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Trinity Presbyterian Church – Pensacola, FL  
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## **LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: 2. “Who Has the Power?”**

1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

The two widows in our scripture readings say a lot about people of hope who live looking forward and people of despair who see nothing for which to look forward.

### **Elijah and the Widow**

The first widow encountered Elijah while out by the town gate gathering sticks. Elijah asked her for some water to drink. As she was going for the water, he called out, "And please bring me a piece of bread." This was more than the widow could handle. "As surely as the LORD your God lives," the widow replied, "I don't have any bread—just a handful of flour and a little oil. I am gathering a few sticks to take home that I may make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die."

There are millions, of people in our world even today like her, who are just as desperate. They don't know where their next meal is coming from, or how their situation in life will ever get better. Will this war ever end? Can I handle this surgery? Will these treatments cure me? Can I handle the academic pressure, the peer pressure, my need to be perfect? Can I handle life as a widow, as a divorcee? Does anybody love me? Does anybody care about me? Will the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico ruin my business, my property, our environment? Will my homeowners insurance cover my losses? "Where is God in all of this?" **“Who has the power to help us?”**

This widow thought her situation hopeless, but not Elijah. Elijah knew that God is a bountiful, powerful, giving God who can do amazing things. Elijah told this despondent widow, *"Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread and bring it to me. Then make something for yourself and your son, because God 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."* The widow did as Elijah said, and *"...Elijah and for the woman and her family ate for many days and neither the jar of flour nor the jug of oil ran out, just as God had said."*

God's Holy Spirit in us helps us to endure hardships and thereby to build up character, which produces hope. Hope is not simple optimism. Optimism minimizes the hard facts of tragic situations, believing the solution is simple and easy. Hope, on the other hand, **rises out of** the tragic situation, hope is realistic about the tragedy and the pain and about the internal and external obstacles we must overcome to find fulfillment. Hope is confidence that you will emerge from your despair and trouble stronger for what you have endured and what you have discovered about God, about yourself, about human nature, about faith in God that endures and overcomes all things. Hope is trust in God because of past experience and God's faithfulness. Hope is possibility; hope endures.

But what do you do when your jar of hope is empty? In our story of Elijah and the widow whose jar of grain and jug of oil are almost empty, after she eats her last meal, her hope will be

gone; her future –gone! What then? Do you give up hope and die? Do you try as hard as you can and as fast as you can to fill up your life with something else to give your life purpose and meaning? Do you turn away from God and the church and run to some other source, to anything, anyone who promises something better? What do you do when your hope jar is empty?

Elijah says don't trust in your jar, trust in your God. The widow feeds her son the last meal and yet the jar of meal and the jug of oil do not run out and they eat for many days more, fulfilling the word Elijah spoke.

We live in a scientific age, a post-modern culture, we no longer consider call draughts and floods and tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes “Acts of God,” we now list them as “Acts of Nature,” caused by changes in weather patterns or shifts deep within the earth. But, like our ancestors, we still seek God's presence, God's protection, God's deliverance in the midst of these times. **Who has the power to sustain us through disasters and disappointments? God!**

In the Elijah story, King Ahab had turned from following Yahweh, God of Israel, and instead, had begun worshipping Canaanite god Baal, believed to be the god of rain and vegetation. The Canaanites thought that when there was rain, Baal was alive and death had been defeated. When there was drought, they believed that Baal was dead and death had won.

God sends Ahab and message through Elijah: *“There shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word”* (1 Kings 17:1). *“My Word...,”* says God, Not Baal's word, not your word..MY power will prevail. Elijah has thrown down the gauntlet; and God's name, God's glory, God's power is on the line. Time will tell – for now God tells Elijah to withdraw back across the River Jordan and go and hide in the wilderness by the river Cherith where God shall provide for him. There by the brook Cherith, Elijah can drink water from the stream while the ravens bring him food. The word for raven, *“crybym,”* when pronounced another way means “Arabs or Bedouins” – folks who know how to live in the desert. But once the draught dries up the stream neither ravens nor Bedouins can help Elijah. So then God sends Elijah North to Lebanon to a woman for food. Both ravens and desert Bedouins live as scroungers, not suppliers. And a widow and her orphan son expect to receive charity – not to give it. Arab Bedouins and a Lebanese woman caring for an Israelite man – and doing so out of their meager rations – who could have imagined it? God exceeds normal relationships and expectations.

And then disaster strikes – not draught, but death – the woman's son dies! And when the woman challenges Elijah for his false promise or his judgment on her past sins, that her son should die, Elijah calls on God and God raises the boy back to life. In verse 24, the woman says, *“Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is truth!”* Now the woman believes in God and has hope for the future. She who had no meal to eat, now has plenty. She who had no son, now has her son back. She who had no hope, now has hope for the future. **Who has the power? Not Elijah, but God!**

### **Jesus And The Widow Of Nain**

Our reading from Luke's Gospel is remarkably similar to Elijah's story. William Barclay deems this “the loveliest story in all the gospels” because of what it reveals about God's compassion

and power. Barclay writes that in one short, austere sentence, Luke tells of the pathos and poignancy of human life.

“A dead man was being carried out....

He was the only son of his mother...

And she was a widow...”

Could the situation be any more pathetic?

Amidst the pathos we realize the compassion of Christ. Jesus was moved at the sight of the widow. Jesus, the all powerful Son of God, is moved to the core of his being – is that not one of the most precious things about Almighty God - that God is moved by our situations, that he has compassion for us?

Verse 14 then adds the POWER of Jesus. Jesus walked up and touched the coffin and spoke to the corpse – “*Young man, I say to you arise!*” and the dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to this mother.” (v. 15) Like Elijah, Jesus restored a son to his mother; like Elijah, Jesus claimed for life a boy who was dead! Jesus triumphed over death and promised that because he lives, we too shall live (John 14:19). **Who has the power? Jesus does!**

### **The Hammer, the File and the Furnace**

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT enables us to trust God’s power, that God knows what he’s doing and what he is doing is what is best for us in the long run. Like the widows in today’s Bible readings, we must learn to trust God in the midst of painful trials and heartaches.

Chuck Swindoll illustrates this in his story “The Hammer, The File and The Furnace.”

“The hammer is a useful and handy instrument. It’s essential and helpful too if nails are ever to be driven into place. Each blow forces them to bite deeper as the hammer’s head pounds and pounds.

“But if the nail had feelings and intelligence, it would give us another side of the story. To the nail, the hammer is a brutal, relentless master, an enemy who loves to beat it into submission. That is the nail’s view of the hammer. It is correct. Except for one thing. The nail tends to forget that both it and the hammer are held by the same workman. The workman decides whose “head” will be pounded out of sight...and which hammer will be used to do the job.

“This decision is the sovereign right of the carpenter. Let the nail but remember that it and the hammer are held by the same workman and its resentment will fade as it yields to the carpenter without complaint.

“The same analogy holds true for the metal that endures the rasp of the file and the blast of the furnace. If the metal forgets that it and the tools are objects of the same craftsman’s care, it will build up hatred and resentment. The metal must keep in mind that the craftsman knows what he’s doing...and is doing what is best.

“Heartaches and disappointments are like the hammer, the file and the furnace. They come in all shapes and sizes; an unfulfilled romance, a lingering illness and untimely death, an unachieved goal in life, a broken home or marriage, a severed friendship, a wayward and rebellious child, a personal medical report that advises “immediate surgery,” a failing grade at school, a depression that simply won’t go away, a habit you can’t seem to break. Sometime

heartaches come suddenly ...other times they appear over the passing of many months, slowly erosion of the earth.

“[Are you] a “nail” that has begun to resent the blows of the hammer? Are you at the brink of despair, thinking that you cannot bear another day of heartache? Is that what’s gotten you down?

“As difficult as it may be for you to believe this today, the Master knows what he is doing. Your Savior knows your breaking point. The bruising and crushing and melting process is designed to reshape you, not ruin you. Your value is increasing the longer He lingers over you.” (Swindoll, 212)

**What does all this mean for us?** Let us not depend only on our own efforts, our own labors, our own goodness, our own solutions. We do not have the power – God does! We have a God who never runs out! Our God is a god of life, not death; a God of plenty, not of scarcity. Does not God provide for our needs, and enable us to provide for others’ needs?

Yes, we have much to offer to solve the oil spill in the Gulf, and to solve the economic woes and to solve much of our world’s problems, our social ills, our family problems, but God has even more help, more power, more insight, to offer!

Our emotional jars go empty sometimes,

our spiritual life goes stale,

spiritual draught saps our strength,

but God’s Holy Spirit is ready to nourish us with bread and cup.

Drink deep, Elijah, drink deep.

Quench your thirst, fill your belly, sleep, rest, let God’s power infuse you again,

then arise and go, for you still have options open, and places to go and work to do.

WHO HAS THE POWER? God does! And God is able to do far more abundantly than we can ever dream or imagine. His providence is abundant! Astounding! Amazing! Magnificent!

LIVING IN THE SPIRIT of GOD we can see more and do more and give more and bless more than we can ever dream of doing without him!

BRING YOUR EMPTY JAR TO THE LORD’S TABLE AND LET GOD FILL YOU UP

AGAIN. Then you not will have to gather up sticks and cook your last morsel and mourn the fact that your hope is gone. Because God’s love never dries up and even now you have much you can offer. Our hope is not in the jar, but in God Almighty. Amen!

### Sources

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Harman, Tracy. *2007 Abingdon Preaching Manual*, June 10, 2007. 152.

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