

## God Builds Faith

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

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1 Kings 17:17-24

*Well...thanks **Gilbert** for that song...and thanks **Kelley** for setting up today's story in our study "**Days of Elijah**"*

- *Today...like Kelley said...we are going to look at the story of this widow...and how God **built her faith** when she went through a **time** where God **didn't make sense**.*
- *And let me say we're going to **look at her story in 4 steps**...4 pieces of her story that we will **walk through one at a time**.*
- *And we'll see that **these 4 steps** form a sort of **cycle**...a **sequence or progression** that **God often uses** in our **life** when he wants to **build our faith**.*

*OK...so we'll see this in **4 steps**, and **kids**...sorry...this is probably the **least kid-friendly sermon** in our **Elijah series**! It's got some kind of **grown-up ideas**.*

- *Now... it still relates to **all of us** no matter what **age** we are.*
- *But **next week**...we'll be back on more **kid-friendly ground**, when we talk about **Elijah facing the prophets of Baal**!*

### Let's Pray

- *So we're going to **look at this story in 4 steps**...and as we **look at each of the steps** in this story...we'll **talk** about how it **relates to us**.*
- *So **4 steps**...and the **first step** in her story is **this**:*

**1. At First...God seems to make perfect sense (X2).** *To this woman...*

**I mean**...if you were here **last week**...and you heard the **story** of **Elijah** and this **woman**...just **think** about where she **is**...as we **come to today's story**:

- You know, at the **beginning** of **last week's story**...she was a **Baal worshiper**.
  - *She worshipped this false god...this storm god...this idol named Baal.*
  - She lived in a **town** that was the **very center** of **Baal worship**...
- And she **worshiped Baal**: When she **meets Elijah**—the **prophet** of the **true God**—she says “*as surely as **YOUR** God lives (like ‘he’s your God, not my God) as sure as your God lives...I don’t have anything to eat*”

So this woman **started out**...as a **Baal worshiper**.

But then...in **last week's story**...something **amazing thing happens**: **Elijah** introduces her to the **true God**... And she takes a **step of faith**:

- Elijah says “give God the first part of the *little bit* you have *left*--take the first part of your little bit of **flour**... and the first part of your little bit of **oil**...and give it to my God—the **true God**—and he will *rescue* you.
- He will **show you** he's the **true God** by **providing for you**.
- So this woman **does it**—*she takes a step of faith*—she **trusts** in this **God of Israel**...

And you know...it works! God **provides**... His **promise is true!**

- **I mean**...not **only** was there **enough flour** in her **jar**...and enough **oil** in her **jug** to make a **meal** for **herself** and her **son** and **Elijah** on that day...
  - *But there was enough for the next day...and the next day...and the next...*
- And **not only** did God **provide** for her... and continue to provide...
- But God **promised**—*he specifically said through his prophet Elijah*—that he would **provide food** for this **widow**, and her **son**...and **Elijah**...*until the day that the drought ended*.

And **listen**... I'm sure for **her**, as she **lived out** that **promise**...**everything made sense**:

- She had found the **true God**... she had **done** what he **asked** and **taken** a step of **faith**...
- The **true God** **promised** to **provide** for **this woman** and her **son**... and she had found his **promise** to be **true**. Everything made sense.

And you know **guys**, like that **widow**...when we **first turn to God**... when we first **stop trying** to do **life** on our **own**...and place our **trust** in the **true God**... the God of the **Bible**...*Life usually starts to make sense*.

- **It does**. **I mean**... **think** about it: God **made you** with a **purpose**.
- He made you and me to **operate**—to **live our lives**—a **certain way**.
- He made the **world** to operate in a **certain way**... It's like **God** has just **woven** his **purposes**...his **wisdom**...his **character**...into this **world**
  - *So that life is better when we tell the truth...life is better when we love our neighbor...life is better when we don't take things that don't belong to us...*
  - *life is better when we worship the God who made our world.*

We were **made** to **do these things**...so when we **do them**...**life makes sense**.

And that **often happens** when we **first turn to God**.

- *How many people do I know ...that come to Jesus ...and you can just see the joy on their face when they first invite God into their life.*
- Just like this **widow**...we find **God's promise is true**...and we find **joy** in **serving him**... and both **life** and **God**...just **make sense** in a **new way**.

• *So at first...at the 1<sup>st</sup> step in our story...God seems to make perfect sense. BUT...*  
**Step 2: But there came a time...when God didn't make any sense.**

There came a **time** when God **didn't seem to make any sense...at all.**

- Let me **show** you what I mean: **Look what the Bible tells us in 1 Kings 17:17...**
- This is **right after** God had **promised to provide** for this **woman** and her **son**:
- The **drought** is **still on**, but it's **OK**: God is **still providing**...when the **writer** tells us **this**:
- *<sup>17</sup> Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally...stopped breathing.*

This woman's **son grew ill...** and he **died**.

- This verse tells us *he stopped breathing*: **Later on** both **Elijah** and the **widow** are going to **say** that he was **dead**. **The widow's son died!**

And **you know...**this wouldn't have made **any sense** to this **widow**.

- **I mean God** had just **rescued her** and her **son from death**...he had **provided**.
- And **not only that...** but God had **promised to keep providing** for **both** of them...until the **drought** was **over**...*Suggesting that they were going to live through the drought!*
- **God** had said that. And now *this* happened.

And **think** about it: it was **bad enough** that her **son had died—right?**

- But **why** would **God** give them **hope**...why make a **promise...only to do this?**
  - I'm **sure** this woman was **completely confused**: *it reminds me of a statement I once heard somebody make about a ruler of a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country who started good...but then who had turned into an evil dictator:*
  - *she said "how could you give us so much... And then take away more?"*
- How could you show such kindness ...and such cruelty?* I'm **sure** that's how this **widow felt**. I'm **sure** at **this point**...God didn't make **any sense** to her.

And **you know guys...**I **have** to **say** something: if you **follow God long enough...** there will come a **time**...when he **doesn't seem to make sense**.

- There will come a **time** when his **promises don't seem to be true**...
- A time when you **struggle to believe** that God is **on your side** at all.
- **God won't seem to make sense**.

It **might** be a time when you **suffer injustice**: *A time when you do the right thing... and you get in trouble for it. It doesn't make sense*

It might be a **time** when God **withholds** the things that seem to be his **"normal"** blessings from you.

- *Maybe you're a **godly young man** or **godly young woman**... And you can't find a **godly husband** or **wife**. No matter how hard you try.*
- *Maybe you're a **godly couple** that wants to have **kids**... And you **can't**.*
- *Maybe you're a **godly parent** that has a **wayward child**. You **honestly** tried your **best** to **raise them right**...you did it by the **numbers**. And it **doesn't seem** like it **paid off**.*
- **Whatever it is**...God has **withheld** his “**normal**” **blessings** from you. The things that **normally happen** for **obedient people** don't **happen** for you.
- When you **experience** that...God doesn't seem to **make sense**.

Maybe you see **bad people** who seem to **get away with it**:

- *Sometimes people **cheat** on **tests**... and they **pass them anyway**.*
- *Sometimes the **kid at school** that everyone **knows** is the **mean kid**... becomes the **teacher's pet**.*
- *Sometimes **cheaters do** seem to **prosper**. Sometimes they get **rich**.*
- Maybe we see **injustice**...Maybe we **face disaster**... like the **widow did**.

Or maybe we just **serve God over and over**... to the **point of exhaustion**... and it just **doesn't seem** to **pay off**.

- Maybe it seems like the **reward** for your **faithful service**... Is to **always face another test** of your **faith**.
- And it **feels** like God is **ignoring** you... or maybe even like he's **against** you... and God just **doesn't seem** to **make sense**.

*Let me just ask...Have you ever gone through that?*

- I think maybe some of you are in **that kind of a time** right now.
- You're **wondering** what God is **up to**. He **doesn't seem** to **make sense**.

If that's **you**... *can I just **tell you something**?* Here's what you need to **know**:

- You're **not alone**. That isn't **new**. What this **widow** is going through...what **you're** going through...is **not new**.
- **In fact**—I kind of hate to say this, but it's **standard operating procedure** for **God**. It's something he does **all throughout** the **Bible**.
- **Think** about it: if you know the **stories** this **happens again** and **again**:
  - ***Joseph** obeyed God and he ended up in **prison**...*
  - ***Israel** obeyed God and **departed from Egypt**... and he took them **straight** to the **Red Sea**.*
  - ***Daniel** obeyed God...And ended up in a **den of lions**.*
  - *Jesus **obeyed God perfectly**... and God led him to the **cross**.*

*In each of these **moments** and **many many more** in the **Bible**...God didn't seem to **make sense***

- *Listen... (1) at first... God seemed to make perfect sense. (2) But there came a time... when God didn't make any sense at all. Now the 3<sup>rd</sup> step of this woman's story is this:*

### **3. The woman wondered if God was against her, or if it was because of her sin (X2).**

This woman **doesn't know** what's **going on**. But as she tries to **make sense** of the **death** of her **son**...she starts to **wonder** about some things. **Look at verse 18:**

<sup>18</sup> *She said to **Elijah**, "What do you have against me, man of **God**? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"*

She wonders **2 things: first...** she wonders "*could it be that God is just against me?"*

- **You know...** There are **different translations** of the woman's **1<sup>st</sup> question**:
  - GNB renders it "why did you do this to me?"
  - Message "why did you ever show up here in the first place?"
  - NRSV "what have you against me?"
- These translations are **all slightly different**...but they all **amount** to the **same thing**: She's thinking "*Maybe God is just out to get me.*"
- She's thinking "*maybe I'd have been better off without this True God in my life after all*"
- "*Maybe he's not as good as I thought. Maybe he doesn't love me as much as I thought he did.*"

**That's** what she's **thinking**. And, let me **ask**...*Can you see why the woman might think that? Can you see why she might think that God is out to get her?*

- **Sometimes** we think that way when God **doesn't make sense**. We think he's **out to get us**, don't we?

*"Or maybe" ...she thinks... "this is because of my sin. Maybe it's because of things I've done in the past that are wrong."*

- **You know...**we've all sinned.
  - We've all disobeyed our parents when we knew they were **right**.
  - We've all said and done things to our family or our friends that were **hurtful**.
  - We've all been selfish when we should have been **servicing**...
  - We've all had **times** when we didn't speak the truth...or when we took something that didn't belong to us.
- And we all **know** those things are **wrong**...but we **do them anyway**.

**We sin...everybody sins**. And you know **what**? Sometimes **God judges sin**.

- The reason that **Israel** was having this **famine**...this **drought**...in the **first place**... is because they had **sinned**. They had worshipped **Baal** and **disobeyed God**.
- So she's **thinking** "*maybe God is judging my sin. Maybe he's judging my former idolatry.*"

The woman he's trying to figure out **why** this has **happened** to her. She's **confused**.

- All she **knows** is that she **followed this God of Israel**—she **thought God** was going to **watch over** her...and **Elijah**...and her **son**. And now her **son is dead**.
  - She doesn't know **what** to think.
  - So she thinks **maybe** God is **against** her... or maybe he's **judging her sin**.

And you **know guys**...when God **doesn't make sense**...sometimes we think the **same thing**... *don't we?*

- We think “maybe I **didn't know God** as well as I **thought** I did... maybe his **promises** don't mean what I **thought** they meant.”
  - Maybe he **is**...kind of **out to get me**.
- Or we think “*maybe I've sinned. Maybe I've been disobeying God... and he's letting me face hard times to teach me not to do that.*”
- *Aren't those the places our minds go? It's confusing...right?*

**In fact**...I want you to **notice something**...even **Elijah** is **confused by God**.

- Even **Elijah** wonders **why** this has **happened**... and wonders if the **lady** might be **right**: *Maybe God really is kind of out to get her...Look at vv.19-20...*
- <sup>19</sup> “Give me your **son**,” **Elijah** *replied*. He **took** him from her arms, carried him to the **upper room** where he was *staying*, and **laid** him on his **bed**. <sup>20</sup> Then he **cried out** to the **LORD**, “O **LORD** my God, have you brought **tragedy** also upon this **widow** I am *staying with*, by **causing** her **son** to **die**?”

Elijah says “**Lord**...*this isn't just any widow. This is the widow I'm staying with. She put her **faith** in you. She **obeyed** you. She **trusted** you. She has **provided** for your **prophet**...*

- And you **promised** to **provide** for her and her **son** every day. *Are you really bringing this **tragedy** on her? Is this really what you're doing?*” He's **struggling!**

And I want you to **notice something**: this is **Elijah** we're talking about: **Elijah**... one of the **greatest prophets** of the **entire Bible**.

- When you read the **story of Elijah**... he's **always confident** in **God**... he's **always the guy** with the **answers!**
  - **I mean**... when he **first meets the widow**... and she says she has **no food**... **Elijah** tells her “*make me a **cake anyway**... and **God will provide**” he **has the answer!***
  - In **next week's story**...when Elijah faces **450 prophets of Baal**...he is **so sure** of **himself** that he offers them **every advantage**:
  - He's like “*we'll meet at your place...you can **choose your sacrificial bull first**... we'll do **fire from the sky** because that's your **god's thing**...you can **go first**...*”
  - He is **so confident**...he **always has the answer**.

He **always** has the **answer! But not here**.

- Here Elijah **joins the widow** in her **confusion**. He says *“God...Is this really what you're **doing**? Is this really your **purpose**? Do you really want her to **experience this pain and tragedy**?”*
- He **admits** that it **doesn't make sense to him either**

**So...at first**, (1) *God seemed to **make sense**...*(2) *but there **came a time**...when he **didn't make any sense at all**.* (3) *The widow **wondered** whether God was **against her**... or whether he was **judging her sin**.*

- **In fact**...even **Elijah** doesn't **know** what's **going on**...He doesn't know **why** this is **happening**: It **doesn't make sense to him either**.
- But **here's the thing**: Elijah **does know**...who to **talk to** about it.
- He **does know**...where to **go**. Elijah **prays to God**. He brings his **honest confusion to God**. **Elijah prays**.
- And as he **prays**...something **happens**. **Look at v.21**
- <sup>21</sup> *Then he **stretched himself out** on the boy **three times** and **cried to the LORD**, “O **LORD my God**, let this boy's **life return to him!**”* <sup>22</sup> *The **LORD heard Elijah's cry**, and the boy's **life returned to him**, and he **lived**.*

**Somehow** as Elijah **prayed**... As he **brought this widow's need**... and his **honest confusion to God**...God **told Elijah** what he **wanted him to do**.

- Elijah **stretched himself out** over the boy **3X**... And **3X** he **stated**, in the **simplest way possible**, the **request God had told him to make**...
  - A request that **no one** in the **whole Bible** had **ever made of God before**.
- Elijah said *“oh Lord my God, let this boy's life return to him”*

**Now**... we don't know **why** God **told Elijah to pray that way**... but God **did**

- And as **Elijah did** what God **told him to do**... something **incredible happened**: the **boy returned to life!**
  - He **started to breathe**... and his **eyes opened**... And God **raised that boy from the dead!** It was **incredible!**
  - Something **no one** had **ever seen**... or **done**... or **heard of**... **ever before**.

**Now look at v.23**...Elijah **responded** by doing what **any of us** would have **done**:

- <sup>23</sup> *Elijah **picked up** the child and **carried him down** from the **room** into the **house**. He **gave him to his mother** and said, “**Look, your son is alive!**”*

And I'll **bet** that's **not all** Elijah did.

- I'll bet **he**... and the **widow**... in the **boy** did a **little dance right there!**
- They danced a **little jig**...Probably did the **Dougie**...a little bit of **Gangnam Style** right there! I **don't know**. I don't know what **dances they had!** But they **danced!**

- And I'll bet there was a **little bit of extra flour...and extra oil...**in the **jar** for **dinner** that night! *They celebrated! Her son was alive again!*

But there was **still the question...**of why God **allowed** this to **happen**.

- *Why did God seem to do something that made no sense? Why did he allow this boy not just to get sick...but to die? Why did God put this widow through this?*

Well... In the **last verse** of our story... the **woman realizes why**.

- She had **thought** maybe it was because God was **against her...** she had **thought** maybe it was because God was **judging her sin...**
- But **that wasn't it at all. Why did God allow this?**

#### **4. It was because God was building her faith (X2).**

##### **Look at what she says in v.24**

- <sup>24</sup> *Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I **know** that you are a **man of God** and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the **truth**."*

**Think about that.** She says "**Now I know**"...**not before...**but **now**.

- "**NOW** that my son got sick...**NOW** that he died...**NOW** that God didn't make any sense...**NOW** that he **rescued** me from all that. **NOW I know**."
- **Now** this widow has **full faith**. God **did this...**to **build her faith**.

- *And think with me for a minute...about how God has grown this woman's faith.*
- *Think about all she has come to know as a result of this tragedy:*

#### **1. She knows that Elijah is a true prophet of the true God.**

- **I mean...surely** she **thought that before--** *I don't think you could completely dismiss a jar of flour and a jug of oil that never run out--so...* she **knew** Elijah represented something real...
- But **now...** She knows **this** is the **real God**. *I mean this is **THE** God. He's not just the God of flour and oil... He's the real God.*
- She **knows** this... and she knows it in a **deeper, stronger** way then she did **before** her son got sick. *Now she won't be moved.*

- *(1) She knows Elijah is a true prophet of the true God.*

#### **Secondly...She knows that the true God can overcome death (X2).**

- **You know...** like we said... this **widow** started out as a **Baal worshipper**.
- And **you know...** **much** of what happens in Elijah's story is actually **aimed at Baal**.
  - You may **remember** from **last week** **Baal** was a **rain god... a storm god**.
  - *So how did God get Israel's attention when he wanted them to stop worshipping Baal?* He brought a **3 year drought**



- God is saying “*listen... I'm the real God. I'm the God who can stop the rain and start the rain. Not Baal. I have power over rain.*”

So **Baal** was a **rain God**. But there's **one other thing** you need to **know** about **Baal**: Baal was **also engaged...** in a **constant struggle...** with **death**.

- In **Canaanite mythology** **Baal** was **constantly at war** with **Mot... the God of death and the underworld**. And **Baal** was **never able to overcome him**.
- **Every year** when the **dry season came...** the **Baal worshippers** believed that Baal had **died** and been **dragged** into the **underworld...** and that his **sister** had to **rescue him** and **pull him back** to the **land of the living**.

So **Baal** was **never able to overcome death**. And this **widow** would have **known that**: she would have **grown up hearing those stories...**

- So **God** gives her a **special miracle...taylor-made** for **her...** to **build her faith**.
- God lets her **son die**—*something that at first seems very cruel*—but it was the **clearest, most incredible way ever...** For **God** to **assure her** that he was the **true God**.
- He's saying “*I'm the real God... The only God with authority over all things... even death... so you can put all your trust... in me.*”

**You know, guys...**we have a **God** who can **overcome all things...even death**.

- And **our God** doesn't **call us** to go **anywhere** he **hasn't gone himself**.
- God took this **woman's son all the way not** just through **difficulty...** but all the **way to death**. He went to **extreme measures** to **assure her** that he had **power over death**.
- *But you know what?* He was willing to do the **same thing** with his **own Son**.
- He took him **to death** and **through death...** a death that was **cruel** and **harsh...** and **didn't seem to make sense** at the **time...**
- So that we could **rest assured** that **our God...the true God...has power over death**

*God grew this woman's faith... so that as we get to the end of the story... (1) she knew that Elijah was a true prophet of the true God... and (2) she knew that God could overcome death.*

- *And as we get to the end of the story... She knew one more thing:*

### **3. She knew God made sense (X2).**

- It's **not** just that God had **powers** she **didn't know about** before... It's that God **really did make sense**.
- His **intentions really were** as **good** as they had **seemed...** his **promises really were** as **true** as they **seemed**.

- He was **reliable**... he could be **trusted**. He **really was going to provide** for her...and for **her son** through the **whole drought**
- Because her **son** was going to **live** through the **whole drought**

**Listen**...here's the **point**: when she **got to the end** it **all made sense**.

- And **Church**...*can I just give us all a word here?* It's **all** going to **make sense**.
- When we get to the **end**...it's all going to **make sense**.
- When we get to the **end of our trial**...our **trials often make sense**.
- And when we get to the **end of all things**...it's **all** going to **make sense**.
- *Every shred of **injustice** we've **experienced**... every time God seemed to **withhold normal blessings**... Every time the **wicked** seemed to **get away** with it... every time we **served faithfully**, and it **felt like no one noticed**... in the **end**, **all** of it... is going to **make perfect sense**. We'll see that it **all** has a **purpose**.*

And I **know** that some of you are **going through a hard time right now**...

- and you're **saying** "*I can't see it. I've looked and I've looked... I've prayed and I've prayed...and it just doesn't seem like God makes sense.*"
- Can I just **tell you**... you're not to the **end yet**. *Hang on till the end.*

*You know...there's a story told about a missionary named **Henry C. Morrison**:*

- *He had **endured hardship**...and **sacrificed**...and **served in Africa for 40 years**.*
- *He finally became **ill** and had to **return home**.*
- *He had **poured out his life in faithful service to God**. And he **wondered** as he **sailed back**, who might be there to **greet him and welcome him back to America**.*

*As his **ship** pulled into **NY Harbor**...he saw a **crowd of people** gathered...and some people **waving signs**...*

- *But his **heart sank** as **realized not only** that the **crowd and signs weren't for him**...but he **realized** that **no one**—not one single person—had come to **welcome him back**.*

It **didn't make sense** to him. And he **later confessed** that he had a **moment of resentment**...where he prayed to **God** and **said**:

- "***Lord**...I've come back after **40 yrs. of hardship and faithful service**, and **not one person** is here to **welcome me home**. How on **earth** does that **make sense?**"*
- *But he said then a **still, small voice** spoke to him and said "**You're not home yet.**"*

**Listen**: **Eventually**...in the **end**...*God will make sense again.*

- *Maybe that will be at the **end of your trial**...maybe it will be when you **finally reach home**...but it's all going to **make sense**.*

- *And we'll see how God used those times that **didn't make sense**...to **build our faith**.*
  - *We will find that his **intentions** were as **good** as they **seemed**...*
  - *That his **promises** were as **true** as we'd **hoped**. And it will **all make sense**.*