

God, Our Benefactor

Several weeks ago, I mentioned a church where the collection plate was passed around at the end of the worship service. As the deacons were making their way back to the front of the sanctuary, one lone gentleman came forward and cried out that he did not have any money but he gave himself to God. This may seem a bit odd but this is exactly what God wants from us.

As we begin this week's message, I want to be very clear that this is not a sermon in which I beg for more money. Rather, the purpose of our message is to see that God supplies our needs. The aim is that once we really grasp that (at the spiritual level) we will surrender all to God. Our faith in God will reach the level where we trust God in all things including our finances. Who knows, maybe we will trust God rather than our finances.

Let's begin this morning by taking a look back in time. If you will, open your Bibles to First Kings the 16th chapter as we begin reading with verse 29.

Now Ahab the son of Omri became king over Israel in the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, and Ahab the son of Omri reigned over Israel in Samaria twenty-two years. Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him.

It came about, as though it had been a trivial thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he married Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and went to serve Baal and worshiped him. So, he erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal which he built in Samaria. Ahab also made the Asherah. Thus, Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him. (1 Kings 16:29-31 NASB)

Here we have a king who has married a foreign wife. He has erected an altar, place of worship and a totem pole (Asherah) dedicated to an Assyrian goddess. As we just read, Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

We move into the 17th chapter and we read: Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." (1 Kings 17:1 NASB)

Elijah first went toward the east and hid near a brook where he had water from the brook and was fed by ravens until the brook became dry due to the lack of rain. In verse 8, we come to the main scripture for this morning.

Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you." 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, "Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink." As she was going to get *it*, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die." (1 Kings 17:8-12 NASB)

This poor woman, a widow, a single parent rearing a lone son has reached the end of her provisions and is preparing one last meal before she and her son die.

So, God's prophet calls out to her to bring him some water and some bread. Elijah is not being cruel here he is simply following God's instructions.

Then Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring *it* out to me, and afterward you may make *one* for yourself and for your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" So, she

went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for *many* days. The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke through Elijah. (1 Kings 17:13-16 NASB) If we paid attention to this passage, we picked up on the idea of “first fruits.” This widow only had enough flour to make one last meal for her son and herself. Elijah to make the cake of bread first for him and then for her and her son.

Elijah shares the promise of God by telling her that her meager supply will not be depleted until the drought ends. This widow had faith in God and did as Elijah instructed.

We may remember another widow who had very limited resources. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus is in the temple and He begins teaching. Let’s look in Mark the 12th chapter and begin with verse 38. In His teaching He was saying: “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and *like* respectful greetings in the market places, and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets, who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.” (Mark 12:38-40 NASB)

Jesus is condemning those who use their position as preacher, teacher or leader within God’s house to gain an advantage. We see many televangelists who make a great show of their piety while living a life that is hedonistic. Even in the days when Jesus walked on earth, there were many who made a great show of their religion in order to receive special treatment. Since the teachers of the law were not allowed to be paid for their services, they were dependent on the gifts of patrons for their livelihood. Such a system was vulnerable to abuses. Wealthy widows especially were preyed on by the greedy and unscrupulous among these men.

Against the pretentious scribes and teachers, Jesus finds someone who is not worshipping for show.

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and *began* observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:41-44 NASB)

A few years ago, I had a message about the widow’s mite. In that message, I explained that she gave to God realizing that she had nothing else to sustain herself. In essence, she gave herself to God. She placed her faith in God and acted on her faith.

We find similar giving when we look in the 2nd Corinthian letter. The churches in the region of Macedonia willingly gave to those in need. These churches included churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. We read from the 8th chapter of 2nd Corinthians beginning in the first verse.

Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5 NASB)

A short time ago, I shared a definition of grace as God giving us something we did not deserve or earn. Here, Paul is talking about that gift of God, this grace, that allows them to contribute to the needs of the saints.

These churches were in poverty. When people looked at those on who they might solicit for funds, those churches did not make the list. They had to beg for the opportunity to give. Not only did they beg to give they had an abundance of joy. They were able to give more than was expected and as noted by Paul, they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

The widow feeding Elijah did so by the will of God. When we use the eyes of man to view our circumstance, all we see are limitations. We think only of what we cannot do or accomplish. When we look to God, there are no limits to what we may accomplish through His power. The widow feeding Elijah could not survive unless God was her benefactor. The widow who was observed by Jesus, knew that God was her benefactor and threw all she had at His feet. These churches received God's blessings because they gave beyond their means.

To live like these examples requires faith. It requires the faith like we see in people like Abraham. It requires that we give ourselves totally to God first. Then we can come to know the assurance of a God who will give us more than we ever imagine. We will know the generosity of God that Paul speaks about in Ephesians when he says: For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:14-21 NASB)