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Fill up Your Faith Jar

Are you ready to take an Indiana Jones leap of faith? Right now we are! I love the story of the great high-wire performer Charles Blondin who stretched a long, steel cable across Niagara Falls. During high winds and without a safety net, he walked, ran, and even danced across the tightrope to the amazement and delight of the crowd. Then he took a wheelbarrow full of bricks and amazed the crowd by pushing it effortlessly across the cable, from one side of the falls to the other.

Blondin, ever the performer, turned to the crowd and asked, "Now, how many of you believe that I could push a MAN across the wire in the wheelbarrow?" The vote was unanimous. Everyone cheered and held their hands high. They all believed he could do it! "Then," asked Blondin, "who will be that man?" As quickly as the hands went up, the shot back down. Not a single person would volunteer to trust his life to Blondin on the highwire. Would you?

Many of us say to God, "Yes, I believe!" But are you willing to demonstrate your belief by trusting your life to Him? Are you willing to risk everything on your faith?

What I want you to know today is that faith is not only something that's important in the Christian life as you're entering into the family of God. But it's also an important part of your life from that day forward.

In fact, there is a difference between a saving faith, that which gets you into the family of God, and a growing faith. But they are both about trust. Saving faith introduces you to the family of God. But once you're in the family of God, God now wants to mature you and grow you up. And one of the best ways for Him to teach you about faith and put you into circumstances where you're going to learn how to trust Him.

But what is faith? I'm sure if we passed around the microphone today we'd get a variety of answers. While we sort of intuitively know and recognize it when we see it, we have a hard time defining it. The good news is that one of the writers of the Bible, in the book of Hebrews, not only asked the question but also effectively answers it. Let's look at **Hebrews 11:1**: "**Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**" And a little later on in verse 6 we read: "**And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.**"

The starting point in any discussion about faith has be the character of God. Faith begins with the fundamental conviction that God is who He says He is. That what He speaks in His word, He means, and that anything He says is true and accurate. But faith doesn't stop there. Faith goes a step further because faith is also about our actions lining up with our faith in the promises of God. Faith is betting the farm. It's going out on a limb. It's risking comfort and security in order to obey God. Faith is putting God on the witness stand, examining the evidence and concluding He is who He claims to be and that I should adjust my life to live according to His commands.

But what does that look like if I'm a 21st century Christian? What is faith to people who have a mortgage, a car payment and 2.3 kids? What does faith look like to us? That's exactly the question I want us to wrestle with this morning. To do that, I want to take you to a rather obscure Old Testament story that really draws out some principles that will help us to understand what faith looks like in your life and mine.

The story is found in **2 Kings, chapter four**. It is a story of the faith of a desperate widow and her encounter with a man of God named Elisha. Let's begin. **"The wife of a man from the company of 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 boys as slaves."**

The woman's husband was from the company of prophets who served primarily as spokesmen for God. When the word of God came over them they would proclaim it far and wide and loudly to God's intended audience. Obviously the call to prophetic work didn't pay very well because when he died he left her in severe debt. Not only was she in a lot of debt but we also find out from the story that she's literally on the brink of starvation and her sons are in danger of being taken into slavery.

In those days, when you couldn't pay your debt, part of the legal recourse that a creditor had was to enslave or sell your children into slavery. This is the situation that she finds herself, late notices are piling up, the creditors are banging on the door and she's panicked that her kids will be sold into slavery. So in desperation she calls on the prophet of all the prophets at the time and begs him for help. What happens next leads her into a tremendous faith experience. But before we get to that part of the story, I want to share with you a lesson that we can unpack right here.

1. Let Your Crisis Lead You to Deeper Faith in God

This woman's crisis, the desperate straights that she's in, actually becomes the doorway for a tremendous faith encounter that is going to forever change her life. There's no question in my mind that many of us who are here today in this room are going through a dark or challenging time in our lives and we can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. We can't figure out what God is doing or when He's going to step in. Nothing about your situation makes sense to you. Right now all you can feel is pain or confusion. Perhaps, even though nobody sitting around you may realize what kind of pain you're in, you feel as desperate as the woman in this story. My hope and prayer for you is by the time we get to the end of this message you see the possibility that God may want to teach you some things about faith and about Him that you can't learn any other way.

The sad reality is that we've bought into the teaching that if you simply try hard enough and believe enough, God will take away all of your problems and all of your difficulties. But that's not what faith is all about. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. In the book of Hebrews, the faith chapter, we find an all-star cast of characters who lived a life of faith and didn't get all that they wanted. But God still took time to applaud their faith.

A life of faith is often counter-cultural. Faith is coming to God in the middle of your crisis, in the middle of your pain and honestly saying to Him, "God, I'm hurting right now. I don't fully understand what this is all about or where this journey is leading but I'm here to

declare that I know my life is in Your hands. And that You are a good God and a good Father and I trust You with my life.” That is faith!”

We see a great example of faith in the book of Job. Right in the middle of the book, in **Job 13**, are ten of the most powerful words in the Bible. Right in the middle of his suffering, Job having lost his children, his wealth, his health, and surrounded by judgmental friends cries out: **“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him.”** That is faith! And with that, I’d like to take us back now to our story in **2 Kings, chapter 4** where Elisha, the prophet responds to the destitute widow. **“Elisha replied to her, ‘How can I help you?’** Now let’s leave the verse up on the screen for a second because I want to hone in on this very simple yet powerful response: “What can I do for you?

I think what we find right here is another principle that I don’t want you to miss. All of us need some trusted friends, a community or mentors who will help us and encourage us in our faith. Can I ask you an honest question? When life falls apart and difficult times come, where do you go? Who is it that you have in your life who listens to you, who supports you, who prays for you, who won’t judge or condemn you? Where do you go find that kind of support? This woman can only think of one man, Elisha.

Let’s continue with the story: He says, **“Tell me, what do you have in your house?”** Her quick response was **“Your servant has nothing there at all,” she said, “except a little oil.”** **So Elisha turns to her and says, “Go around and ask all your neighbours 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.”**

What a strange set of instructions? How bizarre is that? If I’m reading this story for the first time, what I expect Elisha to do is to recommend some sort of debt consolidation program or perhaps recommend to the local church leaders to take up an offering on her behalf but this sounds nuts! It certainly wouldn’t have occurred to me as a possible solution for her problem. What would your response be? Prophet say what? But again we find a valuable principle to learn from this woman in need.

2. Let Your Faith in God Stretch You Beyond Your Fears and Understanding

To walk by faith will mean moving outside our comfort zone. That was certainly true for the widow in this story. Apparently, she’s broke, she’s run out of food and all she has left is a little jar of oil. So Elisha says, ‘I want you to go door to door collecting empty jars.’ Now, I can just imagine someone coming to the door, looking through the peep-hole, probably aware of the situation and how desperate she was, and thinking she’s coming to ask for money or food or worse a place to hide from her creditors. But instead they open the door and there’s this widow not asking for any of that. All she wants are your empties. What a strange request!

But here’s the lesson I’ve learned and observed both from Scripture and from life: To build your faith, God will often ask you to do that which is uncomfortable and counter-intuitive. It is our human nature to move toward safety and comfort and security and not toward risk. Whenever we encounter risk we first try to minimize it and when we don’t succeed it usually leads to fear or unsettled feelings.

But the fact is life is risky. There's no way to get around it. Even if you were to go and hibernate in your house, go to your bedroom and sit in your bed, you're still not free from risk. Did you know that last year half a million North Americans landed in the emergency room because of injuries sustained falling out of bed! Half a million! Even more shocking is that ten people died last year by strangling themselves accidentally with the cord from their venetian blinds. There are no risk-free rides.

It sort of reminds me of the story I read recently of a pilot. His jet takes off from N.Y. on its way to L.A.. When it reaches cruising altitude, as is common, the pilot comes over the intercom and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to flight 293. We're flying from Kennedy Airport to LAX. The flight looks smooth. We're not expecting any turbulence. The weather looks good in L.A. so just sit back and relax." The next words that came over the intercom were, "Oh my gosh!" Then silence. About a minute later, the pilot came back on the intercom and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm so sorry for scaring some of you. But while I was talking to you the flight attendant spilled hot coffee on my lap and you ought to see the front of my pants." Without missing a beat a guy back in coach yelled, "That's nothing! You should see the back of my pants!"

That's a great word picture for church isn't it? We just don't like risks. It scares us to death. But I want to be clear about this. God has a long history of asking those who are His followers to take risks in order to follow Him. He does it, number one, so that we can grow.

And number two, so that He can be glorified. The decision to live a life of faith is always a decision between faith and comfort. Somewhere between risk and comfort, God is going to ask you to step outside of your comfort zone and trust Him in your journey. There are a lot of choices that we don't get to make in life. We don't get to choose where we were born, who our parents are, what we look like. But let's be clear about one thing. One thing that we do get to choose in life is how much we will trust God. That's a choice we completely own.

I'm trying to get into the habit of regularly asking myself, "What am I attempting that I couldn't do outside of the power of God?" If the answer is nothing, I'm probably not learning much about faith. In **2 Corinthians 5:7** Paul reminds us, "**We live by faith, not by sight.**" There is so much more to life beyond what we can smell, see and touch. Really living as God wants you to live doesn't mean playing it safe. It means following God and it means believing Him with everything that inside of you and choosing to trust Him.

I know that some of you, when you hear those words, there is something that stirs within you that says, "I want to live like that. I'd like to have that kind of courage, that kind of faith. But it's just not in me." I have some good news for you. It only takes a little faith to make a big difference. Just a wee little bit. Sometimes we glamorize faith as though it's only for the super saints that we read about in the Bible. We think it could be for everyday, ordinary people like me. But it is. The Bible says that just a little bit of faith can put the wheels of heaven into motion.

In **Luke 17**, we read the apostles whining to Jesus to "**Increase our faith!** He replied, "**If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree,**

“Be uprooted and planted in the sea,” and it will obey you.” Wow! How much more would God bless this church if we were willing to trust Him like that?

Maybe, like me, you can relate to the father in the story found in **Mark 9**. He brought his tormented son to Jesus and he was looking for some kind of answers, some kind of relief. **He says to Jesus, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” “If you can,” said Jesus, “Everything is possible for him who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”**

I think that’s the honest cry of a lot of us. Like this father we’d say, “I want to be there. I want to have more faith. I want my ability to believe to increase. But I’m just not there. And Lord I need Your help to be able to get there.” It’s an honest plea. I would tell you I feel like I have a long way to go in trying to really learn to live with that kind of abandoned faith. But in the years that I’ve walked with the Lord there are some things that have helped me build my faith. Let me share three of them.

- I) The first way my faith is strengthened is by spending time with God by reading the Bible and talking to Him. When my relationship goes deeper, my faith gets stronger. One of the reasons why some of you may be struggling to take steps of faith is because you’ve never really taken the time to get to know God.
- II) The second faith builder in my life is being with people who model trust in God. Their trust in God gives me courage and the motivation to trust God more.
- III) And the third faith builder is simply taking some small risks and seeing God be faithful. When I see him faithful in the smaller things I’m able to trust Him in the bigger things. But here’s the point. What matters more than the size of your faith is the size of your God. And we have a great big God who can be trusted far beyond anything we can imagine. So the first lesson from this story is to let the times of crisis become a faith opportunity and the second lesson is to let our faith stretch us beyond our comfort zone. The third lesson the story is to...

3. Let Your Faith Develop Through Action

When this widow comes to Elisha in her time of desperation he tells her to go out and collect these jars. Again, he says don’t just collect a few. I love the fact that she begins to put that into action immediately. She sets out to the neighbourhood and starts knocking on doors. She and her sons, as evidence of her faith, start collecting jars everywhere they can find them but she still needs a miracle. But it is that first step that reveals her faith in God and by extension His prophet Elisha.

One thing I want you to be completely clear about. Faith is not just a matter of what you believe in your heads or what you embrace in your hearts. Faith always leads to action. It is never passive. It always leads to action. In the **2nd chapter of James, in verse 17-18**, we hear this loudly, **“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”**

Let’s get really practical. What does it look like to take this faith, this belief in God in the 21st century and translate it into action? Let me give you some possible scenarios. Some

of you here today are being pressured at work, at school or at maybe even at home to compromise your integrity. You know it's wrong. You know what the Bible says about it. You know what God says about it. But you're confronted with a real decision.

This is a faith opportunity for you to put into action what you say you believe. Again, some of us in our humanity will say, "You don't know what's at risk. That's just how it's played there." But God says it's wrong. So the question is, "Are you going to adjust your actions and behaviour to line up with what God says is true and leave the consequences up to God?" Or are you going to sell out and just go the way of the world?

Some of you here are in the midst of a broken relationship with a friend or co-worker. God says, "I want you to pursue reconciliation and restoration of that relationship. You say, 'You don't know what they did to me.'" God says, "If you're a follower of mine your job is to always pursue reconciliation. You can't control what the other person does but you can control your actions. That's a faith opportunity to put into action what you believe.

Some of you have had a dream placed in your heart by God that you've never acted on. You really sense it's from God but it's going to take some sacrifice and some risk and you're not sure where this journey will lead you. It's been my experience that God never shows you the full picture all at once. He just shows you enough to get started and God says you are going to step up and put it into action.

Some of you are here and your life is falling apart at the seams. If we could look inside your heart there would be all kinds of confusion and frustration and anger. Some of it is directed towards God. God feels distant. Yet God says to you, "Even in the midst of all you're going through, I want to be with you and help you through this." To some of us that may seem unrealistic and our emotions are pulling us a completely different way. But faith says, "I will not live according to my emotions. I will come back to you and honour you and trust you with my life. I will do what You, God, have asked me to do even when I don't feel like it."

One final time I want to take you back to the story. This woman and her sons have hit the pavement, they've collected the jars. They've gone in behind closed doors and I think there's got to be this moment where she thinks to herself, "This is ridiculous! I'm sitting here in a house full of empty jars. I need money. I need food. I need help. I don't need empties. I must look like a fool." But then we sense this moment of faith that wells up inside of her, a moment where she picks up that small jar of oil and thinks, "What if?" What if this really is how God wants to solve my problem?" It doesn't make sense to me. I can't imagine this would be it but what do I have to lose."

Let's read **2 Kings, verses 5 to 7**. **"She left him and afterward 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.'"**

I find it interesting that God's provision matched her faith down to the last drop. God is a God who has and always will honour faith. So many jars were filled that the Bible says

that she could sell them and pay off her debts and still have enough for her and her sons to live on. What an awesome story of faith and provision! I hope you're encouraged. I hope that whatever issues, circumstances, and dreams that God is speaking to you about right now is a faith opportunity for you.

I'd like wrap up this morning by asking you a few questions: What step of faith do you need to take? What do you need to put into action that reflects your faith in God? Is there something right now that the Spirit of God is whispering to you? Is He telling you that this is your time? A time to step out and off the ledge and into God's waiting arms. If you need a push, let today's message be that for you. Let's go out in faith and in confidence that God not only cares, but in our need, He provides.

Closing Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the opportunity to know You through Your word and through prayer. Lord, today we draw our line in the sand, we take our stand and say we believe in You and we declare our faith in You. We trust You with our lives and the best way we know how we will adjust our lives is to live according to You and Your truth. Lord, I pray that, from this gathering today, you would stir up more and more faith in our hearts. I pray that we would be more willing to risk and that we would step out and do things that are uncomfortable. May our actions then lead to spiritual growth, spiritual maturity so that You can be glorified more and more. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.