

## The Widow of Zarephath: The Leap of Faith



### SABBATH—DECEMBER 4

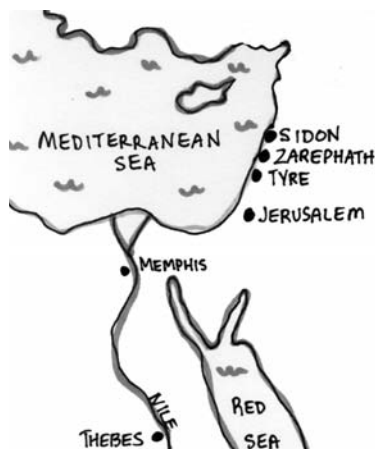
**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** 1 Kings 17; Job 38; Job 42:5, 6; Luke 4:24–28; Hebrews 11:1; Revelation 1:17.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “I am sure that the One who began a good work in you will carry it on until it is completed. That will be on the day Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6, NlrV).

**THE WOMAN WAS NO STRANGER TO DEATH.** She had seen her husband die. And now she watched, helplessly, as everything around her died. The grass dried up. The trees dropped their leaves. The cows were almost skeletons. And the goats cried for mercy (help). Every day she watched the cloudless sky. She hoped for a cloud and rain. She had been saving as much of the flour and the oil as she could, trying to make it last until the rain came back. The little round, flat daily loaf was unevenly divided. Her son needed all the food she could give him. It filled her with pain to see the boy so thin and without energy. But her efforts to help them survive seemed hopeless. She feared that both she and the boy would soon starve to death. There only was enough for one last meal. Holding the hand of her son, the widow left the dusty town of Zarephath to look for firewood so that she could cook their last meal. It is here that the unnamed woman steps into the Bible story and into sacred (holy) history. Her story teaches us lessons that, thousands of years later, we can use for ourselves. This week we study the great controversy (war) between God and Satan played (acted) out in the life of an unnamed widow who chooses God and is led step-by-step into a journey of faith.

**SUNDAY—DECEMBER 5****TO ZAREPHATH (Hebrews 1:1–3)**

Our story begins as God commands the great prophet (special messenger) Elijah to go to Zarephath. But we first must remember what led to this command. The kingdom of Israel had fallen into idol (false god) worship. Baal worship had become the official religion of the government. God had “challenged” the storm god (Baal) by declaring through his prophet Elijah that there would be no more dew or rain (1 Kings 17:1).



When the brook Cherith runs dry, God commands Elijah to go to a widow's house in Zarephath.

**What strange humor or irony<sup>1</sup> is found in the idea that God tells a kingdom that was worshiping the storm god that there would be no rain? How is God's power in our world different from every other power? Read also Psalm 86:8;**

**Jeremiah 10:6; Hebrews 1:1–3; and Job 38.**

Elijah had been hiding at the brook Cherith (1 Kings 17:3). Meanwhile the nation of Israel was suffering from a terrible drought (no rain). The creek finally ran dry, and God commanded (ordered) the prophet to leave and go to Zarephath (1 Kings 17:1–9).

God commands Elijah to leave Israel and go to a foreign land. Zarephath is located on the Mediterranean coast between the cities of Tyre and Sidon. It is within the territory of Phoenicia. This is where the terrible queen Jezebel comes from. One of the important Phoenician national gods is Baal. Jezebel, as King Ahab's queen, is the one who brought worship of Baal from Phoenicia to Israel. In the time of the Bible, people often thought that gods belonged to cities or regions. Zarephath is located outside of Israel in a foreign country. It is supposed to be far from the Lord's area of influence.<sup>2</sup> The people of this nation should be far from the reach of God. But no one is ever out of His reach. Right in the very center of Baal worship, God is going to make His presence and power known.

It is important to note that God uses the need of the prophet to reach out to a woman in far-off Zarephath. As believers in Jesus, we do not have to seem perfect to those around us. We do not have to cover up our problems or pretend that we have no needs. This is because we know this is not true. As

1. irony—the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think, especially in order to be funny.

2. influence—the power to change or affect someone or something.

Christians, we still suffer. We still hurt. We still have times where we need the comfort and help of others who might not be of our faith or of any faith at all.

**What is wrong with the attitude (feeling) that we show a lack of faith when we look for help from others? What are ways that we might, through our needs, show others the goodness and character<sup>3</sup> of God?**



No one is ever out of God's reach.

## MONDAY—DECEMBER 6

### AN UNUSUAL TOOL (1 Kings 17:7–12)

The widow is out getting firewood to make a last meal for herself and her son when she sees Elijah. Right away she knows that Elijah is a believer in God. The verse does not say how she knew, but something let her know that Elijah was a worshiper of the Lord.

**Read carefully 1 Kings 17:12. The woman admits that there is a God. But what does that mean to her? Think about her words, “that we may eat it, and die.” What does it suggest?**



The widow is out gathering firewood to make a last meal for herself and her son.

**What things does 1 Kings 17:3, 4 have in common with 1 Kings 17:8, 9? How are they almost the same?**

God directs and guides His prophet Elijah to help him survive his life. God tells Elijah to hide by the creek Cherith. God then commands ravens to feed Elijah. Following this, God sends Elijah to Zarephath, where he has “commanded a widow” (verse 9) to feed him.

The widow seems an unusual tool for God. She is not an Israelite. She is a widow with no social standing and no influence or power. And she herself is nearly starving to death.

So many wonderful lessons can be learned from studying God's plan (will). More often than not, God chooses us because we are weak (2 Corinthians 12:9).

3. character—the way someone thinks, feels, and behaves; who someone is.

Yesterday we learned how God is not limited by geography. Today we learn that God is not limited by what limits us. God is the One who gives commands in this story. In this story, it always is clear that God is in control. This is a very important point to remember when we think about Elijah's ministry (work done for God) in the great battle between the Lord and Baal. Nothing and no one can stand in the way of God's will (plan). Later in the story we will learn that even death cannot stop God's purposes. We may have to deal with things and events that are harmful to us. But God's purposes for us are always good (Jeremiah 29:11). We may not realize this at first. But we must learn to trust Him in all situations, good and bad. After all, we are sure to find ourselves in both situations at some point.

**How has the Lord been able to use you even though you have weaknesses? How much more could you do if you could overcome your weaknesses?**

Widows were not very important characters<sup>4</sup> in the Bible, even during the best of times. If they did not have any grown children, especially sons, to take care of them, they were not protected by laws. A widow in the time of a great drought was even worse off. Each family was fighting to live. So, there would be no charity to help poor widows. And now Elijah asks this woman, a widow, to feed him. Of all the people he could ask for help, she does not seem to be the best choice. Only a handful of flour and a little oil stands between this poor woman and starving to death.



Only a handful of flour and a little oil stand between this poor woman and starvation.

## TUESDAY—DECEMBER 7

### TOTAL SURRENDER (1 Kings 17:13–16)

**Read 1 Kings 17:13–16. In these verses, what is the first thing Elijah says to the widow? Why? What great leap of faith is Elijah taking when he asks her to do this?**

**Whom does Elijah tell the woman to feed first? What kind of things must have gone through her mind when she heard this? What kind of faith did it take for her to do what he said?**

In many cultures,<sup>5</sup> it is more proper (right) to offer to others before taking

4. characters—people who appear in a story, book, or play.

5. cultures—the beliefs, customs, arts, and so on, of different societies, groups, places, or times.

for ourselves. But the prophet wants to take from a person who has so little to give, and he wants to be served first.

Remember that, in this story, the prophet is standing in for God before this woman. By asking her for her last bread, the prophet Elijah is inviting the woman to take a leap of faith and to surrender (give) all that she has to God.

**What other examples can you find in the Bible when the Lord asks for complete surrender? Read, for example, Genesis 22.**

When we give God everything we have, we always gain in the end. The woman had only enough food for one meal at the beginning of the story. When she gave that meal to the prophet first, this pagan<sup>6</sup> woman reached out in raw faith. She trusted in what she could not understand. But is that not what faith is all about (read Hebrews 11:1)? We put our trust in a God we cannot see and in promises we do not fully understand. What is different here is that this is not an Israelite woman but a woman from a pagan land who practiced idol worship. Yet, God somehow communicated (spoke) with her (read verse 9), and she answered in faith, doing what she was commanded to do. She did it even though her actions might have seemed foolish to her.

**When was the last time you had to reach out in raw, naked faith and**

**trust in what you could not understand? What lessons did you learn about what it means for us, as sinners, to live by faith?**

### WEDNESDAY—DECEMBER 8

#### REMEMBERING MY SINS (1 Kings 17:17, 18)

**What is the natural thing people do when they have a “meeting” with God, according to Job 42:5, 6; Isaiah 6:5; Daniel 10:8; Luke 5:8; and Revelation 1:17? Why do you think that so many people act this way?**

Through the prophet Elijah, the widow “met” God. As we come into a “meeting” with a holy God, our sins become clearer. As a result, when something terrible happens, we may feel that the Lord is punishing us. In 1 Kings 17:18, the widow blames the prophet (Elijah) for bringing her to God’s notice.

**Think about her reasoning (verse 18). Why do you think she thought the way she did?**

Perhaps the widow saw the kind of faithful and holy life that Elijah lived. And she felt the difference between her sinful life and Elijah’s holy presence. Or, in living every day with such a miracle,<sup>7</sup> she felt the presence of God and His holiness as never before. So, the widow felt her sinfulness more

6. pagan—a person who worships many gods or goddesses or the earth or nature.

7. miracle—an unusual or wonderful event caused by the power of God.



than ever before. Whatever the reason, she soon began to believe that the awful thing that was happening to her was caused by her own sins.

In many ways, this is such a common way to feel. We often blame ourselves and our sins for the bad things that hurt us or our loved ones. What did I do that caused my child to get sick? What sin has caused this bad thing to happen in my life? It is true that pain and suffering often result from the sinful choices we make. But it is also true that bad things come for reasons we do not understand and not because of anything we did. Think about the story of Job. Even God said that Job was a righteous (holy; pure) man, and look what happened to him. We need to be very careful in how we try to understand the causes of bad things and evil in our lives. What is more important is how we deal with those bad things. Trying to put blame on the cause will not help us at all.

**We all face unexpected things and events that we cannot explain. It is part of what it means to be sinners in a sinful world. How can you learn to trust and love God, even during painful times?**

## THURSDAY—DECEMBER 9

### TESTING FAITH (1 Kings 17:17–24)

**How was the faith of both the widow and Elijah tested in 1 Kings 17:17–24?**

Notice the struggle that Elijah himself has with the death of the boy. He does not seem sure that the Lord will raise the dead boy back to life. Elijah's struggle seems to show some of the same feelings of the woman herself. Elijah blames God for the death. What this shows is that even prophets can struggle with understanding why things happen (Matthew 11:1–3).

For some time, both the widow and Elijah were living in the presence of a miracle. This miracle is the endless supply of flour and oil—which should have been more than enough to keep their faith strong. But when the boy dies, Elijah and the widow find their faith put to the test.

How often in our own lives have we had some wonderful experience with God? It might be something that really touched us in a powerful way. Yet, we still might find a way to question Him later when things happen that we do not like. Miracles can play an important part in the building of faith. But they should not be the center of it.

**How does Elijah speak to the Lord? What does that tell us about his relationship with God?**

Elijah has a very close relationship with God. He calls God “my God.” But having a close relationship with God does not mean having all the answers. Elijah cannot understand why God has allowed the child to die. But when we have a close relationship with God, that is when we can have the greatest experience of the

power of God in our lives. The miracle does not happen because Elijah uses magic when he tries to keep the boy warm. The writer of the story makes it clear that it is God who brings the boy back to life.

Elijah is overjoyed by the miracle. “Look, your son is alive!” Elijah probably shouted to the widow. This miracle must have done wonders for the faith of the woman. But it probably helped the faith of Elijah too.

The widow’s answer ends in a statement of faith. She now knows that the God of Israel is able to support life and also to give life.

**Read Luke 4:24–26, where the widow comes up again. How do the words that Christ says here help us better understand this story? What lessons can we learn from it for ourselves?**

### FRIDAY—DECEMBER 10

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** “In the days of Elijah, Israel had left God. They held on to their sins. They refused to accept the warnings of the Spirit through the Lord’s messengers. So, they cut themselves off from God’s blessings. The Lord passed by the homes of Israel, and found a safe place for His servant [Elijah] in a heathen land. God chose a woman who did not belong to the chosen people. But this woman was favored because she had followed the light she had received. And her heart was open to the greater light that God sent her through His prophet.”

—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 238.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

❶ What is the connection between sin and suffering? The widow of Zarephath thought that her sin caused the death of her son. In the New Testament, the disciples (followers of Jesus) thought that being blind was caused by the sins of the blind person or those of his or her parents (John 9:2, 3). How should we deal with people who are suffering as a result of their own sins? And how should we deal with those who seem to be suffering through no fault of their own? Should we treat them differently? Or should we not even make that judgment call? Defend your answer.

❷ A child is born with a rare disease. The mother feels that God is punishing her for her rebellious (sinful) youth. What advice and comfort can you as a class give to the mother?

❸ Ask if anyone in your Sabbath School class ever witnessed a miracle, something that could have come only from God. How did the person act toward it? How has the influence of the miracle on the life of this person changed over time? Did he or she ever struggle with doubt again, even though he or she had witnessed (experienced) first-hand something so amazing? What lessons can we learn from these experiences about what it means to live by faith?