

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Dare we trust God?

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning!

Here's an interesting question: Do we dare to trust God? It takes a while before we can fully trust someone. First we want to observe them over a period of time to find out if they're trustworthy. We watch whether they keep their promises and truly care about us.

But do we dare to trust God when we can't see him? How do we know if he's reliable? What do we do if we obey what God commands, and believe his promises, but then it seems that God's not keeping those promises? What if we follow God's ways then find that life seems to be falling apart? Can we still trust God?

Let's explore that question this morning by considering a fascinating story from the Bible. It's the story of an unnamed woman – she's simply called the widow of Zarephath. She had to wrestle with this very question: 'Dare we trust God?'

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This morning we're thinking about the question: Dare we trust God? There was a woman whose story is told in the Bible who grappled with that very question. We're not told her name. She's simply described as the widow of Zarephath.

This woman lived in the time of the prophet Elijah. God's people in Israel had turned away from the Lord, and God was trying to get their attention. Through his prophet Elijah God announced he would allow a devastating drought to occur. During the next three years there was no rain or dew, and the land became very parched. The people of Israel suffered, as well as those in nearby countries. Meanwhile the Lord looked after his prophet, Elijah. The writer of 1 Kings records: 'The word of the Lord came to [Elijah]: "Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food." 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?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread"' (1 Ki 17:8-11).

Imagine this widow's situation. She was not one of the Jewish people. She lived outside Israel, in the territory where the god Baal was worshipped. She was probably a worshipper and servant of this god Baal. This woman was one of those most affected by the drought. Her husband must have died at an early age - she was perhaps in her 20s. Being a widow meant she lived in abject poverty. She had a son, still a boy, and it was very hard for her to provide for both of them. The drought made life very difficult. She had trusted in the god Baal, but no rain was falling and she and her son were close to starvation.

Elijah's request must have seemed cruel to her. Her reply reveals her inner feelings: "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 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" (1 Ki 17:12). After a long struggle she had just reached the point of giving up – this was her last act

before death. Then came the surprising message from God’s servant Elijah: ‘Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 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 gives rain on the land’” (1 Ki 17:13-14).

This request of Elijah might seem selfish – he asks for the last part of her remaining food to be given to him. With the request comes a promise that the Lord will provide for her and her son, and sustain them. She asks herself: ‘Dare I trust this God of Israel?’

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Dare we trust God? We’re considering a woman whose story is told in the Bible. Her situation was desperate; she and her son were close to starvation. Yet God promised her, through the prophet Elijah, that God will provide for them. She decided to trust this God of Israel and do what he asked. The text says: ‘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. 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’ (1 Ki 17:15-16).

Here is a clear picture of what true faith is. Faith is hearing God’s command and promise, then in response obeying that command and trusting the God who makes the promise. Faith is staking everything upon the Lord’s sheer word, wagering all upon the reliability of God. So every morning this woman woke and saw the quiet faithfulness of God. Her jar and jug were not overflowing, but, miraculously, there was enough for that day. So it went on day after day, week after week. Every morning she was quietly reminded of the faithfulness of the Lord to his promise.

But suddenly her whole life went pear-shaped. The flour and oil were there but her son had also become sick. The Bible records the tragedy: ‘Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing’ (1 Ki 17:17). The tokens of life sat on her shelf – flour and oil – while the fact of death lay in her arms.

Every believer in Christ feels the edge of this woman’s experience. This widow had acted on the Lord’s bare word, and had found he was as good as his word (vv.15-16). The Lord had been at work preserving life, yet now death attacked one of their lives that had been preserved. After a time of steady provision came a sudden loss. The Lord had promised to provide and sustain this widow and her son. So the death of her son seemed to contradict God’s declared purpose. Believers often meet such jolts as we walk with God. We’re unexpectedly plunged from the light of God’s goodness into the muck of trouble. The Lord both provides and perplexes. He sustains life and then takes it away. What are we to make of him?

No wonder the woman was so angry: ‘She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”’ (1 Ki 17:18). She suspected her son died because of her own guilt and sin. Many Christians know exactly how she felt. If we suffer tragedy and loss, in our despair we dredge up all sorts of guilt that God must be punishing. Why did the Lord allow such a tragedy to happen to this new believer? We can’t answer such questions. We can only say that this woman discovered early on that the Lord both sustains and bewilders, both delights and devastates. That’s one thing about the Bible that’s so comforting. It’s honest. It hides nothing, but warns clearly that this is what it’s like to walk with God. The Lord both blesses and baffles his servants.

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This morning we're looking at a woman from the Bible who asked herself the question: 'Can we dare to trust God?' She was a widow who lived at Zarephath. Initially she did trust God and obey his word. The Lord sustained her and her son. Then tragedy struck, and her only son died. God's prophet Elijah took the body of the dead boy and prayed earnestly for God to give life back to him.

A miracle occurred. The Lord responded to Elijah's prayer, and the boy was given life. The mother was astonished and overjoyed, and 'said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth"' (1 Ki 17:24). What is she saying? Through her agonising experience she learned that the word of the Lord is reliable. That's the theme of this story. Several times in her experience the reliability of the Lord seemed questionable. God had indicated by his previous promise (v.14) and by his daily provision (vv.15b-16) that he intended to preserve this widow and her son. Her son's death (v.17) seemed to blow a huge hole in the Lord's word. Was the Lord, after all, like pagan gods – spasmodic, capricious, unpredictable? Does he make promises but is unable or uninterested in keeping them? But now, as it turned out, she saw that God's word that Elijah speaks *is* reliable. At the end of her trial the Lord had proven himself faithful.

This brings a very encouraging message for us today. In the face of the Lord's ways, which often seem to us perplexing, seemingly absurd and contradictory, he will show himself faithful to his people at the end of their trial. Sometimes when God's people are going through particularly hard times this message is all that keeps us sane.

The message of this passage goes far beyond trials in general, and tackles the one great trial in particular. Its focus is the d-word: death. When the widow's boy died a whole new challenge arose to the Lord's adequacy and authority. Could God be the victor even over death? This story tells us very clearly: **yes**. The Lord is supreme over all, even over death. The miracle of this boy being brought back to life points to an empty tomb, where the mighty Son of God would prove he is victor over death. The story of the widow's son is a sign. It's a sign, a hint, to all who commit their lives to Christ, that through the work of Jesus God will hold his people safely though death. When the risen Lord Jesus appeared to the apostle John on the isle of Patmos, Christ declared, 'I am the living One; I was dead, but now I am alive for ever and ever! (Rev 1:18). Not even death can place God's people beyond the grip of his hand, the sound of his voice, and the touch of his power. Dare we trust this God? We can, and we should! Will he hold us safe through the trials of life and even death itself? Absolutely!

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Dare we trust God? The biblical story of the widow of Zarephath assures us we can. She staked her life on the reliability of God's word. Like her, we can believe the word of God as we face life and death. That's what Robert Bruce, the famous Scottish preacher, did. As he finished his last breakfast he sensed his Master calling him home. He asked his daughter for a Bible, requesting her to open at Romans 8. His eyes failed but Bruce recited those words from memory: 'For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... neither the present nor the future ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:38-39). Robert Bruce asked his daughter: 'set my finger on these words.' 'I die,' he said, 'believing in these words.' Dying or facing our last meal, faith has only one thing to rely on: the reliability of the Lord's word.