WOULD JUST ANY WIDOW DO?
(How God Provides for His People)

by Joan Warren

One heart-warming story in the Old Testament teaches us a valuable lesson about how God calls and provides for His people. First Kings 17 introduces Elijah as a prophet called by God to minister to his people during a terrible time in Israel's history. Ahab, the king of Israel (the Northern Kingdom is wicked indeed. He had set up Baal worship in houses and groves. The Bible declares that he "did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him." His wife, Jezebel, was as bad, if not worse, than he. Through their influence, Israel's heart was being turned from God to the worship of idols.

God Provides for Elijah (verses 2-6)

Elijah told King Ahab that there would be no rain or even any dew to wet the ground for a
specific period of time. Drought was a punishment threatened against idolatry (Deuteronomy 11:16-17) and, in this particular instance, the obstinacy of Ahab continued the drought for *three years*. God controls the elements, and man should learn this lesson.

After Elijah told Ahab the bad news about the drought, the prophet needed a safe place to hide; Ahab was a violent man who would likely cause him harm. Elijah also needed nourishment to sustain him during his time in hiding. He needed time —until proof of the prophecy was established and time for Israel to learn of their need of God.

God had a place for Elijah. He always has a place for His people if we will only trust Him. Elijah was to go eastward, by the brook Cherith. There he would have plenty of water to drink, and ravens would bring him food. This in itself is a miracle of God. Ravens, were considered unclean; as birds of prey, they would normally consume dead creatures. But by God's command, they brought meat and bread to Elijah every morning and every evening. Not only is God in control of the elements of nature, but He is also

in charge of the creatures He created. Man needs to learn this, also.

In verse 7 we are told that the flow of the water in the Brook Cherith gradually lessened, and over a period of time, completely dried up. What thoughts went through Elijah's mind as he saw this source of his existence slowly disappear? We would probably bemoaning and groaning and worrying and stewing about the future. But God remained silent until the brook dried up.

What a test of faith for Elijah. He obediently delivered God's message, obediently hid by the brook and obediently ate food brought by the ravens. When the brook is dry—that's when our faith is tested and most often rewarded in a marvelous way—if we will only trust God as Elijah did.

God was still in control of Elijah's life. He still had a job for Elijah to do. God was still providing for him. This time, however, he used another person—a person who also needed to learn some life lessons. He told Elijah to go to Zarephath, a city of Sidon, and live there. He had prepared a widow of the city to take care of him. The rest of the chapter (verses 8-24) talks about God's provision for both Elijah and the widow.

A Widow's Want

As in the past, obediently Elijah went to the city of Zarephath. God planned for His prophet to be dependent both upon a woman and upon a Gentile. No doubt, many women in Israel would have counted it a great honor to minister to the wants of the persecuted prophet of God. But God sent Elijah to a widow and a woman in such abject poverty that she and her emaciated son were reduced to starvation. The woman lived just inside the gate, and Elijah knew at once that this was the person God had in mind. But, due to the drought that had spread throughout the area, this woman was truly in want.

She lived in a coastal city in the heart of Baal worship, and near the home of Jezebel, the wicked queen. Elijah saw her picking up sticks and asked her for a little water to drink. He had come some distance without water and was quite thirsty. What nerve to ask a dying woman for a drink of water

during a major drought. But she went to get him a drink, and as she was going, he said, "By the way, bring me a little bread to eat, too."

The widow seemed to realize Elijah was a prophet, for she responded, "As the Lord thy God liveth, I have no cake or bread!" She went on to explain that she had only a handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a jar. She was gathering two sticks to prepare a last meal for herself and her son. Then they both would die.

She was in want of nourishing food. But she was also in a deeper want—a want of gaining a deep personal knowledge of the Lord God. She knew of Him; but did not truly know and serve Him with her whole heart.

Many people today experience the same want. These people have plenty of food to eat, a nice place to live and all the comforts earth provides. Yet, there is an emptiness in their lives because God has no real place there.

A Widow's Willingness

Elijah spoke gently to the widow, "Don't be afraid. Go ahead with what you are planning to do, but first, make me a little cake to eat. Then make one for you and your son. For God has told me that the barrel of meal shall not waste, nor the cruse of oil fail, until the day He sends rain on the earth again."

"You've got to be kidding, Elijah! I just told you—there's just enough meal to make one cake for me and my son. You will have to fend for yourself." That's what most of us would have said, and perhaps that *is* what this woman thought to herself. Or maybe we would have made the cake and shared a bite with the man. But Elijah requested that he be served first.

Why? This woman's willingness to share had to be tested. She had to be proven in the small things before she could be entrusted with greater things. What a test! She had to have faith in this foreign man and this foreign God to provide food, trusting that He could somehow miraculously supply her own wants. Who of us would have given our last bit of food to a stranger? How could she know that, after eating all the food, he would do

nothing but laugh in her face? She did not know what might happen. But *we know* that she was obedient to Elijah's request. She made the cake for Elijah and fed him.

A Widow's Wonder

Because of her willingness to share all she had, God rewarded the widow, her son and the prophet with abundance. They were able to eat for "many days" God blessed her for entertaining His servant. (Verse 16: "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.")

God always does what He says He will do. Why then are we surprised when it happens? With thankful devotion, this widow woman looked upon her barrel and cruse every day. Every day she saw the mercy of God providing for her needs. Not only was she fed physically, but she was also drawn closer to God because of her obedient sharing and its results.

But notice: God provided her *needs.* She was not given elaborate food such as cakes, meats or other delicacies; she had oil and meal enough to feed herself, her son and her guest (God's prophet Elijah). Scholars conclude that Elijah probably stayed there until it came time for the test at Mt. Carmel and the rain that followed.

Jesus taught similar lessons in His Sermon on the Mount. If asked to go a mile, go two; if sued for your coat, give your cloak also; give to those who ask of you; loan to those who would borrow. The bottom line is to be caring and considerate of others. Share what you have, even though it may not be much. The New Testament widow who placed her two mites in the treasury was commended: because she gave out of her poverty all that she had. The wealthy gave much, but compared to the woman's gift, theirs was a paltry sum.

What do we give? Or do we give at all? Are we willing to share our livelihood with others? Are we willing to share the good news of the gospel, letting others know of the priceless gift of salvation—theirs for the asking? Or do we hoard that along with material things God has blessed us with?

A Widow's Woe

When a person becomes a Christian and commits their all to the Lord, then everything is always rosy. Right?

Wrong! In verse 17 of this chapter we see that in spite of her willingness to serve God by sharing her livelihood with His prophet, this woman was faced with a terrible tragedy. Her son, her only son, the apple of her eye, became sick. The sickness was not just a brief case of flu, but so serious a condition that the son died. This child, who had escaped death by famine and was miraculously sustained by God's food supply, is now struck down with a mysterious disease that very swiftly took his life.

This poor widow did just like many of us would do: she became angry, and struck out at Elijah. This man had entered her life at a time when death was certain, but she and her son were spared because of God's intervention in their life. But now she cast some blame on Elijah for her son's death. Had Elijah saved the boy from famine only to see Him die withto kill him with sickness? Was this in payment for some sin that she had committed? She was searching for some reason for this terrible tragedy. We do the same. Self-examination might be helpful; but self-blame and blaming others for the many tragedies of life is not realistic. The old saying declares that into each life some rain must fall. Both good things and bad things happen to us; that is a part of life.

Do not be misled by those who claim that a successful Christian will be healthy, wealthy and wise. God can heal, but He does not always choose to do so. Many Christians are poor. The early church in Jerusalem was poverty-stricken and lived for a time on offerings from others. But if we know the Lord, He cares for us, protects us and gives us peace through the many trials of life. Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer— I have overcome the world." We can be survivors—more than conquerors— through Him who loved us and died for us.

A Widow's Worship

Elijah was concerned about the woman and her son. He took the boy out of her arms, and carried him up to a loft— his own sleeping quarters, near, or perhaps even on, the roof. He laid him on his own bed. Then he prayed. He was personally and deeply moved by the distress of the widow; and his prayer is an urgent appeal to God as a just and merciful and righteous being, ''Lord, are you going to allow this evil thing for the widow who has taken me in?" This was his question to God. We often ask Him similar things:' Why are You allowing this to happen?

Then he stretched himself over the child three times, and prayed very specifically: ''Let this child's soul come into him again." May times we dilly-dally with our prayers, praying all around what is needed. Perhaps we should get to the point!

In verse 22, we find that the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. What a blessed miracle—one of the first biblical accounts of a person brought back to life.

Elijah brought the child downstairs and gave him to his mother saying, "See, thy son liveth." I can see the strain disappearing from her face; her eyes widening in surprise; her face lighting upwith joy as she clasps her restored son in her arms.

She had believed, (somewhat imperfectly) before this incident). But now she was a true worshiper of God. She told Elijah that she now knew him as a man of God, and that the word of the Lord spoken by him was true. She had complete faith in Elijah, and complete faith in Elijah's God. What would have happened had her child remained dead and been buried? Her belief might have died with him, for it was very fragile. God took care to give her ample evidence of Himself to encourage and build up her faith.

Sometimes it takes a great tragedy to bring us to God. But we need to trust in Him and serve Him before these things happen in our lives. Then we can pass through the grief; the trial; perhaps the humiliation with joyful assurance, for we know the Christ, the Son of the Living God. This is a personal decision each one must make.

Summary

We can learn these and other lessons from this account:

1. God uses those who are obedient to His calling, as Elijah was.
2. God protects His own—through many different ways
3. If we share and give to others, we will receive abundantly.
4. Tragedies come even to Christians, but God will see us through them.
5. Prayer is important and will be answered— but not always as we think.
6. We need to know Christ personally and examine the main evidences that He is Christ.

Why did God choose this particular widow? Wouldn't just anyone do? Luke 4:25-26 tells us that " ... many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow." God showed special favor to this Gentile woman who responded in obedience, by choosing her over many Israelite women who might have failed the test.