

“A Scoop Away From Empty”

1 Kings 17:8-16

Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Kings 17. We're in a study of the life of the prophet Elijah, a man whom James 5:17 says is a man like us, a man with a nature like ours. Which is to say that Elijah wasn't a super-human, but an ordinary man whom God used in an extraordinary way. He lived in a time in which his own generation had abandoned the true worship of God in exchange for the idolatry of Baal. Elijah was called by God to declare the truth to his generation, to cry out against Israel's sin and point them back to the hope which is found only in the Lord.

Hudson Taylor was a 19th century British missionary who devoted more than five decades of his life to bringing the gospel to China. When he got there in 1854, he became convinced that missionaries needed to move beyond the coastal cities into China's vast interior. And so he adopted Chinese dress and customs in an effort to remove what he saw as unnecessary cultural barriers to the gospel. And in 1865 he founded the China Inland Mission, built around a deep conviction that God's work should be undertaken in dependence upon God's provision, often refusing to solicit funds directly from people and instead praying for needs to be met. Despite profound hardships—illness, opposition, financial uncertainty, and the deaths of his wife Maria and several of their children—Hudson Taylor persevered. So that by the time of his death in 1905, the mission that he founded had sent more than 800 missionaries throughout China, and it had established a significant Christian presence in previously unreached regions. It was Hudson Taylor who once said:

Hudson Taylor — *“God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply.”*

Elijah could have said the same thing. This is a text that gives us insight into the way that God will provide for the needs of His servants. The Bible consistently shows how God is the faithful Provider for His people. God promises to provide what is necessary to accomplish His purposes and sustain His people who are in His will. Ultimately, the greatest provision God has given us is His Son. Paul said:

Ephesians 1:3—“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”

And that means no matter what form my circumstances may take, as someone who is in Christ, I am always well supplied. Even when from my perspective I am a scoop away from empty, God’s provision in Christ never runs out. And that is perhaps the main application we can take away from this text.

From this text, I want to make three general observations about God’s provision. First of all:

1—The means is often STRANGE (17:8-9)

“Then the word of the Lord came to him, ‘Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.’”

Elijah has been hiding by the brook at Kerith. God has fed him with heaven’s ‘door dash’ as the ravens bring him food each morning and evening. He’s been drinking water from the brook. That is, until the brook eventually dried up. And then it was time to move. I have this idea that Elijah might have thought he could stay by the brook indefinitely. But its drying up signaled a major change in his

life. And you and I need to remember that circumstances will always mean eventual change for all of us at some point. When things change, we're uprooted from the familiar and comfortable. Paul learned this in his life. He said:

Philippians 4:11-13—“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

When the brook dries up, it is time for Elijah to move on. Notice verse 8 says, “Then the word of the Lord came to him.” He’s living by faith. In fact, look at how we see that illustrated in Elijah’s life here. Back up in verse 3, the word of the Lord came to him, “Hide yourself by the brook.” Then verse 5, “So he went and did according to the word of the Lord.” Verse 8, “Then the word of the Lord came to him, ‘Arise and go to Zarephath.’” Verse 10, “So he arose and went to Zarephath.” There’s a very important truth here about discerning the will of God. How will you know the next step forward? I’ll tell you how:

- Act on what God declares
- Avoid no detail
- Allow for no delay

Elijah acts on what God says, he avoids no detail, and he allows for no delay. It is what Jesus said in Matthew 4:4 where He quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Elijah is listening and obeying. God leads him from one place of provision to another.

A strange place

The means, the method, the way that God provides for us is often strange and does not make sense from a strictly human perspective. When the brook at Kerith dries up, God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath. It would have been about 100 miles northwest of where he had been. And notice the statement, ‘which belongs to Sidon.’ Sidon was the leading city of Phoenicia and was on the Mediterranean coast. Now, that ought to cause your ‘antennae’ to go up, because we read back in chapter 16 that the King of the Sidonians was named Ethbaal, who had a daughter named Jezebel. Which means that God is directing Elijah into the heart of enemy territory. King Ahab is going to be looking far and wide for the prophet who has now become a most wanted man. And yet God will be providing for his needs in Zarephath, or in Jezebel’s own backyard. It was the buckle of the ‘Baal Belt’ or the place where Baal worship was most pronounced. You’ve heard about the fox in the henhouse? Well, this would be more like a hen in the foxhouse! God is commanding Elijah to go down into the cesspool of sin, and not just go there, but to ‘dwell there.’ It is one thing for God to provide for Elijah’s needs through ravens, which are unclean birds. But it is another thing entirely for him to send the prophet to an unclean place—Gentile territory. It is a strange place to receive God’s special provision.

“Zarephath” —*comes from a Hebrew word that means to smelt, to refine, or to test metals*

The same root word is used elsewhere in Scripture to describe what is involved in a refiner’s work:

Psalm 66:10—“For You, O God, have tested us; You have tried us as silver is tried.”

Who knows? Perhaps the village was known for its local blacksmith who forged instruments of some kind, or melted certain metals to liquid where they could be cast into a mold of some kind. Just as Kerith was a 'cut off' place, Zarephath is a 'crucible' place for Elijah. It is a place designed by the Lord where He will continue to refine Elijah's life, where he will become melted down and moldable in the Master's hands.

A strange person

Not only is the place strange, but notice how God provides for Elijah through a strange person. The word of the Lord said in verse 9, "Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." Not a wealthy individual. Not even a group of people. God's means of providing for Elijah is a widow of all people, who as it turns out didn't even have enough for she and her son to live on.

David Jeremiah — *"God didn't give Elijah a river; He gave him a brook. God didn't give Elijah a wealthy patroness; He gave him a poor widow. God didn't give Elijah a Jewish widow; He gave him a Gentile widow. God's instructions to Elijah ran counter to everything that made any sense from any human perspective."*

Isaiah 55:8-9 — **"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'**

And so when you consider how God will meet Elijah needs in a strange place and through a strange person, that verse really become appropriate. His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. This is why Zarephath will prove to be a crucible, a place where Elijah's faith in God is deepened. The same thing will be true in your life. There are certain times in your life where God

will bring you to a place like that, a place where the heat is turned up, so that the refiner's fire can do its work in your life.

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.*

The means of God's provision is often strange. But then notice a second observation:

2—The measure is always SUFFICIENT (17:10-12)

“So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.’ And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ And she said, ‘As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.’”

God is providing for Elijah in a most unusual place and by a most unusual person. And that is especially true when you consider just how small and insignificant are the widow's means. As Elijah comes to the gate of the city, providence would have it that the widow was there gathering sticks. It was one

last effort on her part to make a little cooking fire with which she would bake one last meal for she and her son. Then, the jar would be empty and they would soon die. That's how severe and widespread the famine is at this point. Not only had the rain not fallen in Israel, but it hadn't rained here either.

R.T. Kendall — *“The universal effects of Elijah’s prophecy is a reminder of the universal effect of sin. The world is filled with different cultures, different races, different levels of education, different accents, and different degrees of intelligence. But all have one thing in common: ‘All have sinned and come short of the glory of God’ (Rom. 3:23).”*

Move towns, move jobs, move schools, move churches. And what will you find? Well, you will find in a very short period of time that people are the same. Their hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). Regardless of where you go, you cannot travel across the county, state, nation, or globe and get away from sin and its effects on society. And so the famine had come to Zarephath too.

Thirsty from his journey, Elijah asks the widow for a drink of water which she goes to get. And as she is going, he asks her for a piece of bread. It is no doubt a piercing reminder of her dire situation. She has been scraping the bottom of the barrel and is but one scoop away from empty. She has exhausted every resource available to her. She has no reserves, no backup plan, no hidden supply. She is very much at ‘the bottom of the barrel.’ We use that expression a lot. Do you know what it means to be at ‘the bottom of the barrel?’ You know what it feels like to come to the end of what you have to give. And people can find themselves there in all kinds of ways. Perhaps you have been at the bottom of the barrel financially, wondering how you are going to meet another obligation. Or you’ve been there emotionally, having carried stress, grief, or disappointment

so long that you have nothing left to give. Or you've been there relationally, when your marriage is strained and you wonder how much longer you can keep trying. You can get there physically, when your health and the demands of life have exhausted you. And you can get there spiritually, when you seem to be going through the motions, or when prayer goes unanswered, your strength is gone, and you question whether you have enough faith to take another step. But that's why this text is so very powerful. Because it points us to the sufficiency of Jesus Christ and the truth that the measure of His provision is always enough. The bottom of the widow's barrel was not the bottom of God's supply! And let me tell you something about His supply:

It's not too little

Elijah asks the widow for a piece of bread, but she sees only 'a handful of flour' and 'a little oil.' From a human perspective, the math does not work. There is enough for one final meal for she and her son, but not enough to sustain three people through a famine. She is making a determination about the future by what remained in her jar. God would measure it by what remained in Himself. And there is no shortage there. Often, what looks inadequate to us is not inadequate in the hands of God. We can see this same pattern all through Scripture:

- Noah's ark (Gen. 6)—God provided salvation for Noah and his family while sending flood waters on the earth.
- Manna in the wilderness (Ex. 16)—God feeds an entire nation with bread appearing on the ground each morning.
- Water from a rock (Ex. 17)—God supplies water from the place you would least expect to find it.

- Balaam's donkey (Num. 22)—God uses an animal to restrain and warn a prophet.
- Naaman's cleansing (2 Kings 5)—God directs a powerful military commander to wash seven times in the Jordan.
- Five loaves and two fish (John 6)—Jesus feeds 5,000 from one boy's small lunch.
- The cross itself (1 Cor. 1:18-25)—This is the supreme example in which God provides salvation through what appeared to the world to be defeat and death.

Whether it is the ravens at Kerith or a widow at Zarephath, God will provide for Elijah. So that what gets put into the hands of God by faith will prove to never be too little. And our salvation is not a matter of what we give to Him, but of what He gives to us which we receive in simple faith.

It's not too late

Notice she says in verse 12, "And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." In other words, this is our last little morsel before we starve. Death is all that she could see in front of her. No more flour, and no more future. She has reached the end of her resources. There is nothing in her hands that can change things, no ability to produce what she needs, no reserve barrel from which she can draw from. One last meal before she dies, and that's all she has left. In that sense, she pictures the spiritual condition of every sinner apart from Christ. I think that's an application we can make here. We may possess accomplishments, morality, religion, or good intentions, but spiritually you and I cannot manufacture the righteousness or life we need. We are not merely running low; apart from Christ,

we are flat broke. I mean, we're not just scraping the bottom of the barrel of righteousness. Friends, we don't even have a barrel to scrape.

Ephesians 2:1 — “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.”

She saw no more flour, and therefore no more future. That is where the gospel finds us. Not merely needing help to stretch what we have, but needing God to give us what we don't have. And that is righteousness in the place of our guilt, life where there is nothing but death, and hope for our future. And all of it is found in Jesus Christ! The widow is about to learn that with God, all things are possible. God's all-sufficient provision is not too little, and it is not too late.

3—The miracle is never SUSPECT (17:13-16)

“And Elijah said to her, ‘Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake out of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For this says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’ And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that He spoke by Elijah.”

The means of God's provision is often strange, and the measure of His provision is always sufficient. But the final observation I want you to see is that the miracle of God's provision is never suspect. And what I mean is that once He does something miraculous, it will be evident that He did it. There is no other explanation outside of the power and grace of God. That's what the widow will

learn. She takes what she has and places it in the hands of God, and He multiplies it. Watch how it happens.

Faith that receives

After telling Elijah that all she had was about gone, he says to her in verse 13, “Do not fear, but go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake out of it and bring it to me, and then for you and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.’” And how does she respond? She could have suggested, “How about tomorrow, Lord? Your prophet looks healthy enough to me. What guarantee do I have beyond Your word that my son and I will have anything?” But that’s not what happens. She went and did as Elijah said. That’s faith! If you were down to your last little morsel, I’m not so sure you’d use it to make the preacher a biscuit. However, the widow takes the step of faith that the Lord required. And she could only do this if she really trusted God to provide. Her faith is secure in His salvation!

She staked her life on God’s promise, and she was not disappointed. She hears the word of the Lord, receives it in faith, and acts on it. That’s how her faith here is on display. She becomes believer in the God of Elijah!

Grace that sustains

She obeys the word of the Lord. Verses 15-16 say, “And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that He spoke by Elijah.” Day after day. Meal after meal. Somehow, there was always enough. Can you imagine the scene each day as she went to the barrel? Imagine what it must have been like the next morning when that widow walked back to the barrel. She

had scraped the bottom of it yesterday. She knew how little had been there. And yet she reached in again, and there was enough. The next morning, she came back again, and there was enough. Day after day, meal after meal, she returned to the place where there should have been nothing, only to discover that God had been there before her. The barrel may never have overflowed, but it never ran empty. And with every handful of flour, God was quietly reminding her, “You can trust Me for today.” By God’s grace, there was always enough. Just like the hymn we often sing:

*Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!*

God supplies our need in a way that is both extraordinary, but also ordinary. What do I mean? The extraordinary is that the flour and the oil was never used up. Day after day after day. But the ordinary is that there was just enough for each day. God doesn’t tell her to dig a bunker where He is going to give her a hundred barrels at a time. The issue is that the amount was always enough. How much is enough for you? You don’t need flour and oil for tomorrow. That is why God gives you what you need today. You can only live one day at a time.

Matthew 6:33-34—“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

Worry concerns itself with an imaginary future. What God promises, He also performs. What He declares, He also delivers. We learn from this text the

wonderful way that God supplies the needs of His people. But something else we see here is how it demonstrates God's love for all peoples, not just for His people Israel. God intended Israel to be a light to the nations. And there is a sense in which Elijah is functioning as a missionary to pagan people. One thing we should notice from this text is that Elijah was 'sent' to the widow at Zarephath. God had her interests in mind as much as Elijah's. God wants to supply her at the same time that He supplies the prophet. So that Elijah becomes a channel of grace, an instrument that God uses in order to communicate the message of His salvation to this Gentile woman. Jesus later said:

Luke 4:25—“I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.”

Who is God's saving grace for? The religious elite thought it was only for those who qualified. As if there is something we could ever do to qualify, to earn, or to merit His grace. It doesn't work that way, friends. Who is God's saving grace for? This text from 1 Kings 17 shows us how it is:

- For the weak and helpless
- For the outsider
- For the dying
- For the one who comes to God in faith

That's us, isn't it? The Bible says when we were weak and without strength, Christ died for the ungodly. We were cut off from the commonwealth of Israel, outsiders, strangers, and undeserving. And we were dead in our trespasses and

sins. Our emptiness reveals our need for Christ, and His sufficiency supplies all we need. You come to Him empty, broken, and at the end of all your resources which have failed you. One scoop from empty is always enough when God is your supply. And that's because God Himself is our portion. He has promised to meet our needs in Christ.

It is one thing to be one scoop away from empty, but it is another thing to be one heartbeat away from eternity. I think about how Scripture reminds us that life is “a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14), and that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). It is inescapable. We may plan for tomorrow, but the reality is that none of us have been given the promise of another day. That makes our spiritual condition infinitely more important than our material condition. What is a full empty barrel when you have an unprepared soul? You can have a full pantry, a padded bank account, a successful career, and years of plans ahead—and still be spiritually empty before God. Jesus asked the question:

Mark 8:36—“What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

Maybe today you can identify with this widow more than you would like to admit. You've come to the end of your resources, and what you have is not enough. I don't know what 'a scoop away from empty' might be in your life, but I can guarantee you do. Maybe you walked into church today with one scoop left in the barrel. You have no idea where tomorrow's strength will come from. The message of this text is not that your barrel will always be full. It is that God will always be faithful. When you've reached the end of your resources, that's a good thing. Because it is only then that you learn you'll never reach the end of His! Annie Johnson Flynt said it well:

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase,
To added affliction He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half-done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*His love has no limit, His grace has no measure,
His power no boundary known unto men,
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth and giveth and giveth again!*

There is no emptiness like the emptiness of a life without Christ. The good news of the gospel is that God has already provided what you could never provide for yourself. You could not produce the righteousness God requires, so Christ lived the life you could not live. You could not pay the debt your sin demanded, so Christ died the death you deserved. And you could not give yourself eternal life, so Christ rose from the grave and now offers life to everyone who trusts in Him. So stop trusting what is left in your barrel. Stop trusting in your goodness and your own efforts. Come empty-handed to Jesus. Turn from your sin, place your faith in Him, and receive today the greatest provision God has ever given—the gift of life in His Son!