

**Oct. 11, 2009 1 Kings 17:7-16 “Refined & Refreshed” by Richard Boatman**

<sup>7</sup> But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land. <sup>8</sup> Then the LORD said to Elijah, <sup>9</sup> “Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup> So he went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, “Would you please bring me a little water in a cup?” <sup>11</sup> As she was going to get it, he called to her, “Bring me a bite of bread, too.” <sup>12</sup> But she said, “I swear by the LORD your God that I don’t have a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug. I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.” <sup>13</sup> But Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you’ve said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what’s left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup> For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again!” <sup>15</sup> So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her son continued to eat for many days. <sup>16</sup> There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the LORD had promised through Elijah.

Friends, this story of Elijah is about God’s provision. No matter what our circumstances, no matter how dark it seems, God will provide for us. Philippians 4:19 says, “And my God will meet all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Hallelujah. Sometimes God provides through ravens bringing food to the brook of Cherith and sometimes God provides through a poor widow and her son at the village of Zarephath, but God always provides.

As we learned in our first lesson, God always provides for us at a place called “there.” In other words, God directs our steps and as we follow and obey, wherever that takes us, God provides. “I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there.” In today’s passage God says, “I have instructed a widow [in Zarephath] to feed you.”

You see your life is important to the Lord. He’s doing a special work. You and I can’t see the finished product, but God can. You and I may not understand all the steps of the journey, but God does, and each step is for a reason. Elijah will go through five major parts of his journey: the brook of Cherith is the cutting place, the village of Zarephath is the refining place. Carmel is the place of conquest; a cave at Sinai is the place of despair; and Elijah’s passing the mantle to his young

protégé Elisha is the departing place. Every step is for a reason. Each step molds us into the victorious person God has made us to be.

Sometimes we want to jump over the *Cheriths* or the *Zarephaths* and get right to the conquest at Mount Carmel. My dad and I used to love watching boxing together. We saw Mohammad Ali “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” In his prime he made it look so easy. He’d even predict what round he’d conquer his opponent. I’d dance around the house jabbing, bobbing and weaving and doing a little “rope-a-dope.” I loved the conquest. But I’d forgotten something. Ali could not have conquered had he not trained. When others were sleeping, he was up at 4 a.m. running mile-after-mile. What he made look so easy in the ring had come at a cost of time and an investment of energy. You see, we can’t just jump over *Cherith* and *Zarephath* and conquer at *Carmel*. These early steps prepare us for victorious Christian living.

Elijah had been sent to the “cutting place” at Cherith. His character had been chiseled. But now the brook dried up. Have you ever had things dry up in your life? Maybe your career or a friendship or your health or your finances have started drying up. Be like Elijah and keep trusting. When God closes one door he opens another. When the source of supply dries up in one place, there’s another source opening up someplace else. Listen to the Lord and follow the witness of the Spirit. There’s a *Zarephath* prepared for you. Amen.

God doesn’t always provide the way we might want, but God always provides. And the way God provides will not only benefit you but all those around you as well.

I doubt that Elijah’s first choice was to go live at a pagan Baal worshiping village. Zarephath was a Phoenician town on the Mediterranean coast, six miles south of Sidon and one hundred miles north of where the great prophet had been. Imagine walking seven to ten days in blistering heat with only some dried meat and crusty bread to eat. You finally arrive, dog tired, hungry and thirsty and the person who’s supposed to help you is in worse condition than you are. You see, the drought that Elijah prophesied was having its effect on everyone.

But beloved let me tell you, it is better to have a little crusty bread and some dried meat and be in the will of God than to eat at the *Phoenician Red Lobster* and be out of the will of God.

Now maybe Elijah thought, Lord I don’t want to be here. I’d far rather be refined at the Temple in Jerusalem. But God knows what we need. The name Zarephath

means “the refining place” as it was known for its superior glassware, refined and polished. And it was here, not in the Temple, not in constant fellowship with God’s people that the prophet would be polished by the hand of God.

But remember, when we’re polished, those around us are touched by the shine as well. When victory comes to our soul, it spills over into the lives of others. If Elijah had been gripped in fear, this fear would have passed to others. You see, whatever fills your heart in abundance comes out. Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” When we are filled with bitterness or anger or suspicion or fear, it spreads to others. But so does faith. So does love.

Do you remember the story of Helen Keller? A girl blind and deaf—it seemed hopeless; it seemed she’d go through life helpless and ignorant. But at six years of age, the teacher Anne Sullivan moved in. She began implementing basic table skills and social disciplines. Having previously been given free reign, Helen violently resisted the change. But this little girl who was intellectually and emotionally starving was suddenly given a key. Through one rudimentary sound – *wa-wa* for water, Anne Sullivan was able to unlock the door to learning, signing into Helen’s palm various nouns. The sign language alphabet developed by Spanish monks in medieval times was now the instrument used to free a little girl.

The widow at Zarephath was starving. When Elijah arrived, she was gathering sticks for a fire for her last meal. Both Elijah and the widow were hungry. But only one of them had hope. Hope is contagious. We’ve all gone through the storm. But isn’t it great to be around those who see the glass half full? Elijah could have been dragged down by the woman’s “realistic assessment of the situation.” But Elijah would not surrender hope. Instead, Elijah was going to unlock the fear-gripped heart of this widow. Through Elijah, God would teach this woman a new language, the language of faith. And it would begin with a compassionate demand.

Sometimes when Larae goes into the kitchen to get me something to drink, I’ll say, *Could you bring me some chips?* or *Would you mind fixing me a sandwich?* Yes, it can feel a little presumptuous, maybe even a little embarrassing—after all, I’m getting a free ride from her effort. Imagine how Elijah felt. The Scriptures are explicit that we are to take care of the widow and the orphans. But now Elijah asks *her* to make *him* the first bread cake, then she may have what’s left. And yet it was a compassionate demand, because it was going to unlock her faith. If only Larae could understand. Jesus said if you want to be great in the kingdom you must serve. When I ask Larae for something, I’m actually helping her to be great in the kingdom.

Well, I'm sure Elijah's motive was purer than mine. Elijah knew that the key to abundance was through giving. And all she had to give was a little flour and oil. But that was enough. You see God was about to unlock her faith, to expand her vision, to change her mindset, to change how she lived her life.

Maybe spiritual drought has made you feel hopeless. You're just going through the motions of living. The circumstances around you are determining how you think and the choices you make. You need a breakthrough, a shift and change in how you see your daily life. God has a plan for us. The Lord has a path for us to follow. But we have to stop filling our minds with the death all around us and start filling our minds and hearts with a new source of strength.

Remember that the name Elijah means *Yahweh is God*. Circumstances are not our God. Secularism is not Lord. Politicians and late night talk show hosts do not set our agenda. The Lord has a word for us, and it is filled with hope and faith. God loves us. And because he loves us, like Anne Sullivan with Helen Keller, he wants to bring the discipline necessary for us to receive heaven's abundance. God wants to unlock the door of our heart and set us free to receive.

What are you being called to give? You see, with the Lord a little is enough. It isn't about the amount of money or time or energy that you give. But it *is* about the sacrifice. It *is* about allowing the Lord to stretch us beyond our comfort zones. Jesus used a little boy's lunch to feed five thousand. It wasn't much. But the little boy was willing to give it. It's not about the little we have but the great God we serve who takes what we have and multiplies it. What do you suppose the little boy's mom thought when people came bringing twelve full baskets of bread and fish to their door? *Why all the food?* she may have asked. "Your son gave his lunch." What's your bread and fish?

Like fine glassware, Elijah was going to spend the next many months in Zarephath being refined and polished. And a widow woman and her son, who thought they would starve to death, ate abundantly every day, all because she trusted what God called her to do.

Where are you in your journey? And what is God calling you to do? God is unlocking the kingdom for us. Shall we walk through the door together?