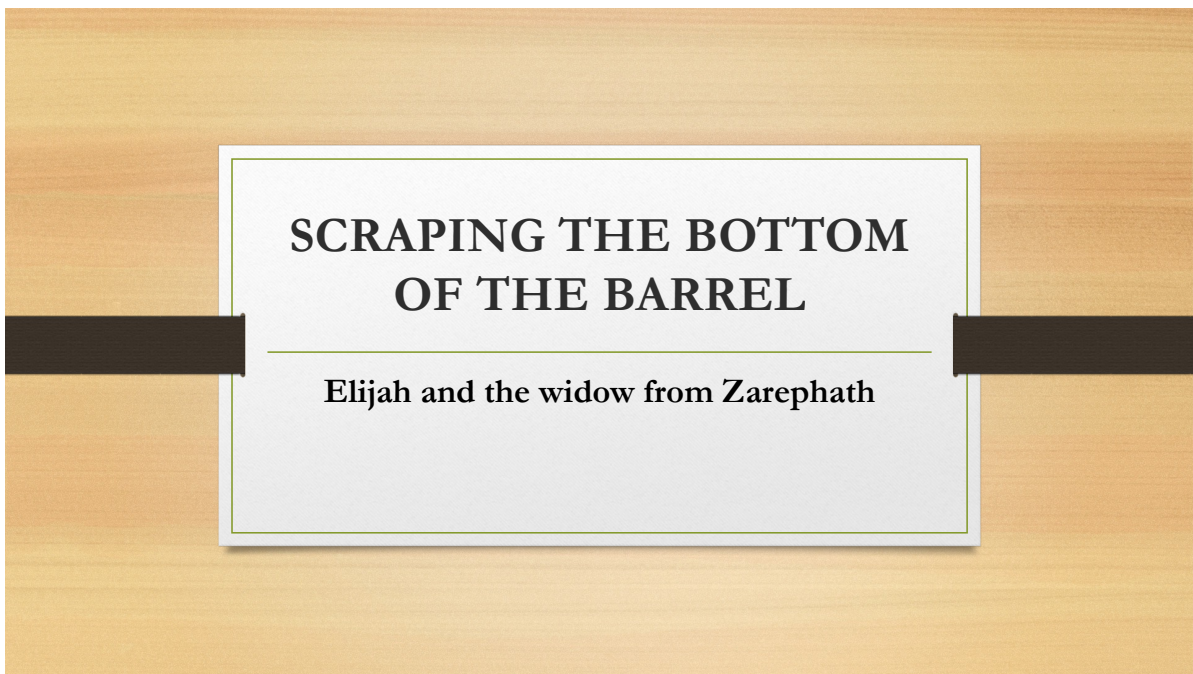


6<sup>th</sup> August 2023 Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

# SCRAPING THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell Presbyterian Church



## READINGS:

**1 KINGS 17:8-16**

**8 Then the word of the Lord came to him: 9 “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” 10 So he went**

to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” 11 As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

12 “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

13 Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”

**15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So, there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.**

## **Psalm 146**

**1. Praise the Lord.**

**Praise the Lord, my soul.**

**2 I will praise the Lord all my life;**

**I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.**

**3 Do not put your trust in princes,**

**in human beings, who cannot save.**

**4 When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.**

**5 Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,**

**whose hope is in the Lord their God.**

**6 He is the Maker of heaven and earth,**

**the sea, and everything in them—**

he remains faithful forever.

**7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.**

**The Lord sets prisoners free,**

**8 the Lord gives sight to the blind,**

**the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the Lord loves the righteous.**

**9 The Lord watches over the foreigner**

**and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.**

**10 The Lord reigns forever,**

**your God, O Zion, for all generations.**

**Praise the Lord.**

## **Mark 12:41-44**

The Widow's Offering

**41 Jesus sat down opposite the place where  
the offerings were put and watched the crowd  
putting their money into the temple treasury.  
Many rich people threw in large amounts. 42**

**But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.**

**43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you; this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”**

## **COLLECT**

**Gracious and compassionate Lord,  
you love the widow and the orphan,  
the poor and the marginalised;  
you provide for us in our hour of need,  
make us willing to share what we have received,  
giving even the smallest gift with great love,  
as an act of generous worship to you.  
Through Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever. Amen**

## INTRODUCTION

There are times in our life when we face desperate situations; situations in which we find our resources, strength, health, or friends are depleted.

Sometimes we find ourselves scraping the bottom of the barrel of our lives.

So, I am sure you have asked, why does God allow us to get into the barrel-scraping business?

Why does the Lord allow the barrel of our lives to reach rock-bottom where we are depleted, desperate, discouraged, or depressed?

We will find some of the answers to these questions in this morning's lesson from 1Kings 17:8 ff.

Times were hard in Israel. King Ahab was ruling over the nation, and he had led them into gross idolatry and sin.

And in Elijah's time, because of the sins of the people, God had sent a drought that lasted for three and a half years.

You may be interested to know Elijah's name is a combination of two names for God, Elohim and Yahweh. It means literally "Yah is El" and could be translated "Yahweh is God."

Elijah has been called the most important leader since Moses and Samuel.

Although, he is one of the best-known prophets in the Old Testament, we know very little about his early life.

To get a better understanding of the wider context we need to read the first seven verses of Chapter

17 ... before we look more carefully at the remaining verses:



Elijah Announces a Great Drought

**17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”**

Elijah Fed by Ravens



**2 Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah: 3 “Leave here, turn eastward and hide in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. 4 You will drink from the brook, and I have directed the ravens to supply you with food there.”**

**5 So he did what the Lord had told him. He went to the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan, and stayed there. 6 The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.**

Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath

**7 Sometime later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land.**

So, according to verse 1, Elijah was born in Tishbeh, an unidentified village probably in the vicinity of Gilead, where he was living when he appears on the scene.

And appear he does, with remarkable suddenness.

Dramatically, without any introduction, Elijah leaps onto the scene.

He ... and the royal couple ... had apparently never met. Without preface or introduction, he appeared before King Ahab and Queen Jezebel in Samaria ... and with startling bravado ... abruptly announced the drought.

No personal credentials. No reasons for the drought. No conditions for mercy. He simply delivered his message ... and just as suddenly ... disappeared.

You see, dew and rain were the two main sources of moisture in ancient Israel. The rains came regularly from about October to March.

The dew condensed on the mountains in the hot season, sometimes as heavily as a drizzle,

especially around the higher elevations about Jerusalem, Hebron, and Bethel.

To cut off both sources of moisture would mean an absolute drought of extreme proportions.

And since Baal was supposed to be the god of fertility, the god of the storm, present in the dew and in the rain, the drought was a direct challenge to this false deity and to the idol worship that followed.

Indeed, Elijah was picking a deadly fight with King Ahab, and his Queen Jezebel, because of their ... and the peoples ... idolatrous and profoundly offensive worship of Baal.

Jezebel went on ... of course ... to kill off the Lord's prophets ... in an effort to destroy the religion of God's people.

Well ... it was a time of religious decline ... of natural disasters ... with appallingly ignorant and

destructive forces at work ... at both the community and political level. And the intent and outcome were the destruction of true religion and to substitute it with idolatry.



Now, there are many approaches that we could take with this text. There are many great lessons to be learned. One of the heroes of the faith - Elijah - is a central figure in this story. His experiences certainly give valuable insight to our Christian journey.

But let us consider the life of the widow who lived in Zarephath.

Now little is recorded of her; we don't even know her name ... but her life has been a source of inspiration for all who have read her story.

I want us to consider the situations surrounding this woman's meagre existence as we reflect on living at the bottom of the barrel.



**FIRSTLY, LET US CONSIDER  
THE SEVERITY OF HER  
SITUATION**

**FIRSTLY, LET US CONSIDER THE SEVERITY OF  
HER SITUATION**

Clearly, we find that this woman was facing extreme circumstances, she was in a severe situation.

#### A. We note ... Her Difficulty (9–10a)

Twice in these verses the woman is described as a widow. It is interesting to note that God told Elijah that he had commanded a widow to sustain him. In that culture, widows were typically very poor. They lived a very difficult life.

We don't know how long she had been widowed, but it is certain that she had known great difficulty.

Widow of Zarephath  
faced extreme  
circumstances

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- Her Difficulty
- Her Despair
- Her Diagnosis



The drought was hard enough to endure, but she had to make it all alone. It appears that this poor woman's life had been filled with one tragedy after another.

Some of you might be able to identify with her this morning. You may not be a widow, but maybe your life has been filled with heartache and pain.

Do you recognise the old phrases, “**Misery loves company. Troubles never come singly. Misfortunes never come singly?**”

And simply being a Christian - it appears to me - does not always exclude us from heartache or difficulty.

Some of the most faithful Christians have faced great adversity.

### B. We note ... Her Despair (12a)

**“As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug.”**

You see, life was surely desperate for her and her household.

Elijah, the man of God, desired a cake of bread, but all she had was a meagre handful of meal and a little oil in a jar. **And that was all that stood between her and absolutely nothing.**



It seems this was all that she had left; this was the extent of her earthly possessions. She had no money to buy any provisions and the drought hindered her from growing anything ... to replace her depleted supply.

Now ... many today are facing difficult times. I am aware, of course, that some of us are blessed beyond measure ... especially living in Otago, New Zealand.

Even the poorest of our nation are rich by the world's standard.

However, the current cost of living crisis that we face is very real in the lives of many people.

There are people who have seen their life's savings disappear ... with the down-stream consequences of the covid global pandemic.

And for others ... lives have been devastated by sinful behaviour - either their behaviour or the

behaviour of others - and it seems ... that all they had ... is now gone. Some today, sadly, are living lives bordering on despair ... that they never imagined.

### C. We note ... Her Diagnosis (12)

**“I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”**

So, we she had resigned to defeat. Her life seemed hopeless. What was the use in living? There was no reason to go on.

All that she possessed would soon be gone ... along with her hope for the future.

She was prepared to fix one last meal and then die.

Isn't that tragic? This was a woman ... who no doubt ... loved her son. She had lived a difficult life ... and now ... she was ready to end it all.

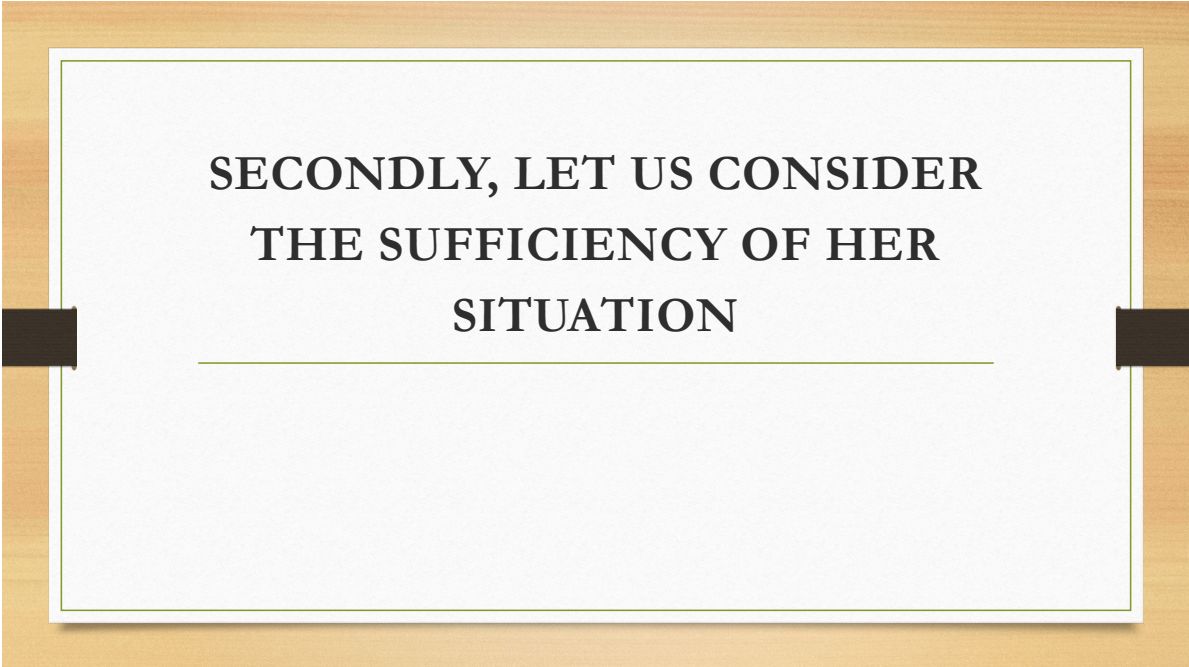
She had reached the end of her rope ... and was ready to let go.

Perhaps there are some today ... for whom life has not turned out as they had planned.

- Maybe the bank account is gone
- the dream job that promised to be secure has been lost
- family difficulties
- death of a loved one
- friendship complexities and confrontations
- loneliness
- the church
- and life
- it may appear life seems hopeless, and they are ready to give up on living

Some have fought the battle ... and have no more strength to press on.

So, we have considered the severity of her situation ...



**SECONDLY, LET US CONSIDER  
THE SUFFICIENCY OF HER  
SITUATION**

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**SECONDLY, LET US NOW CONSIDER THE  
SUFFICIENCY OF HER SITUATION**

You know, I am glad that the story doesn't end here. The widow soon finds hope in her desperation.

She found that she possessed all that she needed to survive. So, the question is ... what was involved in the sufficiency of her situation?

**A. Her first resource was ... Faith in the Lord (13–14)**

**13 Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”**



Widow of Zarephath  
possessed all that she  
needed to survive

- Faith in the Lord
- Following the Lord
- Favour of the Lord

Now, Elijah was seeking a portion of the meagre supply. He promised, by the authority of the Lord's word, that neither the flour nor the oil would fail until it rained.

And I know we have the benefit of reading the story after the fact, but imagine the faith that it took to do as Elijah commanded.

He wasn't asking for her excess; he was asking for all that she possessed. She had to step out in faith.

Do you agree with me that much of our lives must be lived by faith?

We have placed our faith and trust in the Lord we have never seen, only met through faith. Living by faith is easy preaching, but hard to practice.

And we must also keep in mind ... that God isn't asking for our excess. He doesn't want what is leftover; He wants our all.

We must be willing to fully submit our lives to him, walking by faith, even when we can't see the way clear.

## **B. Her second resource was ... following the Lord (15a)**

And so she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: She stepped out in faith and followed the direction of the Lord.

She gave all that she had ... before she received anything in return.

We see her faith was proven by her actions.

Now, she may have believed that God would meet her need, but until she stepped out and trusted him she wouldn't know for sure.

And ... are we not also commanded ... to have faith in the Lord ... but faith is of little value apart from action.

We must be willing to follow the Lord's guidance for our lives.

Can you see ... it is of little benefit ... to trust and to know that the Lord will meet our needs ... unless we are willing to do as he says.



Now, God may have placed a particular burden on your heart. He may want you to pursue a new direction.

And you may possess the faith that God will provide, but perhaps you will never know for sure until you step out in faith.

And let me say ... the church as a whole ... may need to step out in faith.

We believe that God is able, but often we are reluctant to follow the Lord's direction for our lives.

And we are unlikely to experience the blessing of God until we are willing to follow!

### **C. Her third resource was ... the Favour of the Lord (15–16)**

**15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So, there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the**

**jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.**

**We must note God honoured her faithfulness.**

Because she did as she was commanded, God met her needs.

OK, it may be the barrel was miraculously filled to the brim every day. Or, perhaps more likely ... it looked pretty meagre ... but each time that she reached into the barrel ... there was enough to supply the needs for the day.

Similarly, may be the jar of oil was never full ... but there was always enough to pour out what she needed.

**The scriptural truth for us today from this passage is ... when she reached the bottom of the barrel ... she found the abundance of the Lord!**

So, life may be hard right now. You may not be able to see how things could possibly work out.

You may have more need ... than there is money.

Your family may face a desperate situation ... that seems impossible to overcome.

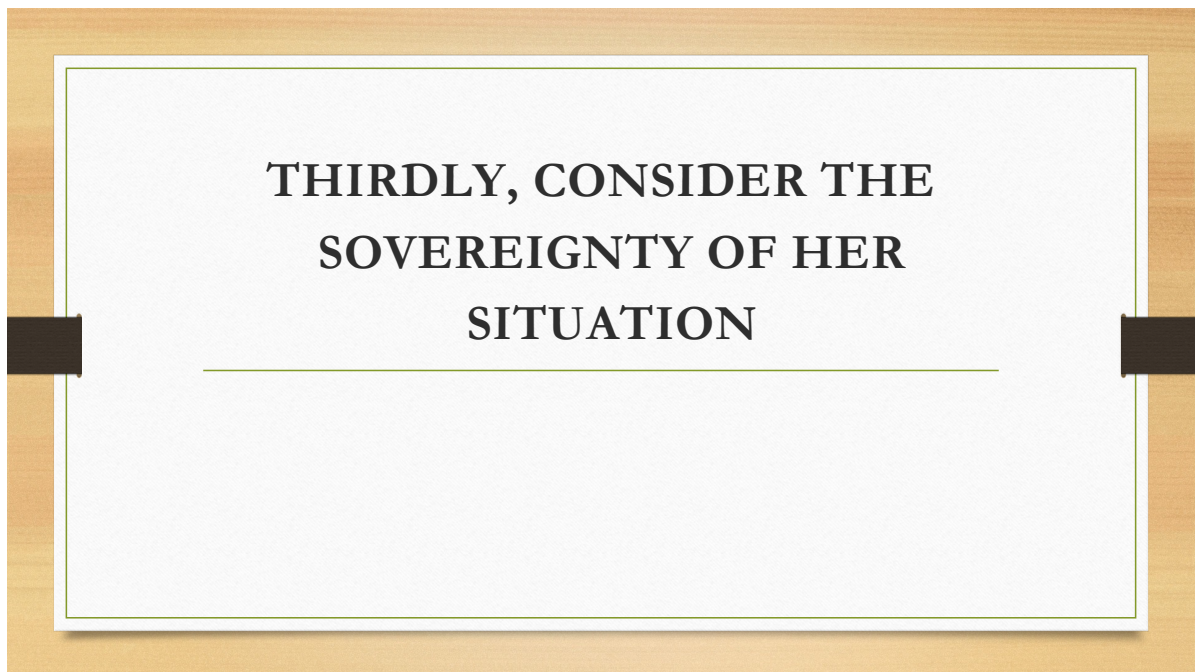
The church in New Zealand may feel thin ... and faltering ... with an uncertain ... or perhaps no future.

Is it possible that God ... wants to get us ... to the bottom of our barrel ... so that he can provide his abundant supply?

Life ... may not be all that we dreamed it would be but ... I can assure you that it will be enough ... and it will certainly be the best ... if the Lord is the source of our provision.

Ironically, perhaps living at the bottom of the barrel ... is a secure place to be. Do you agree with me ... that when I reach the end of myself ... it is then God will provide!

We have considered the severity and sufficiency of her situation and now ...



**THIRDLY, WE CONSIDER THE SOVEREIGNTY OF HER SITUATION**

I want to close with this thought.

From our perspective it may seem that her life was falling apart, but perhaps just the opposite was true.

She may have had a hard time seeing or understanding it, but God was always in control.

And our lives are no different. Let's take a moment to consider the Lord's sovereignty in this situation.

**Divine Sovereignty**

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| <p><b>God had a Plan</b></p> <p>“The widow had never met Elijah ... and yet God was going to use her situation ... for his glory ... and for the welfare of his prophet, as well as the widow and her son.”</p> | <p><b>God had a Purpose</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To Sustain</li><li>• To Strengthen</li></ul> |
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**Firstly, we note ... God had a plan (7–9)**

The Lord had sent Elijah to live by a stream during the drought ... where the ravens fed him.

In time, the stream dried up, but the Lord was not taken by surprise. He already had a plan in place.

The widow had never met Elijah ... and yet God was going to use her situation ... for his glory ... and for the welfare of his prophet, as well as the widow and her son.

I think ... that in a valley ... it is often hard to see the hand of God. And we need to be patient and compassionate with ourselves and with others.

We don't always understand, but we must have faith that God has a plan.

You know, I do not believe there is such thing as ... luck or coincidence ... in our Christian lives.

God is always aware and in control. And, I appreciate ... that this can be quite a mouthful to swallow at times!

**Rom. 8:28—And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.**

Please note this passage isn't saying "all things are great"!

Because, as we know, they aren't ... loss, bereavement, bankruptcy, divorce, terror are not great. They simply aren't.

No.

But it is saying 'in all things God works for good!'

**Secondly, we note that ... God had a purpose**

Maybe situations in life ... happen for a reason?!  
Maybe there is a divine purpose for our current challenges?

So let us notice the purposes ... revealed here for Elijah ... and for the widow.

### **Firstly, the purpose to ... Sustain**

We note, God told Elijah that he had commanded a widow to sustain him.

Through her obedience, God would also sustain her and her son.

So, maybe we need to realise that God is the one who sustains us.

We may be in the middle of a trial ... or even a crisis ... but perhaps God has allowed it ... so that



we might rediscover ... that in God alone ... is our help ... and our salvation.

Do you think we need to rediscover this?

Times may get hard ... and we may live in fear ... and doubt ... but God will see us through.

Do you believe that?

**Secondly, the purpose to ... Strengthen**

The Scripture doesn't specifically say, but I am absolutely sure ... that it is safe to say ... the faith of all involved ... was strengthened ... through this difficult situation.

Elijah ... learned that God could use not only the ravens, but even the most unlikely people to care for him.

The widow and her son realised that ... no matter how desperate things may seem ... God was able and willing to provide.

I am sure their faith ... was no longer the same ... that through this crisis ... they had grown spiritually.

And my experience says to me ... valleys are never enjoyable ... but in them we learn that ... God is good ... and that God will meet our needs.

OK, let us ask ourselves this morning ... how much is our faith strengthened ... when we feel ... we are in control?

I believe, it is when we reach the bottom of the barrel ... and lean upon the Lord ... that we learn to trust him ... which is then rewarded with the Lord's provision and blessing.

I believe, it is when we reach the bottom of the barrel ... and lean upon the Lord ... that we learn to trust him ... which is then rewarded with the Lord's provision and blessing.

Are you currently living at the bottom of the barrel? If so, perhaps you should rejoice.

It isn't an easy place to be ... but there ... we have a choice ... to give God complete control.

Maybe we need to:

- come ... and
- find the abundance ...
- that waits those who reach the bottom of the barrel.

And may the God of Elijah ... and the widow from Zarephath ... be with you.

**AMEN**