

## Week 3: *The Widow of Zarephath: 1 Kings 17:17–24*

### Hook



**Main Point:** God shows compassion and concern for those in need, and His people are called to do the same.

**Q:** When was the last time the weather of North Texas surprised you?

In January 1977, much of North Texas was blanketed in snow; New York was buried under 20- to 40-foot drifts from a blizzard with near-hurricane force winds; and – most surprising of all – snowflakes fell as far south as Homestead, Florida, the southernmost snowfall ever recorded in the United States.<sup>123</sup> Snow in winter isn't shocking. Snow in South Florida is.

In today's lesson, we'll see another remarkable event in an unexpected place. God's moving in power isn't unusual. But *where* He moves, and *for whom* He moves in this passage – a poor widow in a pagan city – that's what makes this miracle unforgettable.

**RECAP:** In the first lesson, we talked about the role of Old Testament prophets as God's messengers and how they pointed ahead to Jesus as the ultimate prophet who not only spoke God's Word but *was* God's Word made flesh.

In week 2, we saw God's provision for both Elijah and the widow of Zarephath during the drought, which was a punishment for Israel's idolatry. This week, we will continue the story of the widow of Zarephath and focus on God's concern for the vulnerable as well as His heart for all the nations.

## **Week 3: *The Widow of Zarephath: 1 Kings 17:17–24***

### **Book**

**Main Point: God shows compassion and concern for those in need, and His people are called to do the same.**

### **1 Kings 17:17–24 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Only God has the power to raise people from the dead.

**Q: What did the woman say to Elijah about her son's death? What did Elijah say to God about this child's death? What does this tell us about God's care for His people?**

**Q: What does it tell us about this miracle that Elijah cried out to the Lord?**

**Q: Why do you think the widow immediately assumed her suffering was connected to her sin (v.18), and how do people still struggle with that idea today?**

In last week's lesson, we saw that when the brook dried up, Elijah left his place of hiding in safety and, at God's command, went directly into enemy territory, to the land of Sidon, where Jezebel's father was king. But instead of going to a person of power and authority, Elijah was instructed to look for a poor widow who was on the brink of starvation, and the Lord supernaturally provided food for her, her son and Elijah. Here the story continues, with the widow's son becoming ill and dying.

Most of us would ask why God would supernaturally keep this widow and her son alive only to later allow him to die of an illness. Perhaps for the same reason Jesus said He allowed Lazarus to die instead of coming early enough to prevent it – so God's power would be shown in raising him. Although the widow had seen God do miraculous things in keeping the flour and oil supernaturally stocked, she did not exclaim, "Now I know that you are a man of God" until Elijah raised her son from the dead.

Elisha also raised a woman's only son (2 Kings 4:18–37), and Jesus raised a widow's son (Luke 7:11–17). The widows in Elijah and Jesus' stories were both very poor, and their sons were their only hope of financial stability. The woman in Elisha's story was not a widow; her husband was still alive and they were wealthy. However, it was her only son, and she had him only because God had supernaturally given him to her. So the question in that story was similar – why would God give her a son only to allow him to die a few years later?

In both Elijah and Elisha's stories, the prophets prayed and then stretched their own bodies over the child. Elisha originally tried to have his servant lay his staff on the child's face, but that didn't work, so he came and did the same thing Elijah had done. All Jesus had to do was speak to the young man, and he rose. In both Elijah and Elisha's story, life returned to the child gradually. In Elijah's case, it took his lying on the child three times. In Elisha's, it was two times; the first time the child became warm, and the second time,

the boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. All this is a clear contrast to prove a major theological point – Jesus is far superior to Elijah and Elisha. They were merely prophets of God, but Jesus was God Himself.

Lying on the child’s body may seem strange, but it wasn’t a magic spell or ritual like the pagan nations would have tried. Elijah didn’t have the power to give warmth or life to the child. The prophets did not practice magic; they asked God to perform miracles, giving all the glory to God alone. The key to Elijah’s power was his prayer – he pleaded with God, multiple times. He was persistent in prayer; he did not give up. God was the source of the power, not himself. The miracle came by God’s will, not his own. Elijah’s actions were not medical or magical but symbolic. Lying down was a posture of total dependence on God. By lying on the child, Elijah was identifying himself with the child, pleading to God on his behalf. He was not claiming to have this power himself. He was calling on God, pleading with Him to raise the child because of God’s love and care for the boy’s mother, who had helped his prophet, Elijah.<sup>4</sup>

In the ancient world, pagan magicians could do certain supernatural things by the power of their “gods,” who were really demons. We see this in Exodus when Pharaoh’s magicians imitated some of the early plagues. But their power was limited; at the third plague, they admitted that replicating it was beyond their powers and exclaimed, “This is the finger of God” (Exodus 8:19). In the pagan world, magicians did not claim to be able to raise people from the dead. Once a person died, they did spells to try to guide their souls through the land of the dead or perhaps tried to talk to the dead, but they didn’t try to raise them.<sup>5</sup>

That’s why this act really convinced the Canaanite woman that Yahweh was the one true God. When this woman declared her faith at the end of the story, she said in Hebrew, “Now I know that you are a man of God (Elohim),” the supreme God above all other “gods.” She continued, “And that the word of the LORD (Yahweh) in your mouth is truth.” She was confessing that Elijah’s God, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the one true God over all other “gods.” Because this was beyond anything the Canaanite magicians could do; only the one true God could have done this.

**Q: What miraculous things has Jesus done in your life? What events in your life have made you exclaim, “Now I know you are God”?**

**Q: How might sharing these stories with unbelievers impact what they think or believe?**

**Deuteronomy 10:12–21 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** God has a special concern for the vulnerable, and so should we.

**Q: How does this passage describe the power and sovereignty of God?**

**Q: How does this contrast with what it says about God’s concern for the vulnerable?**

This passage is from Israel's recommitment to the covenant with God in the second generation, after the wilderness wanderings, just before they headed into the Promised Land. The first generation had failed to trust God, so He delayed and gave the land to their children. Before they entered the land, God renewed the covenant and the people agreed to it. Deuteronomy shows us that following God's law isn't about earning brownie points to get on His good side. It's about living by His ways because we are His people. God called Israel to live by His laws for their own good (v. 13), and when they lived by His ways, they showed the world what God is like (Deuteronomy 4:1–8). God's law isn't random rules; it is grounded in His character. His law reflects who He is.

In this passage, God told His people that He is the Lord of the whole universe and everything in it. Yet this God of gods, the great, mighty and awesome God loves the most vulnerable and defends the cause of those who cannot defend themselves. He is not a distant God who sits on His throne in heaven. He is a loving Father God, the God who sees those who are overlooked. His greatness does not make Him detached; it makes His compassion, care and love for the least of these even more powerful.

Scholars have long recognized that God's Word shows a consistent care for the "quartet of the vulnerable" – the fatherless, the widow, the poor and the sojourner. In ancient culture, these categories of people were the most vulnerable because they had no social or economic power – no land, no inheritance, no legal standing, no protection. God's repeated concern for them shows us that care for the vulnerable is not optional for God's people. It is central to His character. To ignore the vulnerable is not a minor issue; it's a denial of who God is.

In the ancient Near East, the quartet of the vulnerable were the people who most needed rectifying justice because the systems of the world mistreated them. This is why God's law commanded His people not to pick all their crops but leave some for the poor to glean. To treat sojourners among them like the native-born.<sup>6</sup> To defend the cause of the fatherless, provide for the widow, and speak up for those who can't speak for themselves. Over and over, God's law shows a special concern for helping those who are unable to help themselves.<sup>7</sup>

This passage in Deuteronomy bases these commands on not only who God is, but also in who His people are. He told Israel to care for the sojourner because *they* were once sojourners, and God saw their oppression, had compassion on them, and rescued them. We are called to treat others with the same mercy, grace, compassion and love God has shown to us (Matthew 18:21–35). The widow and her son in Elijah's story belonged to all four categories of the quartet of the vulnerable. The story shows us that God sees the invisible of this world. When they were on the brink of starvation, no one had helped them, but God did. When her son died, it would have meant she had no way to provide for herself. God not only brought her son back to life, but He restored her hope, dignity and financial security.

The miracle was not just compassion and mercy; it was an act of justice, giving her the life and dignity she was due as a human being made in the image of God, regardless of her social status in the eyes of the world. This miracle shows us how God provides for those who have been forgotten by the world. It is fitting that this story happens in the middle of Israel's idolatry because it shows us the heart of worship. While the people of Israel were worshipping Baal, God was quietly saving a poor, foreign, unnamed widow. Baal worship was about trying to get the god to give you what you wanted – a good crop, fertility, economic prosperity, etc. But Yahweh worship includes caring for the least of these because that is the heart of God (James 1:27). Many of the prophets taught that our worship is just empty words if we aren't caring for the vulnerable (Isaiah 58:7, 10; Amos 5; Micah 6:8). Because God's law teaches in Deuteronomy that true worship isn't giving lip service to God; it is being His people, living by His ways, sharing His heart for the world.

**Q: Who are the vulnerable people who have been overlooked by our world today? How can we defend their cause?**

**Q: In what ways can we provide for the least of these in our community?**

**Exodus 3:1–15 and 7:8–13 and Matthew 11:20–24 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Miracles are supposed to make people believe, but some people don't.

**Q: (Exodus) How did God answer Moses when he was worried the people wouldn't believe him?**

**Q: (Matthew) Why did Jesus condemn Chorazin and Bethsaida? What did He say about Tyre and Sidon? Why might that have been surprising to the Jews?**

**Q: When God clearly shows up, why do some people respond with faith while others harden their hearts?**

When God called him, Moses was worried the people wouldn't listen to him, so God gave him signs to authenticate his message. The purpose of any prophet's miracles was not to show his own power but to prove that the message he was speaking was from God. When Aaron did the sign of the staff before him, Pharaoh's magicians were able to do the same thing by their demonic power. But Aaron's staff ate theirs, proving God was superior, yet Pharaoh still hardened his heart.

Like the Old Testament prophets, the purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show His glory so people would believe that He was really sent from God (John 2:11). When the Pharisee Nicodemus came to ask more about Jesus, he said he knew Jesus had to have come from God because of the miracles He had been doing (John 3:2). When the Pharisees investigated Jesus' miracles, the man healed of blindness said Jesus had to be from God because without God He could do nothing (John 9:33). Still, many did not believe, even when Jesus raised people from the dead.

During His ministry, Jesus denounced the Jewish towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida because they didn't believe, even though He had done most of His miracles there. Jesus said if those miracles had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long before. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile cities just north of Israel that the Jews believed would be condemned in the Day of the Lord because of several prophecies about their idolatry (Isaiah 23; Jeremiah 25–27; Ezekiel 26–28; Joel 3; Amos 1; Zechariah 9). Yet Sidon is where Elijah found this widow who showed faith in the Lord. Also, during Jesus' ministry, He found another faithful Gentile mother in this area who begged Him to heal her daughter. Jesus praised her faith and healed her daughter instantly (Matthew 15:21–28). To the Jews, Tyre and Sidon were outsiders, but to God, they had, like anyone else, potential for faith.

The purpose of the miracles of Elijah, Elisha and every other prophet was so the people would believe their message from God. Yet many who saw these amazing miracles did not believe; many hardened their hearts. And there were many who flocked to Jesus for a miracle, but they did not humble themselves, repent, and turn to God. Miracles can create wonder, but repentance requires surrender. People reject the Gospel when belief would disrupt their life, when they know they would have to change, and they don't want to. Faith might mean letting go of control, abandoning sin, changing priorities, losing social or economic power. Some people reject the Gospel because they want to control the source of the miraculous power or use it for their own gain. Some people will never accept the Gospel, no matter how many miracles they see (Luke 16:31).

Every miracle in Scripture places people at a crossroads. Will they harden their hearts like Pharaoh or Ahab and Jezebel or respond in faith like the widow of Zarephath? Will they reject Jesus like the Pharisees or trust in Him like the Syrophenician woman? In both of these examples, the poor and vulnerable turned to God in faith, while the rich and powerful rejected God because submitting to Him would mean giving up their power. Humbling themselves. Serving Him instead of themselves.

**Q: Why might it seem easier for the vulnerable to humble themselves before God? What things have you had to give up to follow Jesus?**

**Q: How have you seen people reject the Gospel even though they have seen God do amazing, powerful things? Why do you think they rejected the Gospel? How can you show them the joy of following Jesus?**

**Q: Share any stories of times a miraculous event led someone you know to Christ.**

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### **Took**

**Main Point: God shows compassion and concern for those in need, and His people are called to do the same.**

Caring for the vulnerable is a beautiful responsibility for the Church. James 1:27 reminds us that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Are you currently making a difference in the life of someone who needs an advocate? If you’re ready to put faith into action, consider serving through one of these ministries:

- **Handyman Team** – Serve Prestonwood senior adults who need help with simple but meaningful tasks such as replacing light bulbs, turning mattresses, minor sprinkler repairs, A/C filter changes, and other small-home needs. A small act of service can be a big expression of love. To learn more, email Minister to Married Adults Mark Phanco at [mphanco@prestonwood.org](mailto:mphanco@prestonwood.org).
- **CHOSEN** is the foster care and adoption ministry of Prestonwood. Join a support care team to provide practical help and ongoing encouragement to foster and adoptive families. Your LifeGroup can make a tangible difference in the life of a child and the family welcoming them in. To get involved, contact [chosen@prestonwood.org](mailto:chosen@prestonwood.org).
- **Prestonwood Missions – Community Initiatives** – Partner locally to bring restoration and hope: serving families in crisis, supporting disaster relief efforts, ministering to those experiencing homelessness, investing in international communities, and bringing encouragement to those in prison. Learn more at [prestonwoodmissions.org/serve/community-initiatives/](http://prestonwoodmissions.org/serve/community-initiatives/).

God can use you to bring life, hope and dignity to someone who feels forgotten. Don’t just study God’s heart for the vulnerable. Reflect it.

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Think about the miracles God has done in your life. How have you seen God work in your life? What amazing things has He done that could have only been by His power? What do those things tell you about God? How might they lead you to praise God and thank Him? How can sharing those stories with other people help them see His goodness?

**PRAY:** Pray for those in our world whose hearts are hardened to the Gospel. Ask God to do a miracle in their life or the lives of their friends or family – not just so they will

receive the miraculous healing or provision, but so they will turn to Jesus in faith. Pray for their hearts to be softened.

**ACT:** Be the miracle. You may not be able to do a supernatural miracle in someone's life, but you can still be a "miracle" for him or her just by helping provide a need, especially to those who are vulnerable or feel invisible. Pray for the Lord to reveal one way you can be a miracle in someone's life ... and then do it!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.weather.gov/fwd/dsnows>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.worldatlas.com/natural-disasters/the-1977-ground-blizzard-that-buried-new-york-without-falling-snow.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://weather.com/safety/winter/news/2021-11-22-strange-places-snow-us-world>

<sup>4</sup> Paul R. House, *1 and 2 Kings, The New American Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Nathan Steinmeyer, "Canaanite Burial Customs – Pour One Out for the Departed," *Biblical Archaeology Society* (June 2023).

Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew "ger" is translated *sojourner*, *foreigner* or even *alien* depending on which English translation you are using. Those words can carry different meanings in our modern context than they did in the ancient world. It is important when reading the Bible to remember what words meant at the time they were written and not read our modern context back into them. In the context of God's law, a "sojourner" was a Gentile who lived among the people of Israel, but had committed to follow their covenant laws.<sup>[1]</sup> The only foreigners who lived among them were proselytes – Gentiles who had converted to Judaism, who had agreed to follow their laws. They were not supposed to allow foreigners who had not converted and committed to their covenant to stay among them; they were commanded to expel those foreigners from the land and utterly destroy their altars (Deuteronomy 7:1-5). God knew if they let them stay, they would lead the people away from Yahweh to follow their gods, which the story of the Bible shows happening because the people did not listen to God and did not expel the foreigners who were unwilling to convert from the land. This is why God's law commanded the Israelites to treat the sojourners like the native-born. Because even though they were not born Jewish, they had converted and *become* Jewish. The Bible emphasizes the vulnerability of the foreigner, calling believers to a heart of compassion. The Bible also affirms the authority of the state to set boundaries (Romans 13). A Christian can support the rule of law while simultaneously fulfilling the biblical mandate to treat every human being with the dignity accorded to an image-bearer of God.

[1] Harold G. Stigers, "גֵר" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 155-156