

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Trinity 15 – September 8, 2024**  
**Matthew 6:24-34 – The Widow of Zarephath**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is for all the nations. Not for Jews only, but also for Gentiles. So last week, we heard how Jesus saved a Gentile leper, a Samaritan, while nine other Jewish lepers failed to receive him by faith. And now, this week, we hear how God's grace comes to a Gentile woman of Sidon, the widow of Zarephath.

Like the Samaritan leper, this widow teaches us that the promises of God are received by faith alone, not by nationality or lineage or obedience to the law. "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith."

For as the Samaritan leper also showed us last week, true saving faith glorifies and thanks God for everything he has done to save us, it takes no credit for any contribution of our own.

And this widow of Zarephath is a shining example of faith. For truly she is in bitter anguish, she knows she can do nothing to save herself. This is it. There's nothing more, she's already suffered everything. Famine, starvation, her husband's death, isolation. No one is here for her, no one will help. She even thinks God has forgotten her, if he ever knew her. So there's nothing left to live for. She and her son are about to eat their last morsel of bread and die. Few of us have experienced such distress and anguish in our lives. Our troubles pale in comparison.

And yet, when Elijah comes, what's left of her faith gets tested even farther, to the very brink. Elijah says, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." And as she's going to bring it, he calls to her again and says, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." How rude and heartless he seems! In her despair, she can only reply, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die."

But God knows her plight. God knows she has nothing to eat. He hasn't forgotten her, he's only testing her faith. So Elijah says, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'"

Do not fear, do not be anxious. God knows your troubles, God knows your fears. He is using these troubles to test and strengthen your faith, so you may learn to receive his grace by faith, so you may come before him utterly empty handed, casting yourself wholly on his mercy.

For the mercy of God is not to the Jews only, not just for the holy and shining saints, but even for you. God knows what you are suffering. Perhaps no one else knows, but he knows. And God says to you today, "Do not fear. Do not be anxious about tomorrow. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

For surely, we face many anxieties. We're anxious and stressed out by all the overwhelming responsibilities of each day. Anxious about money, how we'll pay for everything our families need. Anxious about health, about those who are in the hospital, those who we feel helpless to cure. Also anxious about our loved ones, children and grandchildren, those who have turned away from the church, who no longer believe what they were taught. And anxious about our sins, the pet sins that we keep coming returning to again and again, temptations that we can't seem to escape. How will we ever be rid of them? To all of these, Jesus says, "Do not be anxious. Cast your burdens on me. Let me bear your burdens. Let me bear them to the cross, and so fulfill the law perfectly, to set you free."

For all these worries are potential idols. Anxiety reflects a lack of trust in God. Worrying about money is an idol, because you cannot serve both God and money. And worrying about anything else, physical or spiritual – about your loved ones, their faith or their health, or about our country and the upcoming elections, or about your

stressful responsibilities, or about the church, or about what other people are saying about you – any worry can become an idol, if we do not take it to God, entrusting our burdens to his care.

But God wants you to know that when he sends you troubles and distress, he is testing and strengthening your faith, to turn you back to him for help.

Because you know that in all your sufferings and troubles, the will of God is always best. You even know that it was even the will of God to crush His Son, so that the sinless Son suffered and died for you on the cross, to atone for your sins and bring you peace with God.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” “For I am the king,” says Jesus, “And you belong to my kingdom, my church. You are baptized into my name, and I know all your needs. So seek me, the one thing needful. Seek my righteousness, the righteousness I freely give by faith. My righteousness is perfect, given for you in my blood. It pays for all your sin, for all your doubt, for all your failure to trust me in all your anxieties. I clothe you in my righteousness when I forgive all your iniquity, when I remember your sins no more.”

Give us faith, O God, to believe this promise. Turn us from ourselves, from our anxieties and our stress, to look outside ourselves, to the promises of Jesus.

Give us faith like the widow of Zarephath, who, incredibly, believed the word of the prophet. Human reason would say she was reckless, irresponsible, to go home and use the last of her oil and flour not for herself and her son, but for this Jewish stranger, to make a little cake of bread for Elijah. But for her faith, God kept his word. And she and Elijah and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

Give us faith like that, Lord Jesus, in your promises, for the promise is for us and for our children and for all who are far off, even for us Gentiles, grafted into the church of God. You have provided everything we need for body and soul. You have borne our burdens and our sin to the cross, so teach us to turn to you in all our needs.

You are our God, and you know our needs. So bring to us your lifegiving water to drink. Give us water from your everlasting well that never runs dry, the water of baptism and the forgiveness of sins. Give us faith to believe the word you have spoken, that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. And give us faith to receive the little morsel of bread that you prepare each week for us, the little cake that sustains us in the famine and drought of our earthly life of suffering. The communion wafer is your manna from heaven, your true body, the bread of life that sustains us for many days, until you call us home. And send us the rain of your word, to nourish our dry hearts, to learn to know you better and better by faith. Never let the jar of flour in your church – the preaching of your true word – never let it run out. And never let the oil of the gladness in the forgiveness of sins go dry. But send us faithful prophets to always sustain us by your word.

And teach us, Lord Jesus, teach to bear one another’s burdens, as Paul commanded in Galatians, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For you have borne all our burdens to the cross. Teach us to love one another, to have compassion on our suffering brothers and sisters in Christ here in this congregation and throughout the world. Teach us to rejoice in our sufferings, imitating your suffering on the cross in our own small way. “For we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.