

Series: STUFF WE MISSED: Extraordinary Stories From An Extraordinary GOD

August 22, 2010

THE WIDOW'S JAR

2 Kings 4:1-7

1. There are a number of things in life we desperately need. Air would be one of them! You don't want to go very long without air! Water would be another. After a couple of days without it—we're desperate! Food? Health? Money? It's not a good feeling when there's not enough to go around!

-Today, I'd like to talk to you about desperation. It's the feeling that no one ever wants to feel—because it's the feeling of helplessness. It's the sense of being trapped—and doomed. You've examined all the options--and there's no way out.

-All through life we are taught that there is an answer to the struggles and issues we face—usually hidden right in the middle of the problem. Can anyone remember the line, "Houston, we have a problem?" It's from ***Apollo 13***, the story of how a crew facing the despair of almost certain death gets into problem solving mode. The whole team kicks into gear, helping the crew to creatively use what they have on hand to bring a crippled spacecraft back home—and live to tell the story to their grandchildren.

-In a lot of these stories, solutions can sometimes be explained based on the courage, of ingenuity and resourcefulness of the people involved. But there's a part in some stories that defies logic. You could call it the "God-factor." It's the part of the story that reminds is that at the core of history—God is at work, and God is in charge—and that He's big enough to care about the details.

-But when we're ***desperate***—we forget that. We're just as likely to ask, "Does God even care about what I'm facing?" Desperation comes in a ***lot*** of different forms. It might not be a life and death struggle—it may be just that a life which was once full of promise and joy becomes very grim and dark. You lose hope that ***anything*** will ever be any different—and there's no way out of what you're facing. Has anyone here ever had feelings of desperation?

-The story I want to tell you this morning from the Bible is a very simple story about someone in desperate need. It's a story about faith. It's a story that answers four questions people in desperate need many times ask. Questions that ***you***, in fact, may be asking this morning.

***Does God even *know* about my need?**

***Does God *care*?**

***Will He *do* anything?**

***What does He expect of *me*?**

2. In the world we live in, financial desperation is probably the single most common experience people have. And the group most affected by the lack of finances are usually single Moms. And that's where this story begins:

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves." Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?" "Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little olive oil." Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one." But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing. She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left." (2 Kings 4:1-7 TNIV)

The main character in this story is a single Mom with two young boys. Her problem is immense and, naturally speaking, unsolvable. Her husband, who had somehow built up a massive debt-load has died, and now it's *her* debt. **Everything she has** is on the line.

- a. Elisha, this guy she came to with her problem, was a prophet—and the leader of a kind of seminary called a company of prophets. (You could say it was a **for-prophet company** with tax-exempt status.) There's something **really** important to notice here; there's no shaming on Elisha's part over the debt. Her husband was a good man—devoted to God. And **yet**—he amassed a pile of debt and died young.

-If you're a single parent this morning, there's something you need to know. God is **passionate** about caring for you! Over and over throughout the Bible you will find God saying in a variety of ways, "I'm personally watching over the vulnerable! When you show mercy and compassion to them—you have joined **my** team. Treat them right. Don't oppress them. If you **ever** take advantage of their vulnerability, you will account to me!"

-Listen to what Psalm 68 says:

Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy. (Psalm 68:5-6 NLT)

Psalm 146 offers even more insight:

He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The LORD frees the prisoners. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are weighed down. The LORD loves the godly. The LORD

protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked. (Psalm 146:7-9 NLT)

- b. All through history God has warned those with power to treat vulnerable people with tenderness and compassion--but greed kept them from listening. But, for them, making money off of needy people was **too easy** to resist. I mean, you get people indebted to you; buy their property--and then buy **them** at a bargain basement price.

-In the world this woman faced, life for single Moms with young children wasn't just tough—it was **desperate!** Despite what God had said, women tended to be treated like property to be owned and managed. There was no such thing as career moms—and there was no welfare, no government assistance—and not place to turn.

-And if you couldn't pay your bills, either you were sold or your family was sold—just like this widows sons who were about to become slaves for the rest of their lives. On the desperation clock, it was one minute before midnight—and Elisha was this single woman's last option.

3. Well, she came to the right place. It's interesting. Elisha could be pretty curt with kings and leaders. But he handles the lowly, the needy, and the desperate much differently. He says, "How can I help? **What do you have in your house?** She said, "Your servant has nothing there at all...**except a little oil.**"

-Have you ever noticed that God seems to always work through what we already have—no matter how miniscule and insignificant it is. He turned Moses' ordinary stick into the rod of God. He took a little boy's bag lunch--and turned it into a banquet of fish and chips for 5000 people. He doesn't need much—but He **does** need what we have.

- a. Well, Elisha's instructions are **very** specific instructions. "Go borrow every empty container you can from all your neighbors." Now, this wasn't just canning jars, coffee cups, Tupperware—and a potty chair or two. Remember when Jesus was at a wedding—and asked the servants to fill the water jars so He could make wine? They held 25 to 30 gallons apiece! And Elisha says, **Don't ask for just a few!** Let me translate that for you. "Give God **plenty of room** because He's going to do something that is **way** bigger than you can imagine!" -Something else that seems counter-intuitive in our world of TV evangelists and faith healers; he tells her to limit attendance to herself and her sons. Shut the door **behind** you. He wants what God does to be kept private.
- b. So, she does everything she's told. She apparently borrowed every container she could find—and set them up all over the place until her house looked like a Corningware outlet store. You have to understand, the flash of oil she was talking about was more the size of a little bottle of Oil of Olay than a jug of Canola. In that culture, people carried tiny amounts of oil to rub on their faces. But as she emptied that tiny jar, something amazing happened. It multiplied.

One son would move the full jar or jug aside; the other son would carry another over and put it in its place.

-Finally, the widow asks for another jar--and her son says, "There **aren't** any more, Mom." And then the little bottle of oil went dry. I have often wondered if this widow thought with a twinge of regret, "Gee! I should've borrowed the neighbor's swimming pool!" I've had similar feelings when the fish are still biting and I run out of bait!

- c. You and I might appreciate the fact that this oil was pressed from olives—plucked from an OLIVE BRANCH! Olive oil, in that culture, was what electricity is to ours. Aside from water and perhaps flour, it was their single most important commodity. They used olive oil for just about everything--their bread, their lamps, as medicine—they put it on their faces—I mean, it was the same as cash, and everyone needed it.

-This time, God bypassed the olive grove, the harvesting, and the complicated pressing and refining process and went straight into the oil business. A typical olive tree produced somewhere between 10 and 15 gallons of oil. If I have an accurate picture of what happened, this widow may have ended up with several hundred gallons of oil.

- d. Picture this formerly desperate woman—now glowing with joy--running breathlessly up to Elisha, jumping up and down, tears flowing—then grabbing his arm, saying, "It worked! My house is **filled** with oil! God did a miracle!" Well, Elisha doesn't snap publicity photos and feature her in his monthly newsletter--he simply gives some wise advice: "Go sell the oil, pay your creditor off--and then live off the rest of the money." And she does.

-And then she and her sons formed a huge oil cartel called The Olive Branch, and became known as the founders of the modern oil industry. She then married an oil baron from Dallas, Texas and they lived happily ever after. Actually, I just made that part up.

4. It's a great story, isn't it? A desperate need--and a very unique, compassionate answer from a God who **loves** the needy, sometimes desperate people of this world--including you and me.

-I've thought of several ways I could apply this. There's an old Gospel song that borrows this imagery, called **Bring Your Vessels, Not a Few**. Anyone ever heard that song? The story is spiritualized. The oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit; the empty jars are a symbol of our empty hearts that need filled with God's power. As I thought about it--the truth is that God is willing to give His Spirit to us and fill our empty hearts with His life. That's quite true, but that's not the point of the story.

-You could also spiritualize the process. It could get really weird. You know, that if you need money, why not take your little change-purse with its five loonies, borrow all the wallets, purses and suitcases your friends have lying around. Then go into your house, close the door, say a little prayer, and begin emptying the loonies from your

change-purse into all the containers you've borrowed. But truth is, this only happened **once** in this single Mom's life.

- a. I think the message is quite straightforward. **Does God know?** Does he feel my desperation? Does He understand the circumstances of my life--my panic, my pain, my tears? And does it really pay to follow Jesus as the Good Shepherd who gives us rest, restores our souls, and protects in the scary places of life? Or are we just kidding ourselves? We live and die like the rest, but pretend that there's actually a deeper meaning to deprivation and unfairness for Christ-followers.

-That God smiles passively as the creditors and parasites of life suck you dry; enslave you. Then He says, "It's a **good thing** to suffer! You're **growing!**" Does God see rust on cars? The growing distance between my bank balance and my needs? The growing desperation in my family? The gnawing loneliness in my life?

-This story, among many others, declares that not only does God **know**, He **foreknows**. He knows that a cloud of desperation is headed our way while we're still giddy from our latest accomplishment and our bank accounts are still full. Know what truth I have found to be so amazing about God, for some stupid reason? **We** get surprised by bad news and desperate situations, but **He doesn't!**

-Can you imagine God being shocked when this woman's husband died? "Amos! What are **you** doing here **so soon**? I didn't expect you yet! Oh, no! Whatever am I going to do about your family?"

-Whether or not you know it, God knew all about what was going to happen to you. **He** knew how you would feel. **He** knew what you would need. If you can get your head around this--**He's** been silently preparing you for **whatever** you may be facing right now! We're used to sirens, but there are no 911 calls in Heaven--or angels with flashing red lights on their wings.

- b. Sometimes another question comes up. "Yeah, I know He **knows**—He's **God**, after all. The point is, does He **care**? And if He **does**, why does He let things get to such desperate measures? Think about this woman. Her husband served God faithfully—but died prematurely--probably in his late 20's. Not only is she alone, she has two young boys who desperately need their Dad to shepherd them--help them to grow up as good men. But it gets worse—financial ruin.

-We are **so** tempted to suspect that God knows, but just doesn't care. He's a little like a drill sergeant, "A little suffering never hurt nobody! Tough times don't last! Tough people do!" The truth is, if God **cares**, why do things get so out of hand sometimes? Wouldn't it be easier if we could be on a kind of spiritual morphine drip? Feel some pain—just **press the button!** Hmmm. Morphine sounds good sometimes, doesn't it!

-But what would happen to us if faith were kind of like this magic button we push when we see difficulty coming? Things never got really good or really bad? Well, we'd **forget** Him. It's actually pretty predictable. Let me illustrate. I've walked through a number of crises in life—some pretty bad ones. And I've found that God is totally worthy of my trust. But I still panic.

-Several weeks ago, we ran into a situation with one of our children. I was okay at first—but then my mind started chewing on it. What if...and *what* if...and then **what** if...and then... **WHAT IF!!!**. Turned out, things were okay. Now, do you think that when something else comes up—and it will—I will have totally learned my lesson? I'll tell myself, "Don't sweat it. God brought me through before--He'll do it again." No. Bwaaak! Buk! Buk! Another fuss in the hen house. "God's **forgotten** me! I'm **doomed!**" And you do it too, don't you!!

-The truth about you and me is that we're slow to learn—quick to forget--so God has to keep turning our eyes to Him or we start patting ourselves on the back. God cares. Jesus said, "Now, let's see—Your Heavenly Father obviously cares about the flowers, the birds, the deer—even ants and the anteaters who feast on them. Is it just **possible** that He cares about people with eternal souls made in His image that He redeemed at the cost of his Son?"

- c. But there's another question. **Will He do anything?** Harold Cushner, a famous author who has written on suffering describes a God who sees our desperation, **ree-eaally**, really, really cares...but says, "I'm **soo-o-o** sorry! Can't help." This story--in fact, the whole Bible, says something totally different. In fact, the Bible says that not only is God meeting the immediate needs of our lives, He is working in a deeper way--preparing us for things that we just couldn't understand--even if He told us.

-Remember the Name God revealed to Abraham on the mountain--at the crisis point in his life? When his son was on the wood, tied up, knife raised? God is the **God who will provide! He'll see to it! God will make a way.**

-That's what Jesus said. He said, "Ask God for your **daily** bread. Ask for what you need to make it through **that** day." Sometimes, as in this story, there's a bonus. God gives you enough to pay your bills for today--and enough to live on for a while.

-Maybe the point for you and me is, "Don't limit God to just the desperate need you feel. God and His purposes are greater than your Visa bill, your screwed up transmission, the work project you have to finish, the child who's half raised. He's caring for that--and way, **way** more.

5. The final question is--**What does He expect of me?** Well, I think this is where the story gets **really** practical.
- a. Know what God expects of you first? **He want you to identify where your desperation is coming from.** Now, it doesn't take brain surgery to do that. Negative people, especially, are **geniuses** at seeing problems, needs, black

holes, deficiencies...and **great** at giving gloomy forecasts. God wants us to see **beyond** the problem shoved in our face--and see our need of **Him!**

-The truth about me--and maybe you--is that I'm sometimes too proud to admit that I need His help—or the help of others. Can anyone identify? We think, "I can deal with this. I don't need to bother Him." And that sounds very noble, except that God tells us to ask for our **daily** bread. In fact, James—a leader in the early Jesus' movement said, "Sometimes you don't **have...**because you don't **ask!**" We just won't admit it.

-Let's just wade right into the messy stuff. Do you mind? Sometimes what keeps us from admitting our need is the fact that our circumstances are the result of our deliberate defiance. And we **know** that before we ask for help, we have to humble ourselves; we have to make something right, tell someone we're sorry. And **we're just too proud to do it!**

-We'd rather re-write the Bible to fit the decisions we've made, keep hurting others, hurting ourselves and wasting our lives than say, "God, I was **wrong--** and I've got nothing left to give in this empty house of mine."

- b. There's something else. **God expects you to have the humility to ask for help.** This woman came to that culture's version of the little gathering she was a part of. This **company of prophets** was apparently a group of people who knew each other well. The truth about us is that we **need** each other—and most people are **overjoyed** at the chance to help. Jesus put his blessing on helping--**It's more blessed to give than receive.**

-Think about it; what if this woman had been too proud to come to Elisha? It's pretty obvious, isn't it? Her sons would've been raised as slaves and **died** as the slaves of some loan shark. And she would've been thrown into the street and either starved or become a prostitute.

-Some of you this morning have marriages that are **desperate.** People say, "So, **how are you doing?**" And instead of telling the truth, you say, "Praising the Lord!" Your ship's going down, you're living in despair--but you're too proud to tell the truth. Some of you are in financial trouble. Some of you have a problem that's turning your stomach inside out. Some of you have a habit that has you chained to the wall. **So, for cryin' out loud, ASK FOR HELP!**

-By the way, there's nothing particularly noble about going down with the ship. All you do is drown and people drop a metal plate in the water with your name on it to commemorate your passing. Big deal.

- c. There's something else I think God expects. **Active faith.** That's what it took for this woman to bother her neighbors for all their spare clay jars. When she banged on their door and said, "Can I borrow all your containers?" I'm sure some of them must've asked, "Yeah? **What for?**" What would **you** say? Quick poll: How many of you would say:

*“It’s none of your business!”

*My kids been catching lizards and we don’t have anything to put them in”, or

*“Well, you see, I have this little jar of oil with about 2 or 3 oz. of oil in it--and I’m going to **fill up** all the empty ones with it!”

-What does it mean to have faith? To take your car on a trip when the transmission is squealing and blowing smoke? I did that once—and faith didn’t help! Is it faith to write checks when there’s nothing in the account? That’s called **fraud!** When asked to define faith in a religion class, one kid said, “**Faith is believing that something is true when you know it isn’t!**”

-Faith means that you actually **trust** God. That He loves you—and that He will somehow make a way. It means to give God space to work—to do something really good. And he **will!** Maybe not the way **you** want—or ask Him to...but He will make a way.

-So. **Who** or **what** are you looking to for your needs to be met? See, your **God** is really who you look to—**trust**--for those kinds of things. Are you looking at your potential nest egg? Think your needs will be met by finding Mr. Right, or Ms. Right at some single’s bar or chat room? Are you going to have your insecurity solved through image management purchased at a clothing store or a local car dealership? Who are you counting on to meet your needs? Really? God calls His people to live by **faith**.

- d. And then, finally, **God asks us to bring the empty places of our lives for Him to fill.** It’s interesting--most of the time God uses what little we have--and multiplies it. Makes our strength, our patience, our wisdom, our money, our car, our ability go to supernatural lengths--yet in a very non-showy way.

-Sometimes when we get past the point of desperation and people ask, "How'd you do that?"--we can’t tell them—because we don’t know! God just gave us **daily bread.** Grace along the way. We offered him our little bag lunch--and He somehow multiplied it. Somehow God kept our little jar pouring out oil—**long** after it should’ve gone dry.

- e. Many times these desperate seasons of our lives end in something very mundane and practical--like cornering the oil market. I can imagine this widow dragging these jugs of oil into the marketplace--bartering with the merchants--who all asked, **Where did you get this oil? This is the really good stuff!**

-And wouldn’t it have been great to be a lizard on the wall when she confronted her creditor? This money-hungry pig who was salivating over the money he’d make at the expense of her tragedy? I can see her marching up to his door with a bag of coins, saying, "Here’s your money, you filthy swine! You’re not getting **my** sons! Not today! Not ever! Cause there’s a God in Heaven who carefully watches over little people like me!"

6. I believe that some of you—maybe a **lot** of you--have come today with a point of desperation in your soul. You’ve put on your best smile this morning, but inside your

heart, there's a kind of quiet desperation. Your need so dominates your life, you can't see God.

-You've got a perspective issue. It's like holding a loonie up in front of your eyes. When the problem is that close—it can totally block out the sun—something that's 865,000 miles across. If you walk around with your problem this close to your eyes, you won't see your family, you won't see your friends—and you probably won't see the answer. You need to move the problem away from your eyes—and get perspective. You need to hear the words, "Yeah, my problem is overwhelming... **BUT GOD is overwhelmingly BIG!**

-So, I'm asking you--would **you** ask Him for help? Others can help, but the request really needs to come from you. And would you let others walk with you; would you let God love you through other people. **He** does the loving—He just uses other's eyes, arms and prayers.

-Two thousand years ago, Paul—a man who knew what it was like to feel desperation—wrote these unforgettable words. And this morning, they're for you:

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?...No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39 NLT)

-So. Will you believe? And will you offer what little you have to God in faith? Will you believe that God's strength is made perfect in weakness? That He can fill whatever empty spot you have in your life? He doesn't need much to work with--just you. Just your need.

-As we close this morning, I would like you to close your eyes and present whatever empty spot you have in your heart to God. He knows. He cares. He's going to help. He waits for you to ask—and make room.