

Nameless: Stories of Grace for the Brokenhearted

The Woman Who Gave Her Last / 1 Kings 17:7-24

Jeff Kennedy / April 28th 2019

Introduction: We're starting a new series entitled "Nameless" Stories of Grace for the Brokenhearted. Hopefully you got your nametag which is something we'll do for the next few weeks as we seek to get to know one another a bit better. The motivation of this series is to help us to understand the character of Christ better through these amazing stories of nameless women who were moved by God's grace and who teach us lessons of Christlike faith. Some of the stories that we'll cover in this series include the woman at the well, the nameless woman of Nain, and others.

Today we're looking at The Woman Who Gave Her Last to God in **1 Kings 17:7-24**.

Background: The year is 873 BC, and it has only been 130 years since David became King and consolidated the northern and southern territories of Israel. Not long after his Son Solomon's reign, the Kingdom is split by civil war. **And the northern Kingdom has a series of wicked kings who flirt with idolatry, and are constantly making pacts and deals and compromises with the surrounding pagan nations.**

1 Kings 16 records the coming to power of the worst of them all. A man named Ahab.

- Ahab once again consolidated much of the territory.
- His rival King, Shalmenesar III recorded in his chronicles that Ahab was a fierce warlord, with a powerful military, had expanded Israel's influence in the region and built many palaces and public buildings used for civic duties. **Successful by every measurement, except for one.** Ahab is an idolater, a rebel king. Idolatry came in two forms: **1) adding religions to Yahweh worship, or (2) replacing Yahweh (the Hebrew God) with these lesser, regional gods.**
- Ahab's **god of choice was the ever-popular Baal** and his cosmic mistress Asher—a favorite God of Jezebel—Ahab's love interest. He built Asherah Totems and erected them in Israel—and God had all he could stand of that.

So he sends a man named Elijah. Elijah's badge of identification is the way he's dressed and groomed. Elijah has shaved his head in a particular pattern to signify that he is a wilderness prophet. Additionally, he has chosen to wear a camel skin cloak, and a large leather girdle, a wide leather sash and his whole look just screams "Desert Prophet of Israel." He is a tough customer.

Bold, fearless, and unflinching—Elijah walks right up to the powers that be, and prophesies the Word of the Lord to Ahab... (1 Kng. 17:1) Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew

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nor rain in the next few years except at my word.” Why is this important? Because the false gods of Baal and Asher are fertility gods who are thought to have been in charge of the rain and growth cycles.

So God is confronting this idolatry in Israel at the source. If Ahab and Jezebel think their fertility and prosperity god is such hot stuff, then the true God, Yahweh, will demonstrate who is really in control.

The heavens shut, and the rivers go dry, and the fields wither. Until God gives Elijah the word.

Elijah is then told to go to a town called Kerith where God will feed him by the ravens and he may drink fresh water from a brook. But then God’s provision dries up, and he is told to go to another town. Let’s pick up the story at verse 8...

1 Kings 17:8-16

⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ⁹ “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there 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 olive 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 loaf 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 sends 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.

The widow teaches us a few things about faith, kindness, and trust.

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1. The widow was responsive to God's Word.

God uses means to do miracles...

Our suffering, loss, despair, anxiety—when we face circumstances that are beyond our control, our resources, and our knowledge—or even our faith to handle it—**those situations condition us for responsiveness.**

Imagine the pain of losing her husband, who at this time in history is her only meal ticket. She likely lost him recently and the pain in her heart is great from this.

Imagine the unspeakable despair of knowing that you are going to gather your fire wood, bring it back to the house and cook your very last meal, feed it to your son and then wait to starve to death. Picture the hopelessness of it—and now you see a man who appears to be bona fide prophet of the living God of the Hebrews.

The emptiness of our cupboards, or our emotional reserves can condition us to be very responsive when God comes calling. **Sometimes it's harder to hear God when our coffers are full and our pantry is well-stocked.** We must take pains to seek him in times of prosperity.

My comfort brings me relief from what would otherwise be an impossible psychological burden. But it doesn't condition to hunger and thirst for God as my absolute all in all.

Illus. Jesus of Nazareth comes to his small town to preach in the Synagogue. He references this very story. He tells them that the Words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled in himself and all speak well of him. Then the story turns.

He tells them that just as Elijah and Elisha were sent to the widow in Sidon, and a pagan named Namaan the Syria. God was sent to the pagans, not the people of Israel because of their hardness of heart.

Their over-exposure had created in them a spiritual lethargy, and a resistance to God's Truth. But the widow of Zaraphath—she was responsive to God's word because of her desperation.

2. The widow had shaky faith.

Notice she says to Elijah **“As surely as the YAHWEH, your God, lives.”** She believes in Yahweh—that he does exist—but he is still Elijah’s god, not hers. That’s the extent of her faith.

I listened to some messages that upheld her as the model of unshakable faith, and honestly, she’s not. She’s just like you and me. Now, she sees the prophet decked out in his uniform which is one of the ways he identifies himself. She just knows this guy is a Hebrew desert prophet.

Initially, he asks her to bring him some water. **And she just doesn’t blink and off she goes to fetch him some water—a scarce resource in an arid country during a drought.** But then he hollars over her shoulder “Oh—and bring me a piece of flat bread also.” Now, she hesitates, and gives him her context as to why she cannot fulfill that request. **“Sir, I have come here to collect this fire wood, go home and eat the last of my rations and die with my son.”** Later on when her son falls ill, she will accost the prophet and ask him if he has just come there to reveal her sin and watch her son die? She’s struggling. She believes, and sometimes she finds it hard to believe. **She confesses that Elijah’s God is the one true living God—but alas, he is still Elijah’s God and not hers.**

Illus. I have had two periods in my life where, what for me was a knee-jerk automatic faith became shaky and unstable through trials.

The first trial was in college while studying Biblical Literature, and I really had to wrestle through some things. At the time I remember hiding from everyone else that I was struggling mightily. Eventually the Lord got me through it, and I emerged with stronger, greater faith in Jesus—but at the time I felt unsure about what God had called me to do.

The second time this happened was after a small church plant that I was leading had failed within 4 years of starting (actually restarting many times) that church.

I felt like a failure—I had failed God.

I felt like a loser—I had lost precious Kingdom resources in something that just didn’t pan out.

I felt shame and for a while wanted nothing to do with any of it because I thought God was judging me.

But it turns out that God was burnishing my character. Preparing me for something I could not at the time see. I just felt ineffective and my faith.

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3. The widow had sacrificial faith.

Ah, this one's easy. It doesn't take a preacher with an expensive seminary degree to find this one. Her faith is sacrificial. Her gift could cost her last moments with her little son. It cost her yet she chooses to give it to the prophet anyway. In response to her sacrificial faith, God provides more than she could ever have imagined. Not only does he fill the jar with more flour and her flask with more oil for each new day—he gives her a promise that it will be there until the rain begins in that region again—and the drought is over. And we learn from the next chapter that this miracle lasts for three years.

Her kindness is costly, at first.

Matthew 10:39 “Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” **And Ch. 19** “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”

Phil. 3:8 “What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.”

Jesus' promises regarding sacrificial faith for the Kingdom of God...

- Teaches us to keep God where he belongs, on the throne and the only object of our worship.
- It teaches us to reorient our lives to Kingdom of God priorities. Jesus said seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you as well.
- It teaches us to store up treasure in heaven which is permanent and lasting.

We cannot outgive God.

4. The widow's faithfulness was put to the test.

For such as short story there certainly are a lot of twists and turns in it. Now her son falls ill and he is close to death. She does what she can but ultimately the boy succumbs to illness and he is taken.

¹⁸ She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

¹⁹ "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the Lord, "Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him!"

²² The Lord heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!"

²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

So, she comes to Elijah and has it out.

Elijah immediately takes the boy and prays for him. God grants the boy resurrection—he is brought back to life.

The woman is overjoyed and declares "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth."

See how refined her faith is now. At first, this is a tragic setback. Heartbreaking loss. But in the end she follows the prophet's instructions and God raises him to life—and her faith is full of joy.

THE WIDOW'S FAITH IS REWARDED—That's point number 5 but it's not in your outline.

Illus. My birthday letters. Each letter reveals the quirky, uniqueness of each of my children. They were tasked by mom to write a letter describing in detail why they love their father.

- My daughter's letter is just gushing with love, love, love, love, love!
- Tyler's is economical but so profoundly stated and impactful.
- Logan's is formal, and forensic—and heartfelt.
- Hayden's is funny because it looks like every Christmas wish list he's ever made to Santa. But he's not asking for stuff, he's bullet pointing why he loves me and the impact I've made in his life.

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My kids have been able to observe a life that is blessed and tested—a faith that is strong and unmovable at times, and at other times is shaky and unsure—but the sum total of all of it is a thankful heart for remaining faithful through it all.

Takeaways

- **Like Elijah, our character is on display as we reach out to the people who are least like us.** God loves the foreigner, the outcast, the person who doesn't look like "our kind." Jesus ventures into these forbidden places—places no good respectable religious person would dare go, and he seeks and saves the lost. The widow is a timeless lesson on God's love for the lost.
- **Like the widow, we are at times called to give big when resources feel sparse.** Sacrificial grace will cost us something. And we may not receive a return on those sacrifices in this lifetime.
- **Like the widow, our faith will be tested, and burnished in fires of suffering. The you God makes in suffering is a better you.** And God is very much interested in the project of a better me. A more Christ-like disciple of Jesus who is able to comfort those who are afflicted because I have received comfort for my affliction. Who can bear the burdens of others because God has given me a sturdy constitution—able to help carry the weight of suffering that my brothers and sisters are carrying.
- **Like the widow, God remembers our name**—when nobody else in the whole world would.

The writer of 1 Kings either didn't know, or didn't care what her name was.

Jesus didn't call her by her name in Lk. 4.

We still, to this day—have no inscription or ancient record of her name.

But God knows it. Her name is the same as every person who reaches out in faith. Every person who steps out in trusting obedience.

Her name is faithful.

Her story reaches through the corridors of time and she invites us to a life of faithfulness. Perfect faith? Nope. But a growing faithfulness in the Lord.

Next Week

Nameless: The Woman Who Was in Debt

Big Idea: Another unnamed widow who was apparently the wife of one of Elisha's disciples who had passed away and left her with outstanding debts. The amount of oil left in her vessels wasn't enough to pay her debts, and the miracle here is dramatic. All the clay pots she was commanded to borrow had to be "empty" so that God could fill them and settle her obligations to debtors.