

Hope was gone. There was no future. For this weary woman from Zarephath, a small coastal town to the north and ***outside of*** God's promised Land of Israel, there was nothing left. Nothing left for her to do, she believed, but to despair and die. Her husband was already dead. Then came the famine, and it had been long, harsh, and relentless; the extreme drought wiped out so many of the grain fields and other precious life-giving vegetation. There was no relief in sight. The rains had come to a stop, brooks and streams had gone dry, and that meant hardly any food was to be found. Animals and people were growing gaunt and weak, she and her young son were certainly no exceptions.

As this widow lady of Zarephath trudged her way along to the outskirts of town that day, the dry, rocky ground yielded little in the way of trees and shrubs for the gathering of wood but gather she did. After collecting a few sticks, she was now ready to go home, make one more meager meal for herself and her little boy and prepare to die.

But it was at that moment that a stranger approached her and asked for a drink of water. Of course, she didn't have much water left, but out of her culture's tradition of hospitality, she dutifully agreed to fulfill this thirsty traveler's request. Then, as she turned to go get the water, the stranger politely asked for one thing more... "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

Now that was asking for too much: "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." (12) What complete and utter despair! "That we may eat it— and die" No hope. No future. Only feelings of defeat and fear remained in her heart.

Have you ever felt anything like this widow? Have you ever thought, even for a moment, that God has completely abandoned you? We may not be at the brink of starvation -thanks be to God! - but money can still get tight. Some Americans today face a hard choice of which bills they can afford to pay this month, and which ones can wait till next. Many of us also worry: 'What if the car breaks down and the emergency fund won't cover the repairs, and the credit cards are maxed out?' Or perhaps it's a different kind of anguish, like the heartache of a strained or broken friendship. Someone with whom you were once very close, is now so distant. Feelings of hurt and distrust separate you from each other.

Maybe it's the bitter feeling of hopelessness from being overwhelmed at school or work. One assignment piles up upon another, the expectations put upon you are high, and you feel like you can't take it anymore.

How about a chronic illness that offers no relief; a persistent pain that dogs you? Is there a sinful habit you're struggling to break? Or could it be that you see so much that's gone wrong in the world around you? Tensions at work? A crime that's been committed where you'd least expect it, the moral standards of our land turning further and further away from what God clearly sets forth in His Word? So many things and in so many ways it's clear to see that Satan is working overtime these days! Is there any hope for us in our lives, hope for our world, hope for our future, or are we left to despair like the widow of Zarephath felt?

Let's go back to visit her situation and find out from God what the solution is. Remember where she was, not physically, but where she was *emotionally* and *spiritually* when in response to Elijah's request for bread, she uttered those anguishing words of despair: "As surely as the Lord your God lives, I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." (12)

That's when Elijah said to her these *comforting*, yet *challenging* words: "***Don't be afraid.*** Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son." (13)

To the widow it seemed impossible. She held out no hope for herself and her son, so how could she help out this foreign traveler? But what he said next, she would never forget: "This is what 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.'" (14) And at *that moment*, she took Elijah at his word. Better, ***she took the LORD at His Word. That*** was the turning point! That's what would make all the difference for her life and for her future: "She went away and did as Elijah had told her" (15). "Don't be afraid" Elijah had said. Trust God's promises. She did. She held on to God's promises, and her faith motivated her to act!

How about us? When we go through extremely challenging times; times when we're tempted to give up all hope, will ***we*** hold on to God's promises for us? Jesus says, 'Seek first (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (all the things you need to live your life in this world) will be given to you as well... do not worry about tomorrow.'" (Mt. 6: 33-34) Will we take Jesus at

His word? Will we **trust** His promises? Some of the trials we go through, like storms and sickness, aren't any direct fault of our own. They're simply side effects of living in this fallen world; a world that's been reeling from the destructive effects of sin since Adam and Eve first doubted God's Word. The same can often be said for when we find ourselves in financial hard times. Other problems though, like broken friendships, being locked in sinful habits, those things are caused by our own sin. In this case, there are sins we need to confess to God and to go to Jesus to seek His forgiveness. Here too, Jesus offers His promise for us to hold on to, "Whoever comes to Me, I will never drive away" (John 6:37)

At all times, and in all situations, but especially when there seems to be no hope, like when the widow and her son were at their lowest point, ready to go home and wait to die, it's precisely at a point like that that we need to open our heart to God's Word and hold on to His promises.

What are those promises? For the widow it was to trust that God would provide for their physical needs through a miraculous, continuous supply of flour and oil. For us, we have the no less miraculous and **never-ending** supply of God's grace and mercy found in His Son, Jesus. It is to Him that all the prophets of the Old Testament were pointing, whenever they told people to trust God. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ," (2 Cor.1:20.)

In Jesus Christ, God promises that He will give us this day our daily bread, and that means everything we need for this life, and He does provide. In Christ, God promises His repentant people that He will forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and He does provide. In Christ, God promises His fear-filled people, so quickly tempted to doubt, that He will deliver us from evil and from everything that can harm us, and He will always deliver us. We can be absolutely sure of these great promises today because God has never let us down in the past, and will He never let us down in the future. God did not spare His own Son from dying for our sins and raising Him to life to give us eternal life, so we know He will provide us with everything we need.

Our text ends with the once fear-filled widow, now trusting God's promises and being filled with hope. This hope from the LORD would not disappoint. Even as time would pass, and her life would be filled with more ups and down, God's Word remained sure for her. She could put her trust in Him and never be filled with despair again.

We too, have all of God's promises in Christ: Promises He made to you in His Word, the Bible, which we can always read and always hold on to. You also have the promises He made to you in your Baptism. Those promises delivered to you the forgiveness of all your sins and the gift of eternal life. What's more, in Baptism God gives you His Holy Spirit with the promise to be with you always. In the Lord's Supper Jesus says to you, "Take eat, this is my body. Take drink, this is my blood for your forgive-ness." All these promises Jesus gives to you to forgive and strengthen you in your faith until you reach the goal of your faith eternal life in heaven where you will see Him face-to-face.

Yes, in Jesus we have the sure and certain hope of eternal life with God where there will be no more crying, sorrow, or pain. In heaven God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7). How wonderful that will be!

For now, here on this earth we continue to live our lives under God's abundant care and gracious blessing. We hold on to His promises that He will never leave us, He will never forsake us. He will provide us with all we need for this world and the next.

When things look hopeless, trust God's Word. Hold on to His promises, because He will always hold on to you! Amen