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1st King 17:7-23, ESV, abridged

⁷And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him, ⁹“Arise, go to Zarephath. I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰He went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the city, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.” ¹¹And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²And she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” ¹³And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.’ ” ¹⁵And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

¹⁷After this the son of the woman became ill. His illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸She said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son” ²¹Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” ²²The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.”

Lemonade.

When I was twelve to fifteen years-old, and not old enough to get a work permit, I became very enterprising. I earned money mowing lawns, taking care of people’s

houses and yards when they were on vacation, and doing various forms of yardwork. I helped neighbors work on their cars; I washed cars. I helped people install appliances. I painted houses, inside and out. Once, I got a job installing a sprinkler system. I did know what I was doing. I was fourteen and we had just moved to the desert. It was summer. It was extraordinarily hot, and I was not at all acclimated. I showed up at the home of a young couple on a Monday morning. The husband was at work. I started out by digging the trenches that I would need to lay down the plastic pipes. Since it cost money to rent the trencher, I decided to do all of the trenches the first day. As soon as I stepped into their backyard and started pushing the trencher, I felt the heat – big time. Sweat poured off me. I took frequent breaks and retreated from the blinding sun, into the shade, but it was only slightly cooler there. I kept trying to push through, but by midmorning, I was not in good shape. The yard was entirely dirt, and between the heat and the dust, I started having trouble breathing. I had asthma, but nowhere near as bad as my brother had asthma, so I didn't worry about it. Then, suddenly, the slight stuffiness in my lungs turned to a thick cottony feeling. I couldn't breathe. I fell to the ground, and under the intense sun, I rolled onto my back fighting for air.

It was at this moment that the woman who owned the house, who had apparently been watching me through the sliding glass door that led to the

backyard, came running outside. She came up to me, dropped down to her knees, and said something like, “What have I done?” I’ll get back to this.

Let’s look at 1st Kings. 1st and 2nd Kings were once a single book, in the original Hebrew. Kings was written around 550 B.C., during the Babylonian exile, and it focuses on the stories of the Israelite Kings, beginning with King David. Here’s our story, from Chapter 17 of 1st Kings: There is a major drought and the crops have failed. People are hungry. Elijah is a prophet; he served in the ninth century B.C. He is considered the most romantic of all the prophets, perhaps of all biblical characters. He was very influential in his time. His focus was on having an unconditional trust in and loyalty to God. Elijah never dies: he ascends into Heaven. He dresses oddly, and later, John the Baptist would seemingly deliberately echo the way Elijah dressed in what was called haircloth, a stiff fabric often woven from horsehair. Elijah is a rugged man who lives for a bit in a cave. He spends his life fighting the multi-god tendencies that seep from paganism into the faith of the Israelites. As a punishment against the King, Ahab, for building a temple to the pagan God Baal, Elijah predicts the drought that strikes Israel. This puts Elijah at risk, and to protect him, God sends Elijah out of Ahab’s territory and into Phoenician territory. This area is also in drought. There is a poor widow there. Elijah asks her to bring him water and bread. This is a very big deal during

a drought in the desert, among people who survive by subsistence farming. This is what she says to the prophet: ¹²*“As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.”* The widow explains that she has nothing baked, and in fact, only has a handful of flour and a bit of oil. She is at that moment collecting sticks to burn so she can cook something for her and her son. She believes that it will be their last meal; after it, they will starve to death. Elijah replies this: *“Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.”* ¹⁴*For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.’* Elijah tests her faith by telling her to give the last of her food to him. He tells her that once she does this, the containers of flour and oil will never again be empty – because God has promised this. This proves to be true. Elijah stays with her for some time, in her upper room. Then the woman’s son dies of an illness. She cries out to Elijah: *“What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son.”* She apparently thinks that with Elijah in her house, God has been paying

extra attention to her and that this has revealed some hidden sin of hers. We need to keep in mind that in the ancient world, people often thought that illness in one's self or in a loved one was a punishment for sin. Here is what we are told then happens: *Elijah stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again."* ²² *The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.*

This story is intriguing. While this woman was convinced that her son would starve to death, the real threat was that he was going to come down with some sort of illness. We know today that he was likely to already have been sick with this disease when his mother chose to feed Elijah and was rewarded with an endless supply of flour and oil. Either way, God rewards her trust in God – which is evidenced by her obedience to the prophet Elijah – by saving her son, not from starvation, but from disease. We see that like all prophets, Elijah is a representative of God: obeying Elijah by giving him the last of her flour and oil means that she has obeyed God's demand for unwavering trust.

So, let me get back to the saga of me and the sprinkler installation job in the desert sun. The woman asked me if she should call an ambulance. (There was no 911 back then; you called the operator and asked for an ambulance.) I remember the panicked look on her face. I shook my head no. She held my hand

for a few minutes while the asthma attack subsided. Then she helped me into the house, where she sat me down. She asked if she should call my mother. I said no, please, don't call my mom. I said I would be fine in just a minute and could get back to work. She realized why I was saying this. "You really want the work, don't you?" she said. I said yes. Then she said that I didn't have to worry about the money: she would pay me anyway. She then proceeded to tell me that she had told her husband that morning before he left for work that she wasn't sure it was proper to have some poor teenaged kid working in the heat of the summer desert, that they would be taking advantage of me. I was, after all, a hell of a lot cheaper than a for-real professional sprinkler system installer. Her husband, she said, had told her that I was young and healthy, and that I would be just fine, and this way, they would save a lot of money. "Money," she said to me, "my husband and I just about got you killed so that we could save a little money." She proceeded to apologize to me. Then she asked me if I would like some lemonade.

I drank a glass of lemonade. I realized that I could get paid for the entire day. But the job was supposed to last two weeks, so I told her that I would go back out and continue trenching. She said no. She was not going to kill some hundred-pound boy so that her husband could save a few bucks for a new set of golf clubs. She then announced that she was going to pay me for the entire two

weeks – and her husband could put the damn sprinkler system in himself. So, a couple of hours later, when her husband dashed home for lunch to see how the sprinkler system kid was doing, he was surprised to see that I had only managed to dig a few yards of trench. I was sitting in his kitchen eating the lunch his wife had made for me and drinking more lemonade. She took him into the next room, and I could hear her whispering to him, explaining what had happened. Then he yelled out: “What the hell? Pay him to do nothing! For two weeks!”

Buddhists and Hindus have a notion called Karma. The idea is that people live multiple lives, and your actions during your current life will determine how joyful or nasty your next life will be. Christians do not believe in Karma. You might suspect that the woman who hired me was concerned about her Karma, worried that bad things would be sure to happen to her if she were to kill off some hundred-pound kid to save a few bucks. But that’s not the case. In truth, she was a lot like the woman with the tiny amount of flour and oil, the woman who trusted God and knew that if she obeyed God, the right thing would happen. Yes, as it turns out, she and her husband were believers. There were a number of religious items around the house: crosses on the walls, a plaque in the kitchen with a Bible quote on it, and a tiny baptismal dress on display in the living room – except that there was no child in the house. It was the husband who came back

into the kitchen to talk to me; I was worried that he might start giving me a hard time, accusing me of trying to con them out of a couple of weeks' pay. But he looked very thoughtful as he said to me, "My wife is pregnant again. We had a little girl. She passed away. It's been very important to my wife that she stay positive, that she remains a good person and that she not become bitter. That's why it's so important to her that we treat you well. We've got another child on the way. She knows it's because she's stayed thankful and has kept her trust in God."

Here's how the sprinkler system got built. I worked in the late afternoon and early evenings, and the husband joined me each day when he got home from work. I was paid far more hours than I worked. The sprinkler system ended up better than it would have if I had built it on my own. I was saturated with snacks and drinks, with the wife insisting that I take very frequent breaks. The first couple of days, she came out every few minutes to make sure that I was still on my feet. I did not have any more asthma attacks, and in fact, with some flood lights turned on in the backyard, I learned a lesson that I would use many times after this, as I earned money working in the desert: if at all possible, work at night.

The prophets not only spoke for God: they often served as metaphors for God. We're told that "*the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the*

child came into him again, and he revived”. Elijah, by raising the woman’s dead son back to life shows that God can take someone who might have otherwise been broken by what has happened to them and bring them back to a life of joy. We learn from the story of the widow and Elijah that we should always trust in God. We also learn that God’s protection isn’t just an abstract moral thing. Having faith in God means more than achieving spiritual joy or a release from anxiety. God can and will help us in very real ways. That is often how God lifts us up – by restoring us in a physical way here and now. Please pray with me.

God, we trust you with our souls. We trust you with our eternal lives. We also trust you with our lives here on this planet. We know that if we keep our faith, you will protect us. But we know that we must do our part. We have to live our faith on Earth by always doing what we know you want us to do. Amen.