

THE HUNGRY MOTHER WHO COULD NOT FORGET  
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This story begins with one of the most pathetic scenes described in the Old Testament. A lonely, despairing woman stood before her small son and sorrowfully made a tragic decision. The boy was hungry, but she had very little food to offer him. With great care she had handled the supplies that were left, and it is safe to assume the lad was given most of what had been available. Fearfully, she saw her resources dwindling, and finally the dreaded moment arrived. She only possessed "an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse" (1 Kings 17:12).

A small cake might be made and baked, but afterward she and her son would die. A terrible drought had ruined the economy of the city. Three years had elapsed since the heavens produced rain; animals had perished, and many people had left in search of better conditions. The woman had no helper; her husband had died, and she had been left with the responsibility of maintaining a home for her child. The position was extremely critical, the outlook bleak! Leaving the boy in the home, she went to collect sticks for a fire and saw a traveler entering the city. "Poor man; he also would be hungry, but if he came to Zarephath in search of food he had made a great mistake." Perhaps they passed the time of day, then she proceeded with her task.

The ancient writer said, "And when he [Elijah] came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. And she said, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. And Elijah said unto her: Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal

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shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the LORD sendeth rain upon the earth" (1 Kings 17:10-14).

The Disturbing Past... Grace Watching

It would be informative to know the details of this woman's life. The Scripture suggests her career had been difficult. When her child died, she asked the prophet, "Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?" (1 Kings 17:18). The sin of which she felt guilty remains unknown, but in her mind the distracted mother associated it with her boy. Her transgression might have been any kind of inadvisable conduct, but she interpreted her misfortune as being retribution for evil conduct. Maybe she had been engaged in premarital folly, and, as was the case with David and Bathsheba, the child conceived out of wedlock died as evidence of God's displeasure. When this woman considered her indiscretion, the tormented mother believed she was responsible for the lad's death.

There appears to have been some happiness in her earlier years; she had married and given birth to a child. Then her joy had been overshadowed by the death of her husband, and perhaps she consid-

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ered herself to blame for his death. The old saying "When it rains, it pours," had been true in her life. As though that were not enough, the paralyzing famine diminished the supply of food, and she and her son were starving to death. Even the bravest of saints would be troubled by such conditions. Her disturbing past refused to disappear, but through those distressing events God's grace was working on her behalf.

The widow of Zarephath had probably heard of Elijah, but the possibility of their meeting was very remote. Yet, he knew about her and believed she would become a part of his life. The Bible says: "And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee" (1 Kings 17:8-9). Probably God never audibly addressed the lady, for she expressed surprise when the stranger requested food. The text may mean God made arrangements for the woman to assist the prophet. The writer to the Hebrews referred to the angels as being "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (Heb. 1:14). Perhaps the Lord instructed His angelic messengers to supervise the operation in Zarephath, and

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although the distraught mother believed she was alone, her future was secure in the hands of God.

David also expressed that fact when he exclaimed, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (Ps. 42:5). Someone has said, "Affliction is the Good Shepherd's black dog," and the animal is never far from its owner. The grace of God is constantly attentive to the needs of His children.

The Daily Provision. . . Grace Working

"And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Elijah" (1 Kings 17:16). It seems evident that since Zarephath was about one hundred miles from the main centers of Israel, its water supply was not as critical. Maybe the snows of Lebanon eased the situation, for at the time of Elijah's arrival the woman still possessed a small quantity. That she was willing to share it with a stranger was not surprising. Mr. Porter, in the Pulpit Commentary (vol. 5, p. 385), says, "The gift of water to the thirsty is always regarded as a sacred duty in the East. Never, during many years of residence in Syria, and many a long day's travel, have I been refused a draught of water by a single individual of any sect or race. The Bedawy in the desert has shared with me the last drop in his water skin."

The prophet's request for food was more startling. His insistence that a cake be baked for him first, should remind everybody of the words of Jesus, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). The promise that the supply of food would not diminish removed her fear. "And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days" (a full year [marginal reading]) (1 Kings 17:15).

Dr. W. H. Thomson, writing about the home of the widow, says, "Our translation makes Elijah live in a loft, but it is not very accurate. The word in Hebrew is 'alliyeh', and this is a common Arabic word for the upper rooms of houses. This 'alliyeh' is the most desirable part of the establishment, is best fitted up, and is still given to guests who are to be treated with honor. The women and servants live below, and their apartment is called ardiyeh or ground floor...."

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The poorer people have no 'alliyeh'. We may infer several things from this word: that the mode of building in Elijah's time, and the custom of giving the 'alliyeh' to the guest, were the same as now. This woman was not originally among the very poorest classes, but her extreme destitution was owing to the desperate famine which then prevailed. The little chamber made for Elisha by the Shunamite is also called alliyeh, and was therefore an upper room, respectable and comfortable. They are more retired than the apartments of the house, and, of course, appropriate for the resting place of prophets" [W. M. Thomson, *The Land and the Book* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1910), p. 139].

Each day throughout the year the woman knew God's servant lived upstairs and his presence sanctified every meal. When she prepared the food, she was aware of the miracle being performed daily. Jehovah was sustaining His servant, and she and her boy were receiving the overflow of God's provision. It was impossible to live in the presence of the Lord and starve to death! She would have appreciated the hymn, "Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father."

The Desperate Plea. . . Grace Waiting

"And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?" (1 Kings 17:17-18).

The widow of Zarephath resembled all women. It would be difficult to decide which was her greater need—food for her body or peace for her mind. During earlier years she had committed an unidentified sin, and although God had pardoned her, she could not forgive herself! Each time trouble devastated her life she believed it was a punishment from God. Her vision of Jehovah was biased; she did not realize that when God forgives sin, He forgets it! The Lord, through His servant Jeremiah, said, "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). His grace and kindness are beyond measurement; His love supersedes anything known to man.

The mother in Zarephath did not understand this fact; she believed God would always remember her evil deed. The Lord was

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filled with compassion and proceeded to perform a different kind of miracle. Her child became ill and died, and immediately the distraught mother believed the tragedy to be additional evidence that God was relentless. Her mind became a prey to fear; she was haunted by memories.

With infinite pity God watched her and devised a way by which her fear would be removed forever. The woman was about to learn a truth that Paul taught centuries later. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). "And he [Elijah] said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the . . . . And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child. . . and delivered him unto his mother" (1 Kings 17:19-23).

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That glorious miracle not only revealed the power and majesty of the Almighty; it helped the woman to understand God's grace was greater than her guilt. What she considered to be an act of vengeance was a channel through which the Lord sent His benediction. That revelation produced greater happiness than she had ever known. It was wonderful to see and hold her boy, but even greater to imagine a smile upon the face of her heavenly Father.

The Delightful Peace... Grace Whispering

"And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth" (1 Kings 17:24). Most of the theologians believe "the prophet spent about one year in the Wady Cherith, and two and a half years in the house of the widow" (Pulpit Commentary, vol. 5, p. 417). Thus did Jehovah hide His servant from the search parties of King Ahab and at the same time provide food and fellowship for the woman and her child. It must be concluded that however wonderful the fellowship of birds in the hills, the affection of the small family was more desirable. The grateful mother discovered a new basis upon which to rest her faith. She said to the prophet, "I know the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth." If she were ever tempted to worry about her former failure, the word of Elijah dispelled her fears and removed her doubts. When she listened to the counsel of the man of God, she became aware of the whispers of another voice—a still

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small voice—which brought increasing peace to her soul. She began to understand that if God were not merciful, no one would enter His kingdom.

A troubled conscience is a most aggravating companion; it is a thorn in the flesh which destroys the relationship between God and His children. Even the apostle Paul was troubled when he remembered how he persecuted the early Christians and consented to the death of Stephen. Nevertheless, he found comfort in the truth expressed in the letter to the Hebrews, "For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:13-14).

An Indian, trying to describe a troubled conscience, said, "Conscience is a three cornered object in my heart. It remains still when I am good, but when I do something evil, it turns around and around, and the corners hurt a lot. If I continue to do evil, the corners wear off, and it does not hurt any more" (quoted from The Construction Digest).

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