

## **“Hosanna! The Generosity of Salvation”**

*Reading: 1 Kings 16:29-17:6, 17:7-24*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

They say that the only things that are absolutely certain in life are death and taxes, but they're wrong. They missed one. It is also absolutely certain that every evening at 5:00, my dog will begin the process of rounding up his herd for supper. Calvin is a border collie mix, so he's a very strong-willed herding dog who thinks Carey and I are his herd, and he has an uncanny ability to know when 5:00 rolls around, literally almost to the minute. If one of us is not in the kitchen rattling around by then, we are being bad members of the herd in Calvin's mind, and we need to get back on schedule. You know how dogs work: they have a few very high priorities, and at the top of the list is eating. If we haven't started supper by 5:30, you would think Calvin is dying of starvation.

Of course he's not; he's quite well-fed. We live in a part of the world where genuine hunger is rare. We have a very sophisticated food supply system making famines unheard of in the United States, and even when economic times are hard enough that some of us don't know where our next meal is coming from, at least in theory we have enough of a safety net in place that no one should really starve. Very few if any of us know what real, crippling hunger is like, in spite of how Calvin acts. And let's face it, I'm hardly any better than Calvin: Pastor Carey is very familiar with the sound of me rummaging around in the cabinets looking for something to munch on.

But here in 1 Kings 17 we have a story of really desperate hunger. Here is a destitute woman who thinks she is literally cooking her last meal. There was no refrigeration or canning in those days; no food pantries or organized welfare system. Practically everyone lived on subsistence-level agriculture. If you didn't grow it, find it, or kill it, you didn't eat it. With a very limited ability to stockpile food long-term or transport food long distances, any interruption in your food chain could have almost immediate life-threatening consequences. But here is a woman whose husband is dead, so her main source of being provided for is gone. But even if she had a husband, maybe he would only be another mouth to feed: no one else has any food, either, since they were in the middle of a several year-long drought.

The great prophet Elijah, the definitive old school prophet, encounters her while she's in the process of gathering sticks to bake one last loaf of bread for her and her son. She has a handful of flour, a little bit of olive oil, and enough wood for a small baking fire, and that's it: there is no more hope, there's nothing else left, there's no one to help them. They will eat their last meal and then wait to die. Those are unimaginably desperate words. I don't know what it feels like to starve, but I do know that it takes a while, and I'm sure that it's a horrible way to die. But that's all she has ahead of her, as far as she can tell. Nothing short of a bona fide miracle can save them, because there are no other options left.

The drought has already lasted some time by this point, and Elijah had been surviving by living out in the wilderness somewhere by a stream of water, and God was providing for him by sending ravens with food. But the drought got so bad that the stream dried up, so God sent Elijah to this starving widow to feed him. It already sounds like maybe God has kind of a sick sense of humor, but then Elijah arrives just as she's preparing her last meal and, perversely, he asks her to give *him* her last meal. I don't think I'd handle it very well if I were in that woman's position. She, however, trusts

Elijah enough to do it, or maybe she thinks she has nothing to lose at this point and might as well die with her last act being one of generosity. But Elijah tells her not to be afraid, and promises that a bona fide miracle is on the way, because God will provide oil and flour for her and her family until the end of the drought, and that's exactly what God does.

It's an incredible story of God saving a family in need at their lowest point. And we need to point out what a tangible sort of salvation this is. So often in the church, when we talk about salvation we're referring to a sort of spiritual salvation: we need to be made right with God through Jesus Christ so that God can then continue making us right in other ways, so that then one day when we die, Jesus can welcome us into His presence and give us eternal life that is stronger than death. We've been focusing on salvation for three weeks now, centered on "hosanna," this ancient cry of God's people that means "save us." Two weeks ago we heard the story of the Gerasene demoniac, a man who was possessed by demons, and how Jesus saved him. Last week we heard the story of the Exodus, and how God saved his people not only *from* slavery but also *for* worship; He set them free so that they could be given a new identity in relationship with God. In many ways those are very "spiritual" sorts of salvations: yes, they involve God saving these people from very present troubles, but they also have a strong focus on being made right with God.

In today's story of salvation, though, salvation comes in a more immediate, more concrete form. He saves this family from the crisis of starvation by providing their material needs. Though we certainly hope and pray and work for the salvation of people's souls, it is in no way beneath us or unholy to hope and pray and work for the salvation of their immediate crises as well. "Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food," the book of James says. "If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." When we have been at our best, God's people have always been at the forefront of ministering God's salvation to people by meeting their immediate needs, whether they are food, housing, medicine, or some other form of relief.

And it's a tricky thing, because the church is not just a social welfare organization, and we don't want people coming to God just because they want stuff and they hope God will give it to them. We do not preach the message that faith will lead to material blessing. The hope with that sort of material salvation is that it will lead to a response similar to what the widow of Zarephath 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." God saves so that we will know Him.

And that's one of the key parts of this whole story of salvation. The widow's story is really just a part of a larger story. This is, after all, the book of the kings of Israel, not the book of the widows of Israel. The salvation of this unnamed woman living in poverty on the fringes of God's people contrasts with the repeated condemnation and evil of King Ahab. Her humble trust in God contrasts with the blatant, prideful blasphemy and defilement of Ahab's reign. Ahab is remembered as one of the worst of Israel's kings; he's one of those Bible characters you don't want to name your child after. We learn immediately that for Ahab, the sins of previous generations were nothing. He married Jezebel as his queen, a woman of a foreign nation, which was in direct violation of the law against marrying foreigners. He built a temple and an altar to Baal, a god of the surrounding nations who was one of God's chief rivals. He also was apparently involved in the rebuilding of the city of Jericho, which, if we

remember, when Joshua conquered Jericho he pronounced a curse on anyone who rebuilt it. What's more, the rebuilding of the city involved the detestable practice of sacrificing a child on the city's foundations.

The point is that from the very beginning of Ahab's story, he is resolutely defiant against God. His entire story is like that. He regularly persecutes Elijah and attacks anyone else loyal to the Lord. He consistently leads God's people astray in their worship. He is the archetypal prideful villain in God's story. Elijah rises up to confront him, and it is because of Ahab's arrogance that this drought happens.

In every way that Ahab failed, this widow serves as a positive example of the opposite. Ahab was the king of God's people, intended to be their shepherd in the ways of God. He had power and wealth; he surely did not come close to starving in this drought. But he was focused on himself and rejected God, and so his reign is characterized by deprivation and condemnation. On the flip side, we have this woman who is not even named, on the fringes economically since she is a widow, and on the fringes socially since she's probably not even an Israelite; Zarephath was at best on the extreme boundary of Israel's territory. She has basically nothing and is suffering greatly because of this drought. And yet she is the one who is willing to trust what little she has to God's plan. Ahab clung tightly to his power and was deprived; she gave away what she had and was miraculously blessed.

And so we see a very powerful, very dangerous truth about how God saves us: God loves to work in partnership with His people. He is the one who blesses and saves and works miracles, but often He waits for us to take the first humble step of obedience and trust in His goodness. I assume that the widow would not have received endless flour and oil if she had not first been willing to be generous with Elijah. It's a risky thing, this sort of salvation: God loves to work in partnership with us, and so sometimes God's provision is simply waiting on our being willing to take the step of generosity with what little we have.

This is why the church encourages tithing and generosity with our resources: not just because the church has bills to pay, but because we need to weave generosity and humility into our lives at every level. We have to be faithful in the small things before we are entrusted with greater things. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

This is not a magic formula to receive endlessly-flowing jars of flour and oil. Too many lying conmen have preached the false message that if you send your money to my ministry, God will pay off your mortgage. We are not generous in our poverty so that we will magically become wealthy, we are generous in our poverty so that we can better see God's generosity to us and to others, and therefore we can know God better. We take steps of humble trust in God's provision because God is calling us to be in the salvation business, to be participants in our own small, imperfect ways in the work God is doing of drawing all the world to Himself.

This does not suggest that those who are going through hardship lack faith; too many people have preached *that* lie, too. Sometimes bad things just happen, and sometimes God wants us to learn

things in our deprivation that we could not learn otherwise. We have an enemy who wants to tempt us away from God, and sometimes he attacks us. God does not always save us in the same way, or the way we expect, or the way we would like. But he is faithful to us unfailingly, and that is the message of our generosity.

So this story of a widow at the end of her rope shows us that God can save us in the crises of our lives. He can deliver us from the very tangible, “unspiritual” threats we face because He cares about our well-being, and He wants us to learn to trust Him, and He wants us to join in that work of His kingdom. We have a message to proclaim to this world that operates on Ahab ethics, a message that there is another way to live. Rather than fighting and scraping for what we can get, and rather than focusing on our own power and wealth, we can live in generous trust in God.



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