

Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him:⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.”¹⁰ So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?”¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

¹² “As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

¹³ Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.”¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.’ ”

¹⁵ She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.¹⁶ For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. (1 Kings 17:7-16)

Would You Trust God this Much?

If you watch TV at all, you can’t help seeing the pictures of the effects of the earthquake in Haiti. Every day or two, we get an update on the number of people killed and the extent of the destruction. It’s striking. It may even shake our faith a little bit. So I think it’s interesting that our Old Testament lesson for today also speaks of a natural disaster. In this case, it wasn’t an earthquake. It was a three and a half year drought. But the effects were similar. People were dying. Despair and frustration had long since set in. It was a terrible situation. But unlike our television news, God does not give us a detailed description of the suffering or the statistics of how many died and how much damage was done in dollars or shekels. This account is not about the disaster. It’s about the people in our text and their faith. This disaster was a call to trust in God who was doing things that were difficult to understand. The word of God gives us a marvelous example of their response of faith. My friends, in a similar situation, would we follow this example? **Would you trust God this much?**

I.

These events happened maybe half way through the three and half year drought that God sent to call Israel to repent and return to him. Israel was an agricultural society. Most people were farmers. The drought wiped out their crops. People were starving and there were no government programs to provide relief. Indeed, it’s clear from the text that the drought and famine extended beyond the borders of Israel. Zarephath, the town that Elijah went to, was a good 100 miles north of the border. Yet, the drought and famine were in full force there, too.

But God sent Elijah to this heathen land because he had chosen a woman to support him. Not a just any woman, certainly not a woman of means. God sent Elijah to a widow. In the ancient world, widows with minor children lived a very precarious existence. They had very limited property rights, so it was hard for them to support themselves. And farming in the ancient world was backbreaking labor. Very few widows with young children could make a go of it on their own. And there were no welfare programs to feed them. God sent Elijah to a woman who would’ve had trouble surviving in the best of times. And he commanded her to provide for the prophet during this disaster.

Elijah walked into this foreign city and saw this widow and in the middle of a drought, he asked her to bring him a drink of water. Then he asked this destitute widow to bring him something to eat when everyone was starving. Why did he do that? Because God was testing this woman’s faith. Even though she was a foreigner, she recognized that Elijah was a prophet of the LORD, the God of Israel. She seems to have had faith in the true God. As Jesus said 800 years later, there were lots of widows in Israel who could have benefited from having Elijah come and provide for them. But God sent his prophet to a woman outside of Israel and he provided for her in a way that many other people would have welcomed.

But she didn't know any of that. All she knew was that she had a little oil and a little flour left and she had no way of getting any more. So she was going to make one last little loaf of bread and share it with her son and then she was going to wait to die. That's when God revealed his plan to her. He was going to use that tiny amount of oil and flour to feed her and her family and the prophet until the famine ended. And God called her to show that she trusted him to do that by taking that last little bit of food and giving it to the prophet first.

That was indeed a test of her faith. This was a woman who knew exactly how much bread she could make with the oil and flour she had. She had to trust that when God said it would last, he had the power to keep that promise. She had to trust that he could do something that no one else on earth could do. And each time she went back to cook for her family and for the prophet, she had to trust that God could do this miracle again. You might think that it would be easier that way. But would it really? How many times in our lives has God taken care of us? Does that mean it's easy for us to trust the next time? We're sinners and we struggle to trust God's power.

God recorded this woman's trust to teach us to trust that God can do what he promises. That's not always easy for us. It's one thing when we're sitting here in church to say, "Yes, I trust him!" The challenge comes out there, in our lives, when things spin out of control. The challenge comes when we hurt and when we're helpless. That's when we have to trust that God really can do all that he promises.

Do we trust God that much? Do we trust God to be able to do the impossible? Forget about Haiti for a minute – do you trust that God can provide all that your family needs, right now, in this economy? Or do you secretly doubt that he has the ability to keep you from losing your house? Do you trust that even if you do lose your house that God can still take care of your family? Or do you think that's really your job and you better hedge your bets a little bit? It's easy to say, "Pastor, I do trust God." But look how this woman had to express her trust: she had to put the prophet of the Lord first. She had to take what little she had and use it to support God's plan. Do we do that?

Now, God does not command us to give him everything, like he called this woman to do. But God does call us to trust him enough to be generous in our offerings. When we're not, isn't the root cause that we do the math in our heads and we say, "I make this many dollars a week and if I give this much to God, then I will only have this much. How can I live on that?" God calls us to trust that he can provide for us and he calls us to be generous in supporting the church, generous in helping out people in need, generous in all areas of our lives, not because our pastor is browbeating us, but because we trust he can do more than we can imagine. Do we trust him that much? Or do we have to admit that in so many areas of our lives, we just don't trust that God can take care of us?

Failure to trust God's promises is sin. That sin deserves God's punishment in hell. But Jesus came because we are born without any faith at all. He came because even we Christians struggle to believe that God has the power to deal with the real issues that we face in our lives. Jesus was perfect in his trust. In all the disasters of his life – in all the poverty, in all the opposition and attacks, in all the pain and suffering of his death on the cross, Jesus never doubted God's power to save him. That perfect faith counts for us. That perfect faith carried Jesus through the cross and the grave for us. That perfect faith led our Savior to pay for all the sin and all the weakness in our faith. And when Jesus rose, he told us that God counts our faith as flawless, even though we know it's not. God counts it as if it were the faith of Jesus. And he promises us that we will live with him. That promise is the only thing that can change the answer to our question this morning. **Would you trust God this much? Would you trust in his power?** The power of Jesus to conquer our sin enables us to say yes.

II.

The widow of Zarephath didn't just have to trust that God *could* do a miracle. She had to trust that he *would*. So Elijah gave her a promise: **"For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'"** How did she know he would keep that promise, even if she never doubted that he could? There's only one answer to that question: God builds his power into his promises. The promises themselves convince our hearts to trust in what God has said. Day after day, this woman was able to go to her little kitchen and make bread and God kept the promise until the famine was done.

God gave her a very specific promise of a miracle. That promise we don't have. But we do have the same general promise that God will take care of his people. But notice how God took care of her. When he did

the miracle, what did he give her? Bread and apparently water. That's it. Now, how much bigger of a miracle would it have been to give her steak? That would not have been any more difficult for God. He could've dropped steaks and vegetables and high class wine at their doorstep every day for as long as this famine continued. But he didn't. Instead, he made them eat bread and drink water for a year or even two.

And they were thrilled. God never promised that we will be rich. He never promised that we won't have money problems. He never promised that no Christian will ever lose their house. He never promised that we won't get sick or die. What he promised is that he will care for us for as long as we live. He promised that he will work for our good in all things. But sometimes, we have to wait for that good to come. This widow and her son had to wait until they were wiped out and she thought they were going to starve before God gave her the solution he was planning. God sometimes chooses to allow us to suffer and to wrestle with our emotions for a long time before he provides a solution.

But he always takes care of us. When he sends pain and sorrow into our lives, he does it for a reason. He does it first of all to strengthen our faith. This poor widow was at the point of despair. But God lifted her up. God gave her months of seeing his love and his power, months of hearing his promises over and over again. God preached the good news to her and he strengthened her faith.

And he does the same for us. Every time we suffer, God is driving us back to him so that we see that we have no one else to rescue us. It's so easy for us to dismiss God's power and his promises because we think that we're in charge of our lives and if we just do it all right, we'll be OK. But we're not in charge. We're weak and powerless and left to ourselves, we'd die for sure. God protects us in so many ways. But when he lets something through the barriers that he's put around us, it's to remind us who's really in control. And it's to drive us back to the one thing that can overcome our weakness and fear: his promises. God drives us back to the gospel. And then he works through the power of the gospel to lift us up. He keeps our faith strong until we reach eternal life.

And you know what? He does promise that he will solve every hurt and sorrow we face. He will either do that here, in his good time and in his own way, or he'll do it when we reach heaven. But he will heal it all. Do you know how we know that? Because he already kept the promise to send his Son to die and rise for us. When you're in trouble, look to the cross. That's where you see the love of God. You see his Son paying for your sin and conquering death and hell for you. Look to the empty tomb: there you see Jesus healing all that's wrong with this life, starting with death itself. And in his resurrection is the promise that he will care for us and do all things for our good until we reach heaven.

That promise alone gives us the power to answer the question before us today: **Would you trust God this much? Would you trust his promises?** On your own, with the sinful heart you were born with, you wouldn't stand a chance. But the promises themselves are the power of God. Whether you have to live through a disaster like the one in Haiti or the one Elijah went through or the less dramatic disasters we face every day, those promises burrow into your heart and they give faith and they cause faith to grow. They lead us to trust that God can and will do all that we need. Hear those promises. Amen.