

Elijah and the widow at Zarephath: Beggars United

1 Kings 17.8-24

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I have an office in Road 9; I regularly walk from my home to that office, and it is unavoidable to see the women there on the curbside, selling paper tissues. That is an alternative form of begging. We all see people like this, women, old men, street kids, often not even teenagers yet, begging for some money, or for food. And when I am able to be sensitive, instead of irritated, I often wonder:

‘When God allotted our portion in life, why did you end up in this misery? What happened to you and to your mind that made you prepared to lower yourself and throw yourself at the mercy of other people?’



1. Life can seem chaotic and full of paradoxes

Imagine the situation of the widow in Zarephath whom we met in the Old Testament story. She had a son, even a household, maybe with some slaves, and imagine her misery. In a culture where admitting weakness was not done, she admitted frankly to a stranger from a foreign land, to Elijah, that she was at her wits end.

The pantry was empty. She just had a bit of oil, and water, and some flour in a jar. But that was it. How was she to feed her own son, and her staff? Her husband had died, and now the end had come. So how in the world could she help this stranger from Israel?

It had not rained for a long time, so the riverbeds were dry, the crops dried up in the fields. I am sure the widow had asked all of her gods to help, but they were silent.

Zarephath was a village not far from Sidon, in what is now called Lebanon. It is now the small Lebanese city called Sarafand. In that region the female goddess Astarte was very popular, but her brother, Baal, was the major god.

Baal was seen as the source of winter rain, of spring mist and summer dew which nourished the crops. He controlled the land's fertility. He was the most aggressive of the gods and the one on whom mortals most depended. Some of his names were Most High Master, Mightiest, Powerful, Master of the Earth.

But this god of rain and fertility of the land was no so powerful. He did not respond to his people who begged him with their sacrifices of bulls. The people gave him all they could, but he did not give rain in return. Was he maybe asleep, or on a trip?

‘Our prayers and sacrifices did not help, so have we done something wrong’, the widow must have wondered? ‘Why do these evil things happen to us...’

Elijah could give her *some* answers. The lack of rain, of food, was not because of the people in Lebanon... It was because of the Israelites. It was because king Ahab of Israel had married the daughter of the pagan king of Sidon. That king was Ethbaal, named after his city’s god.

King Ahab imported a foreign queen, and he also had a temple built for her god, Baal. Because of this he had provoked the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel.

Elijah, a prophet of the Lord, had gone to king Ahab and told him in his face:

As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.

The giving of dew and rain was, according to the worshippers of Baal, the prerogative of their god – but Elijah makes clear that there is only one Creator: the God of Israel.

He is the one who nourishes us *and* supports us. So in order to punish the king of Israel and to show that Baal was utterly impotent, there was a famine in Israel and in the whole Middle East, in the lands that were considered the playing field of Baal.

God as known in Israel showed that He was the true God of the whole earth. He was almighty, even in the territory of other ‘gods’.

Elijah *understood* all this, but this knowledge did not make his life easier.

Yes, first God saved Elijah from the anger of Ahab by giving him refuge at a brook. But after a while, that brook had no more water. So even the good prophet Elijah suffered; he who had done no wrong in the eyes of God.

God ordered Elijah to go to Zarephath, to the heartland of the worship of Astarte and Baal. How fearful he must have been! And there, a pagan widow would take care of him. How *embarrassing!* But Elijah went to Zarephath, and he behaved, well actually, as a beggar.

You go to Road 9 today, and you shout from a few meters at one of these poor widows: ‘Bring me some water! Please, give me some bread!’ Who then is the beggar?

Elijah, the servant of God, lowered himself to that level because like that widow, he was also at his wits end. He had nothing to drink, nothing to eat, he was a refugee from his own king Ahab, and he had to survive on unclean, pagan soil in the land of detestable gods. How low can a man sink?



Both the poor widow and our poor Elijah must have had many questions about their circumstances. ‘Why does this happen to me? Just as we, I suppose, every now and then also ask that same question.

2. Blaming someone for problems in life

When the son of the widow in Zarephath died, the first thought of the widow was, ‘This was because of me. I am being punished for my sins.’ She did not only blame herself, she also blamed Elijah. She suggested that if Elijah had never come into her life, then the God of Israel would not have noticed her and her sins...and her son would not have died.

We are great at this blame-game when bad things happen to us or to other people. I believe this is related to our desire to make reality around us a bit more transparent. We do not like the feeling that we are tossed around in the sea of events, without understanding what is behind all this. The idea that we can blame someone for our problems, or praise someone when things go well, seems to be deeply embedded in our psychological make-up.

It is a normal desire that we want to understand why good or bad things happen to us.

It is also very human to think that when we do well, we will be blessed, and when we do evil, we can expect problems. As if a sort of universal divine justice should ensure that only good things happen to good people.

In line with this, I read this week that the Brazilian soccer team, on its way to the World Cup in South Africa, believes that the team that praises God most will win the cup.

But looking at Elijah and the widow in Zarephath, this simplistic view of life is simply untrue. Life and the events surrounding us not only seem chaotic, life *is* chaotic, and we do not have suitable answers to all these ‘why’ questions.

Many people, realizing that they cannot detect moral logic in the universe, decide to blame God. If we cannot point to ourselves or to others for the problems we face, we can always blame God. He should do something about our situation!

‘God, why did you do this to me! Why this misery in my world!’

Now the pious answer would, of course, be to defend God, but I will not do this. First, I believe the good Lord is capable enough to defend himself. But what is more important, our answer would never hit the mark anyway! What do we *know* of God’s rule of the universe?

We *know* that He is in charge; after all, he is not like the Baal of Sidon. Our God is truly Almighty. He is the one who creates the rain and the dew, and sometimes he withholds it. He gives life, and he takes it.

But can you justify God by pointing to any personal guilt in Elijah and the widow as a reason why God would want both of them to be made into beggars?

Well, maybe in a very general sense, as no person is good enough to perfectly obey God. But in the story we have read, we hear nothing of their personal guilt. Their misery was caused by the sins of king Ahab, and because of Ahab, God created a regional drought.

Was the sin of king Ahab good enough reason for the suffering of Elijah and the widow?

What to say....

What was the cause for the earthquake in Haiti a few months ago? Why did God allow a tsunami to hit the coasts of Asia a few years ago - and 200.000 people died? Why did he allow the holocaust of 6 million Jews in Europe?

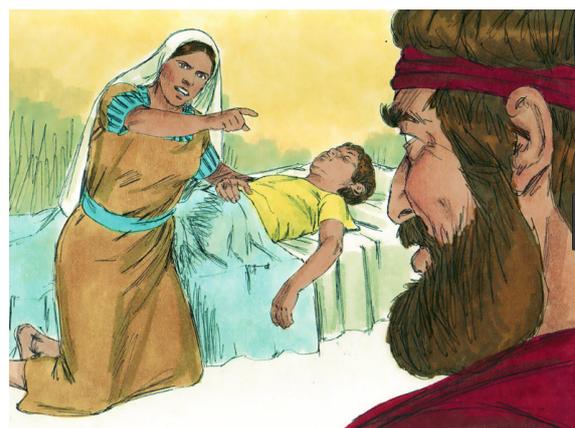
Why 20 million people killed under Stalinism? Why did God allow 3.000 people in New York to be killed on 9/11? We have no answers.

If the moral shortcomings of those victims were a good enough reason for God to punish them, then he should destroy the whole earth. No one attains a level of goodness that comes even close to pleasing God.

Others solve the problem of the justification of God by focusing on the love of God at the expense of his power to act. They defend this loving God by taking any responsibility for these awful events out of his hands. It is the devil, or human beings, or nature as an almost independent divinity...

This may be a well-intended effort to help God, but in the process we make Him into a sweet lovely grandfather who loves the world and who wants to make it a better place, but it is hard for Him and He needs our help for doing so.

This may save God from our criticism that He does not seem to uphold moral justice in the universe, but it also makes *him* into a beggar for our benevolence. If he is not almighty, He is really not God any longer. We make Him as impotent as the Baal of Sidon. The old man sometimes sleeps...



3. God with us

But as Christians, we believe in all attributes of God *at the same time*. He is *always* Almighty, and He also always loves. He rules the universe, and He loves all people.

We, small human beings, have great difficulty bringing those sides of God together.

But please allow me to suggest a way out. Not an answer to all of our questions, but another way of looking at the world and our lives.

In the midst of the darkness of Elijah's days, we detect love and kindness, tokens of the presence of God. God *did* help Elijah. He made sure he survived... He guided him to a brook first, and then He helped him survive in Zarephath where He supplied Elijah with food, a room, even a household.

While the big picture was pretty grim, Elijah *could* detect the loving hand of God being with him.

And the widow *also* survived the famine. When she was about to lose her son, God brought him back to life. Even though she was not of the chosen people of Israel, God, the God of all nations, with food and drinks, blessed her. In the midst of *her* hardship, our Lord tenderly held her hand.

Both of them learned to trust God in those hard circumstances; both learned to humbly depend on God as their sustainer – as their Father.

Conclusion

We meet God our Father best by looking at our Lord Jesus Christ. He showed that in the midst of the chaos of life God *is with us*. He was with God and He was God, but He came to earth in human form – not in order to give us philosophical or theological answers to our questions, but to be present with us, *to be with us*.

When Elijah acted and gave the widow her son back, she concluded: 'Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord is in your mouth.'

When Jesus gave the only son back to a woman in the village of Nain, the people were amazed. Jesus did not lecture on the problems of life. *He came and he acted* and the people concluded: 'God has looked favorably on his people'.

In our thinking about our life on earth, I suggest that we will not find our answers if we first try to create a philosophical superstructure as a framework for our thoughts. It is much more profitable to first look at the particulars, and especially at the bottom of the pit.

And the bottom, the lowest place we can imagine, is where we find Jesus Christ.

In his short life and in his gruesome death, He showed us the heart of God; He was *God with us*, and He is *still* God with us, in our moments of joy, and in our moments of misery. This does not answer all of our 'why' questions - but knowing Him *does* answer the needs of our heart. It quenches the thirst and He shows us God's power and love for us.

+ Amen