

Not!
1 Kings 17:8-16 NKJV
October 1, 2017

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, 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, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink." And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, "Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." So she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, 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." And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.' " So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke by Elijah.

In the English language there is a little word we use to denote something in the negative. That little word is "not." This is not right. That is not the way to do something. I'm the most handsome guy in the room ... not!

In today's Old Testament reading, we find "not" used in three different ways. "I do not have." "Do not fear." "Not used up." We are going to look at the "nots" in this reading and how they apply to our lives.

We need to start with a little background. Israel sinned, again, and God sent Elijah to tell King Ahab: *As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word* (1 Ki 17:1 NKJV).

After delivering the message to the King, God told Elijah: *Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there* (1 Ki 17:3-4 NKJV).

The ravens brought Elijah bread and meat, morning and evening he drank from the brook until it dried up because of the drought. Next, God sent Elijah to Zarephath, and that is where our reading begins.

Let's start by examining the condition of this widow. The drought had lasted long enough to plunge the country into a severe famine. At that time in Israel, it was hard for a widow to survive. It was even harder for a widow with a son to provide for. It was next to impossible for a widow with a son during a famine.

Yet, God had commanded this widow to take on the extra responsibility of caring for Elijah. With her supplies all but gone, sure that she and her son would not survive, God

asks for more from her. God wasn't out to make her life more miserable. God had in mind to turn her poverty into plenty, to turn her anxiety into assurance.

The first "not" in the reading is the widow saying, "**I do not have.**" We can assume that this widow was a woman of faith because God was sure she would follow his command to provide for Elijah. A literal translation from the Hebrew says God commanded her to feed Elijah.

This had to be worrisome for the widow. She knew how little she had left. Did God know how little she had left? Her mind was probably cluttered with the concerns of the day as she was out gathering fire wood for her final meal and met Elijah.

Can you imagine the relief she must have felt when Elijah only asked for a cup of water? Can you imagine the sinking feeling she must have had over his follow up request for some bread? A wave of depression must have swept over her heart as she confessed, "I do not have bread."

Whenever we focus on what we don't have we will sink into depression. We will fill our minds with negative thoughts. The widow had only enough for one more meal of bread and water. There was nothing positive in that reality.

But we must never forget that little is much when God is in it. It was God who created the universe and everything in it out of nothing. It was God who destroyed the walls of Jericho without the Israelites lifting a finger. It was God who used a small boy to bring down a mighty giant. It was God who fed thousands with only a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Is there some small thing in your life that God can turn into a miracle if you just let him?

Our next "not" is spoken by Elijah: **Do not fear** (1 Ki 17:13). Fear is an emotion that is common to all of us. In the NIV translation of the Bible, the word fear appears 468 times. All of us are familiar with fear. Some of us might be haunted by fear. No one lives in complete absence of fear.

Do you know why fear is such a big part of our lives? One reason is that fear is the natural reaction to sin. Because we inherently know we are sinful we experience fear. Fear of being caught in our sin. Fear of the consequences of our sin. Fear of not being able to escape our sin.

The first fear recorded in the Bible happened in the early chapters of Genesis after Adam and Eve had sinned. *The Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" [Adam] answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid"* (Ge 3:9-10 NIV).

Other fears also stalk us. These fears come because we don't have complete faith in the fact that God has promised to take care of us. Because of our weak faith, we have fears about our families, we have fears about our health, we have fears about our money, we have fears about the future.

The widow in the reading certainly had her fears. All she had was a handful of flour and a dribble of oil, and Elijah wanted her to use it to feed him. If we're honest, we would have to admit that we all would be a bit nervous about that prospect.

However, look at Elijah's advice to this widow. He tells her to go about her normal business, but before she prepares a meal for herself and her son, make a loaf of bread for him.

Do you see something wrong here? She just finished telling Elijah she didn't have that much flour and oil. Is Elijah deaf or daft? Neither. Elijah had a firm faith that if God said it, it would happen. Faith is what makes the illogical logical.

Elijah was asking the widow to put God first in her life. He was telling her that if she followed God's commands everything would be all right. That's what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. *Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well* (Mt 6:33 NIV). When a trusting heart gives God priority, fear can be overcome.

The last "not" comes in the narrative at the end of the reading: **The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry** (1 Ki 17:16). The widow did as Elijah had commanded. She used what she had in God's service. That couldn't have been an easy decision. We all want to think we would follow God no matter what. However, when the time comes, when the rubber meets the road, when our human logic kicks in, it can be a scary thing to follow God.

But things worked out for the widow. When she went to make a meal for herself and her son, there was flour in the flour bin. The empty jar of oil was no longer empty. God had provided. He made good on his promise. Not just for that meal, but for every meal until the drought was over. The widow put God above everything else in her life; herself and her son included. In return, God supplied what she needed.

So what does all of this say to us in modern day America? There are four lessons we can learn from this nameless widow of so long ago.

We are to believe God's promises regardless of the circumstances. God doesn't make empty promises. God promised the widow food and she had food. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and he did. God promised a Savior and he came. God has promised to care for you in all situations and he will. God is the only one who has never broken a promise, and he never will.

God's promises are intended to remove fear from our lives. We have nothing to worry about. God has promised to provide all our needs. If we can put our confidence in that promise, then where is worrying? It's gone. We needn't worry about ourselves, our families, our possessions, or our future.

Believing God's promises may seem to involve some personal risk. Following God is the hardest thing any human can do. That's because in his perfect wisdom, God asks us to do things that baffle our human way of thinking. It takes great faith to do as God asks. Abraham was asked to offer Isaac. Moses was asked to confront Pharaoh. Nathan was asked to call King David a murderer. Paul was asked to witness to Caesar. Martin Luther was asked to take on the Catholic church.

When we live by faith in God's promises, God will always supply. All of the people I just mentioned carried out the assignment God gave to them. Did it involve personal risk? Yes. In the eyes of the world, most of these people looked like losers. But, I guarantee you, that today, being with Jesus in heaven, they don't think they lost anything. God provided for them and he will provide for you and me.

Are you trusting in God's promises? He promises salvation for those who believe. He promises an eternal home in heaven. He promises to take care of you every step along the way. Are you trusting in those promises, or are you all tied up in the "nots" of life?

If the "nots" of this life are robbing you of your Christian joy, you need to trade your fear for faith. You need to put Christ first in your life. You need to trust that his promises will not fail. Remember, *the bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry* (1 Ki 17:16 NKJV).