



"I hope I'm doing the right thing." So you think as you look at your young, scrawny boy lying on his bed. You had such high aspirations for him. But ever since his dad died, your dreams for him have been dampened. He couldn't enjoy all the privileges like the other kids. You tried your best, but as a single parent, it just wasn't always possible. Your life was about survival. Not about aspirations.

You were surviving... until the drought. Two years ago, a prophet of God cursed the land because the king and queen had turned their backs on the living God. Two years ago, you could glean bushels of grain from the generous farmers who out of pity, seemed to leave half their crop behind for widows like you. But now, scraping by to feed their own families, there were hardly any scraps left. "If only that prophet hadn't cursed our land. I wouldn't be in this situation. Or better yet, if only my husband hadn't died. Then we'd have food."

With cupboards running bare you set out to the city gate to scrounge for firewood to fuel your last meal. 'Who's that man looking at me? I haven't seen him before. He's kind of creepy. Maybe he's just another transient looking to survive like everyone else. Maybe he's in Zarephath to catch some fish out of the sea. But why does he keep staring at me? Maybe he's going to help me. Maybe he has pity on me 'cuz he sees me picking up sticks like a dog. Maybe he's my knight in shining armor. He's coming closer. Hurry...dust yourself off. Put on a happy face. What's he going to say?'

"Ma'am, would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" Your hopes slowly deflate and the shine on his armor is gone. Typical. Just another person wanting to be served. "Sure, I'll get you some water." "Oh, yeah, and bring some bread, too. I'm starving." You bite your lip. Just like that, your balloon of hope is no longer slowly deflating, it's popped. His words pierce your soul. Thinking about your son back home, you whirl around, "You gotta be kidding. You're starving? Why don't you go count the ribs on my son? He's starving. I'm sorry sir, but you won't be getting any home-cooking from me. You see these twigs. These are going to heat up my last meal. Did you hear me? My *last* meal. A pinch of flour and a drop of oil. That's all we got. We're going to eat and then we're going to die. Don't take my last meal from me."

"Don't be afraid. You can have your last meal. But first bring me a cake of bread. Then make some for you and your son. For the LORD, the God of Israel says, "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land."

Agh... the nerve of this guy. Didn't he hear me? I'm having my last meal. I have nothing to give. How can he expect something from me? How selfish! How rude! How uncaring! How unaware of me and my needs! Shouldn't he be doing something for me instead of me feeding his belly? The gall of this guy. I don't care if he is a so-called prophet.

You storm off. The door of your home slams behind you, as you're still fuming over the unreasonable request. You open the flour canister, and you hear the clink of your spoon on its clay bottom. What was that last part the prophet said... feed me first and the "jar of flour will not be used up"... "the jug of oil will not run dry"... "this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says"... The words of promise echo in your mind much like that clinking spoon in your empty jar. The jar of flour will not be used up... the jug of oil will not run dry... this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says...

You look at your boy, lying on the mat on your dirt floor. You swallow hard. You dump the handful of flour and pour the last drop of oil into a bowl, adding a few tears to the mix. The twigs begin to crackle outside. The fire is ready. Mesmerized by the crackling fire and the now boiling batter, you wonder, "Am I doing the right thing?"

Moments later, with cake in hand... breadcake that could sustain your family for a few more days, you gaze at your son, then you turn your back on him to go feed Elijah. You watch Elijah, this stranger, devour your last meal. You see the crumbs collect in his beard and fall haphazardly to the ground. All the while you're thinking, "Will my son be alive when I get back home? If so, how much more time will we have together? Will he die or will I die first? Did I do the right thing?"

You walk home, scared of what you might find on the other side of your door. Just outside the door, you hear your boy groan, thankful that he is still alive, but saddened that you have nothing to satisfy his hunger pains. Kneeling down, you hold his frail body in your arms. With glass-eyes you peer across the room and notice the jar and jug still on the counter where you had emptied their contents. With your heart in your throat and the promises of the prophet bouncing in your head, you lay your son down and shuffle toward the kitchen. Clutching the clay pot, treating it almost like a jack-in-the-box that you are afraid to open, you slowly lift the lid. There it is... a handful of flour. Now with your heart pounding with excitement, you hold the jug up to the sunlight, and you see a little oil nestling to the bottom. The prophet was right. The LORD was right. The LORD was true to his word. The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry. Whistling, you bake a meal for you and your son, confident that tomorrow you will eat again. But not only will you eat, you will continue to bake for Elijah, the prophet of the living God. You will continue to support the work of the kingdom with joy.

Widows of Zarephath, followers of Christ, are your flour jars clinking because their close to empty? Oh, you may not be scraping for your last meal, but the checkbook may be a bit light these days. Are your oil jugs running dry? Oh, your ribs may not be showing from malnutrition, but your health may be waning. Do you find yourself irritated or angered by others seeking your help when you need help yourself? Do you find yourself irritated or angry at God or his church because he's still asking you to put him and his kingdom work ahead of your needs? Isn't that what he did for you? Before the creation of the world, the Lord had you and your needs in mind. When he was ridiculed by his own people, didn't he put your needs ahead of his? When he needed strength in the Garden of Gethsemane, he put your needs ahead of his. When he took the scourging on his back, he put your needs ahead of his. When he hung in the darkness that one Friday, it was to address your needs. What do you think he is doing today? He still lives and reigns for you. And it's that message – that sweet gospel message that God put me first -- that motivates us to support the gospel work, just like the widow of Zarephath did.

Now permit me this qualifier... the Bible doesn't tell us what was going through the widow's mind as she supported the work of the kingdom. Maybe she wasn't bitter, as I betrayed her. Maybe it wasn't a struggle for her to feed the prophet before feeding her son. I could preach on the same lesson next week and have a narrative sermon that lifts her up as a hero of faith. I hope I didn't ruin your picture of this widow. The reason I painted her the way I did is because I know what I would have done and what I would have thought in her shoes. Even with cupboards full, it's difficult to write out that check or see that automatic withdrawal for money given to support the kingdom when I have my own wish list that goes unattended. It's difficult to volunteer those hours of service for the Lord when there are neglected honey-do lists at home. As one poet said, "It's difficult to have life revolve around Thee instead of me." It's difficult to fear, love and trust in God above all things. It's challenging for each and every one of us to serve God the first "cakes" when we have so many appetites to satisfy. It is faith-testing to offer, "Here Lord, you first. I'm sure I'll be taken care of."

Personally, I think it was difficult for this widow, the first time. Maybe even the second. But by the third day of having enough flour and enough oil, I'm also confident that her continuing support for the kingdom was no longer a chore, but a joy. Her support for the kingdom was a joyful response to the fulfilled promises of God. Look at what it says, "*The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah.*" In keeping with the word of the LORD. God kept his word. The word of the LORD did not just promise to take care of that young widow. Through that same Word, the LORD promises to take care of you. Hasn't he kept that promise? Look at your life... haven't you been taken care of? You have food on your table. You have clothes on your back. Transportation in the parking lot. God has taken care of you in keeping with his Word.

Still not convinced? Alright. Quit looking at your life and look at your Savior. See him hold out his body and blood to you, offering you the unconditional blessing of forgiveness. See him raise his hands and give you the blessing of peace. See him picking you up in the mire of your sin and dusting you off with his mercy. Maybe not while looking at our life, but definitely while looking at our Lord, we all can say, "My cup, my jar, runneth over." Now may we use what God puts in our jars to support his work with joy. AMEN.