

THE WIDOW OF SAREPTA

NO. 817

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.**

*“And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Arise, get you to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain you.”
1 Kings 17:8, 9.*

THE Prophets taught as much by their doings as by their sayings—they were as truly prophesying to the people by the miracles which they worked, as by the messages which they delivered. There was oftentimes a symbolic meaning in their actions, in fact, they were constantly teaching the people by outward symbols, which, alas, those people were usually of too dull an understanding to interpret, but which, nevertheless, were a sign unto them. In the case of Elijah, a Prophet of laconic speech who said but little, but said that with a voice of thunder, I do not doubt that the narratives connected with his life are meant to be to us a kind of acted prophesying, full of richest meaning.

Let us see what we can gather, this morning, from the inexhaustible barrel and unfailling cruse of the widow of Sarepta. I know not how it is that I feel bound in spirit to preach upon this incident this morning, but this widow seems to have followed me for the last two or three days with all the importunity of the widow in the parable who would take no denial! And I trust that there may be some here for whom I bear, under sacred constraint, a message from the Lord. Grant it so, blessed Spirit, and we will praise Your name!

I. Our first observation will be, this morning, that the case of this woman of Sarepta is an instance of DIVINE ELECTION. We are not now inventing anything of our own. We have the warrant of the great Apostle and High Priest of our profession for this assertion, for when He went to Nazareth and opened the Book and preached, did He not Himself say, “Many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the Heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; but unto none of them was Elijah sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow”?

Election passed over all the poor widows of Israel who might have been expected, as belonging to God's Covenant people, to be first provided for in the day of scant, and it lighted in sovereignty upon a *heathen*, a woman living in a country which had been accursed of God and given over before to the sword of the seed of Jacob. Election, I say, passed over all the likeliest ones and pitched upon her who seemed to be beyond the verge of hope—ordaining in mercy that *she*, entertaining the Prophet, should be saved thereby. Surely, Brothers and Sisters, we have here an instance of the sovereignty of electing love!

If Divine Grace must go to Sidon for its object, why must it select a widow? She seemed to be the least likely person to answer the design of the decree, namely, the *sustenance* of the Prophet. Were there not *princes* in Sidon with secret stores of food? Were there not merchants who had passed over the salt sea and knew where grain was to be found? Were there not men of understanding who could, by their conversation, cheer the Prophet's lonely hours? No, but though they be great or wise, or wealthy, God bids His chariot downward to roll away from the lofty towers of nobles to the humble cottage of the poorest in all Sidonia's dominions—and a poor widow woman becomes the object of special Grace!

Here is an illustrious instance of distinguishing Grace, yet not such a striking one as mine, nor such a remarkable case as yours to you. I seem as if I can understand God's having chosen *you*, but I shall never cease to wonder that He has elected me—

*“How many hearts You might have had
More innocent than mine!
How many souls more worthy far
Of that pure touch of Yours!*

*Ah, Grace! Into unlikeliest hearts
It is Your choice to come;
The glory of Your light to find
In darkest spots a home."*

The choice is in every case made by the supreme will of Jehovah, and is not ordered according to the will of man nor the will of the flesh, nor blood, nor birth. It is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but He who rules all things according to His own good pleasure. He gives as He wills and withholds as He pleases, and who shall say unto Him, "What are You doing?"

At the same time it was a most just choice. I have never heard anyone complain that this widow of Sarepta was thus preserved in famine. And who could complain? For if the whole people had been all subject to the same pinching need they all deserved it—and if God's special bounty in a single case turned aside the evil by His own remarkable power, shall not the Lord do as He wills with His own? Is our eye evil because His eye is good? So also in the realm of Divine Grace—none of us have any right to God's mercy—if you think you have, go plead your rights and God will give them to you. God shall treat no man worse than he deserves, but, indeed, infinitely better! "He has not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities."

But what if He chooses to give to some His special and abounding Grace? Men may quibble if they will, but the only answer God will give them is this, "No but, O man, who are you that replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why have you made me thus?" But, Beloved, although God condescends not to explain His modes of action, nor to prove His own justice—for who is He that He should stand at our bar, and should speak for Himself, and explain His actions?—yet is He always just. Who are we, the ephemera of an hour, that we should arraign the Infinite, the Eternal One, from whose hands we spring? He will do as He pleases.

Yet for all this, His Throne is settled in judgment and His scepter rules according to righteousness and truth! And in the daylight of eternity we shall all of us admiringly discern that sovereignty was never dissociated from justice, and that when God did absolutely as He willed, He always willed to do the thing which was upright and just. The choice was as *just* as it was sovereign. But what a blessed choice it was for her! She saw her neighbors famishing—all over the land the people felt the bitter pangs of starvation—but in her house there was no need, for bread and oil abounded!

This was no luxury, but was similar to bread and butter among us, for the Easterns use the oil as we use butter. There was just plain food enough to support, but not enough to gratify delicate tastes. The Prophet had lived upon better fare before, when he had meat twice a day, but now he must do without it altogether. The Prophet's Master would not have the Prophet be dainty about such things. This woman had enough—meal and oil were, to her, right royal dainties—when there was famine through the land.

And, Beloved in Christ Jesus, how blessed are we who rejoice in our election! What food we have! What bread and what oil—no, what supplies of richer dainties than earth could possibly yield—redeeming Grace and dying love! The flesh of Jesus and His precious blood to be our meat and drink! If election brings us such stores as these, let us forever magnify the merciful sovereignty which ordained us to such Grace!

The choice of this woman, while it brought such blessedness to her, involved service. She was not elected merely to be saved in the famine, but to feed the Prophet. She must be a woman of faith. She must make the little cake first, and afterwards she shall have the multiplication of the meal and of the oil. So the Grace of God does not choose men to sleep and wake up in Heaven, nor choose them to live in sin and find themselves absolved at the last—nor choose them to be idle and go about their own worldly business—and yet to win a reward at the last for which they never toiled. Ah, no! The sovereign electing Grace of God chooses us to repentance, to faith—and afterwards to holiness of living, to Christian service, to zeal, to devotion.

Ah, many a man would wish to be chosen for Heaven, but he has no wish to be chosen for holiness! Then why does he quibble at election? If he does not wish it himself why need he grudge those that have it? Dog in the manger, what right have you to howl at those who rejoice in what you do not care for yourself? You do not desire holiness, then why complain that it is worked in others? If any man here wishes to be chosen to holiness, wishes to be chosen to give up his sin—if that is a sincere wish it is a sign that he is chosen *already*, for such a wish as that could not grow up in his soul by nature—God must have implanted it. Let him be thankful that he finds it there.

But, Beloved, let us never think about proving our election unless we bring forth fruit unto holiness by the Grace of God. If you hope you are chosen like this woman, let me ask you, are you feeding the Prophet? Are you exhibiting daily a faith in the living God? Could you, like she, at the Lord's command, take out the handful of meal and oil and *believe* that God would still supply you? Are you living as the just do, by faith, in simple dependence upon Jehovah whom you cannot see, but whose promise stands fast to you? If so, you can be sure you are chosen to it, for you have obtained it! You may be clear of your election, for you have made it sure because you have brought forth the *fruits* of it! You are elect unto holiness, elect to be conformed to the image of His Son, predestinated to be one of the family of which He is the First-born and Pattern. Inasmuch as you are made like He is, this proves that you are ordained to be made like He, and you may rest and rejoice therein!

I beseech our friends never to be afraid of that doctrine of election when they hear it spoken of. It is not to be controverted about every day in the week and insisted upon as though it were the whole Gospel, for it is only one Truth of God among many, but it is a very precious one. There are certain preachers that get this doctrine into their theology as the organ grinders get a tune put into their barrels, and they can never grind out anything but election, over, and over, and over again! Such persons bring a most Scriptural doctrine into disrepute.

At the same time, it is an indisputable truth of Christianity, and one full of the richest comfort to the child of God—one which is intended to kindle in him perpetual flames of adoring gratitude—a truth which lays him low and makes him feel that there is nothing in him, and then raises him up and bids him, like a seraph, adore before the Throne. Distinguishing Grace is a fact! Prize the Truth and hold it firmly! Live upon Jesus Christ! Bless Him that you are made a partaker of His eternal love.

There always will be some who will pervert and wrest this doctrine, as they also do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. But I hardly think I need stop to speak to them. Still there are some who say, "If I am to be saved I shall be saved." Did they ever hear of a certain Ludovic, an Italian philosopher who had imbibed the idea of predestination to the exclusion of every other truth? He could see nothing but *fate*, and thought religions activity useless. A physician who attended him during his sickness, a godly man, desiring to convince him of his error, said to him as he stood by his bedside, "I shall not send you any medicine. I shall not attend to you. In fact, I shall not call any more, because if you are to live you will live, and if you are to die you will die. Therefore it is of no use my attending to you."

He went his way, but in the watches of the night, Ludovic, who had been the slave of a notion, turned it over and saw the folly of it. He saw that there were other truths besides predestination, and he acted like a sane man. As God accomplishes the healing of the sick by the use of medicines, he usually accomplishes, also, the saving of souls by the means of Grace. And as I, not knowing whether I am elected to be healed or not, yet go to the physician, so I, not knowing whether I am elect to be saved or not, yet will go to Jesus as He bids me go and put my trust in Him. And I hope I shall be accepted in Him.

Dear Hearer, do not trifle away your soul by thrusting your head into doctrinal difficulties! Do not be a fool any more, but go to Jesus as you are, and put your trust in Him and you will not find this knotty point a terror to you! It will, indeed, become like butter in a lordly dish to you. It will be to you savory meat such as Isaac's soul loved. And as you feed upon it you will become like the three holy children in Babylon, both fatter and fairer and more lovely than those who have not received this precious Truth of God.

II. A second Truth we learn from the text is the doctrine of the SECRET OPERATIONS of God upon the human heart. This is illustrated here, for we read, "I have commanded," and yet we do not find that the Lord had spoken a single word to this woman, certainly not by Elijah, and I do not know that there was any other Prophet at that time within reach of her. No command had been given, and yet God said, "I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain you."

She does not appear to have been at all aware that she was to feed a Prophet. She went out that morning to gather sticks, not to meet a guest. She was thinking about feeding her son and herself upon the last cake—certainly she had no idea of sustaining a man of God out of that all but empty barrel of meal! Yet the Lord, who never lies, spoke a solemn Truth when He said, "I have commanded a widow woman there." He had so operated upon her mind that He had prepared her to obey the command when it did come by the lip of His servant the Prophet.

Even thus, and blessed be God for this comforting Truth, long before the minister is sent to preach the Gospel, *God prepares* the hearts of men to receive the Word! Long before the actual living message comes as a matter of instruction to them, there have been secret operations, both of Providence and of Grace which have been making ready a people prepared of the Lord who shall be called in the day of His power! Beloved, there is a time, no doubt, when the Spirit of God begins to operate upon the heart of saved ones—and even from infancy the Grace of God begins to prepare the heart for salvation! And long before conversion all the moral agencies, all the Providential afflictions, and indeed, all the events of life have been working together to prepare that character for translation from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son!

There are gracious operations long before there are operations of the Spirit of Grace! I call them gracious because they are directed *by* Grace, though they are nothing more than moralizing, restraining, or awakening operations. When I came to preach, this morning, I did not know who may be in the crowd, but I did know that I would preach to a picked congregation whom God had Himself selected, and that I would speak to some who need me, and to whom I am sent of God. There will be tinder somewhere for my sparks, and though there will be many to whom the discourse will be worth nothing, yet there will be chosen ones to whom it will be the power of God!

Still does the widow woman meet Elijah—she may not know why she comes, she may come with a very low motive, as it were only to gather a few sticks—but the *Lord* has sent her. No one can give God's message to her but the chosen preacher and she is the woman who must receive his word. So in all places where my Brothers in the ministry are preaching the Lord not only sends His servants, but sends the persons whom He means them to meet! He equally prepares the preacher and the hearer!

It is to be hoped that many here have been hopefully prepared for the reception of God's Gospel, for they are the children of godly parents. I would sincerely hope that when the Gospel comes to them they will receive it because they have seen the proof of it in their mother's piety, and in their father's holiness. I trust that having known, like Timothy, the Scriptures from their youth, they will be like the thirsty land which gapes with huge cracks as if thirsting to drink in the blessed shower—and not as the hard rock which turns an ungrateful surface to the gentle dew of Heaven. I trust there are some here, young in years, of whom the Lord has said, "I have commanded a little girl, or a young lad, to receive Jesus today."

Many I know have been prepared for the Gospel by having long attended the ministry. Ah, though you are not saved yet, I hope that God is getting you ready for that day of effectual Grace. How have I knocked at the doors of some of your consciences! Surely, the mark of the hammer may be seen there now! You have found it hard to sin, though you have gone on sinning. You have been almost persuaded, though not persuaded after all. Still you are not what you once were. You have been sobered. You have been made to think. You have become uneasy. The sinful pleasures which were sweet to you have been abandoned. You cannot altogether shake off the thoughts of eternity, of judgment, and of the life to come. Ah, well, I hope this preparation will not, after all, turn out to be a bud that does not knit, an up-springing blade that never comes to the ear! But may Divine Grace even now lead you to Jesus, for today is the accepted time—today is the day of salvation! May you be as ready for the Gospel today as the widow woman was for Elijah when he met her with Jehovah's command.

Many are prepared by Providential *trials*. I have blessed God a hundred times that He does not leave His preachers to do the work of winning souls alone. When I have gone to see the sick I have felt that my Lord has been there preaching sermons which have touched flesh and blood, and pierced to the very quick, while my words, alone, would only have gone in one ear and out the other. He has laid that dear child dead and the mother cannot forget that her infant has gone to Heaven while she is on another road. There is the husband looking down upon the corpse of the beloved wife, and he cannot laugh at death and eternity now! There is space for a word of admonition now.

Ah, when you come fresh from the bed of fever, when you come here after having been detained at home by weeks of illness and weariness—then is my time with you! God has broken up the clods, plowed up the fallow ground, cut up the thistles and made room for His good Seed so that it may fall where it shall live and grow! Be thankful for your troubles if they prepare you for the Gospel! And if any of you have come up here, this morning, fresh from fiery trials, now that you are like melted wax may God put the seal on you, lest if you grow cold any more you may never be melted again, and

never have another opportunity of receiving the stamp of the Cross of Jesus, the mark of the genuine faith in a bleeding Savior.

Others are prepared for immediate salvation, because the Spirit of God is actually resting upon them, though they know it not. There are the incipient germs of repentance! There is the embryo of faith! There is *everything* which goes to make the Christian life—but it has not as yet come to such development as to be known to be such. When the minister's voice, or the Word of God in the Bible shall explain and enforce the Truth of God, the man will perceive it and discover himself to be in Christ!

The observation may arise in some mind, "Well, if this is the case, that God is preparing for the Gospel, could we not dispense with the ministry altogether?" This is unreasonable. This, instead of putting the ministry on one side, will have with every thoughtful mind the opposite effect. How it ought to encourage us to preach if there are some who are ready for it! Well may we distribute the Bread of Life when there are hungry souls waiting for it! Well content may we be to compel them to come in that the house may be filled, when there are the poor and needy under the hedge and in the highways who feel their need of the sacred banquet! How this ought to cheer the Christian minister!

No man is better pleased to go fishing than he who fully believes that he shall catch abundance of fish—no warriors march more cheerfully to the fray than those who are assured that they must win the victory. The certainty of success inspires a man to be doubly earnest. The preacher feels that he should be in arduous labors yet more abundant when he perceives that all these labors are backed up by the Providence of God, and made effectual to the most Divine ends. Send your servant to sow the seed upon a rock, and to plow all day, and see if he does not grow weary with his useless labors! But if you give him a good piece of ground to till, it is comparatively light work for he foresees a crop springing up.

Even the worst of men have this mind about them. I have heard that our military prisoners, when they were punished by being made to carry large shot from one end of the prison yard to the other, did not feel it to be so much a punishment when they saw the pyramid of shot at one end of the yard growing larger and the other diminishing. At last it was resolved to make them carry the same shot from one end of the yard to the other and back again continually—then the sense that they were working very hard and accomplishing nothing made the punishment far more irksome. So would it be to the Christian minister. Give him the conviction that he is really achieving success—success for which God works in His Omnipotence side by side with him—and the man becomes strong as the bullock for the draught, strong as the lion for the fight. He can do all things, for Jesus strengthens him!

There are some things which may indicate a preparedness for the Gospel. Listen, you unconverted ones, and put your hands into your heart to see whether you have any of these. Some men are evidently ready for the Gospel because they are out of love with all the world's joys and are the subjects of a constant unrest. They used to be quite satisfied, but they do not know how it is, now, that nothing pleases them. They were charmed once with the theater, but the drama now seems dull and insipid. The viol and the bowl, the dance and the merrymaking—these were once a Heaven below, but by some means, they scarce know why, they have lost all enjoyment for them! They have accumulated a little money—they hoped that this would satisfy them—but now they say of it, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Literary pursuits which once engrossed them, give them, now, no satisfaction.

Now, you seem to me to be the persons for whom the Gospel is intended. Jesus cries, "Come unto Me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Let us hope that when the Gospel comes to you, this unrest, though it is not a saving thing, will prove to have been a *preparation* for the saving work. Others we meet with who have a constant dread of coming judgment. They are somewhat superstitious, it may be, but still, even their superstition may become the basement for something better. The fear which haunts men so that they can scarcely sleep at nights—the dread of punishment which overshadows them—may in some way lead to the worst of results, but in others it is overruled to drive them to Jesus, who gives joy and peace in believing.

Frequently have we met with persons oppressed with great distress of conscience. It is not the Spirit's work, but merely a natural sense of wrong-doing. Yet for all this it is a fine joint in the harness for the arrow to lodge in. They feel that they have done wrong. The recollection of some one sin, or of a series of iniquities, haunts them and they cannot be at peace. Let us hope that now these fluttering doves will fly to the cleft of the rock and find peace in the wounds of Jesus!

It seems to me that God has put a preparation for Grace in the minds of those who are of honest straightforward disposition. I do not want to say anything which could be thought unorthodox, and I do not mean it so, but I think

where our Lord speaks of honest and good ground, He did mean that there was a good quality in the ground before the Seed came—not exactly a saving work, but a God-worked readiness for the Seed, and that readiness was *honesty*. You cannot do anything with rogues. God Himself seldom saves cunning double-minded tricky men. I do not expect to meet in Heaven a single man who was an habitual shuffler on earth—it seems as if such were never converted. I have met with double-dealing professors, but I do not believe the Grace of God had anything to do with them. And whenever I catch members of this Church who are not straightforward, I always think of them, “I wish I had known this before you had entered the Church, for I would not have advised the Church to accept a double-minded man, let him be as fine a professor as he pleased.”

How often are those called by Grace who, wicked as they are, are downright honest fellows! Look at Jack Tar, swearing big oaths, drinking and fighting when on shore, and thinking nothing of it—but at the same time never found doing a mean thing, but transparent as glass. Now, when Jack hears the Gospel, he is the very man to receive it, for God has worked in him an outspoken honesty which is like a furrow for the heavenly Seed to fall upon. Honest persecutors have often become honest martyrs. Take, for instance, the Apostle Paul. What an honest man he was! He never received a conviction but he carried it out at once. He was “exceedingly mad” against the servants of God, but so soon as he knew that Jesus was the Christ, what a bold defender of the faith he became!

It delights me to see in men the operations of creation and Providence, like secret commands of God, preparing men for mercy so that when the open command comes with the Spirit of God, the men receive it and are saved! There are other matters of this sort, but I shall not mention them. I only want to bring out the point that, apart from the Spirit, and before the effectual Grace of God, there are workings in Providence without, and mental operations within, by which men’s minds are made ready for the Gospel so that when it comes it is as readily obeyed as was the command of Elijah to the widow woman, because, by some mysterious working, God had secretly moved her to sustain him.

III. In the third place, our text affords us an instance of ACCEPTED INSTRUMENTALITY. Here is a woman selected to sustain the Prophet—she is poor, and a widow. Brethren, if our heavenly Father had so willed it, the spread of the Gospel need not have required a penny of our money—but He has ordained it from the very beginning that wherever the Gospel comes, it should make an appeal to the liberality of those who profess it—for its support. There are certain persons who say that the minister ought not to be supported and that it is a very high and honorable thing for him to earn his own living in trade.

I have no doubt it is a very honorable thing. I almost envy the preacher who is able, like Paul, to carry on business and to support himself. But I must confess I am very well satisfied to be as honorable as my Master was—and as He never carried on any trade from the time He took to the ministry, but was supported by the free-will offerings of His people—it is, so far as I am concerned, enough for the servant to be as his Master, and the disciple as his Lord. From the very first, when our Lord began to preach, the people entertained Him and supported Him. And His rule was, when He sent forth His Apostles, not, “Pay your expenses, and mind you do not mention anything about money to the people,” but, “Into whatever house you enter, eat such things as are set before you.”

They were evidently to live upon the people to whom they preached, for, said He, “The laborer is worthy of his hire.” Now, why has our Lord been pleased to put it so, that the carrying on of the Gospel should always require money? There is something so distressing about the very sound of the word *money* that some superfine Christians feel quite ill when the box comes round! They are so heavenly-minded that the idea of *any* allusion to Mammon grieves their blessed spiritual-mindedness! Why did our Lord put it so that there should ever be any need of speaking about *funds*? Why did He talk of the widow’s mites, and sit over by the treasury? Why not abolish the treasury altogether?

Surely He was as spiritual as we are! Why did He introduce the topic of money, or render it necessary that it should be introduced? Was it not because the giving of *something* to God is the truest form of *worship*, especially when you give till you feel you have given? To sing a hymn, to pray, yes, these are well enough, but what hypocrite will not do these? What really is there of self-denial in these? If we have sung we can sing again and it costs us nothing. But he who gives something, he who like the Sareptan widow is willing to give all of his little, has given a real tribute to the Most High! There is no shame about that, and of all the offerings which come up before God I will venture to say that the money gifts of His people are among the most real, and the gifts of the poor when they have to deny themselves in order to give, are as acceptable to Jesus Christ as the wrestling of Jacob by Jabbok, or the songs of David when he danced before the ark.

May not our Lord have been pleased to address us in Scripture concerning “the collection,” because liberality to the Lord’s work sanctifies the toils of earth? During six long days the Lord’s people are working among bricks and timber, or in the field at the plow-tail, or standing behind the counter—what a dreary thing were this for an immortal spirit if it could not be sanctified to noble uses! The Lord enables you to sanctify the labor of the six days by bidding you consecrate a portion of the earnings of the six days to Him—week by week presenting your offering through Jesus Christ. It links earth with Heaven. It links your merchandise and shipping, your exchanges and warehouses with the heavenly Jerusalem and its streets. Instead of degrading religion by bringing it down to connection with Mammon, the demands upon your generosity elevate you by enabling you to do something for God, and compel this world’s toils to yield a tribute to the Lord of All.

There is another reason for the calls of the Gospel upon our purses, which is not at all a small one. God intends, thereby, to conquer in His people covetousness and earth-love. He calls upon them to support the cause of religion, not because religion could not exist without them, but because *they* could not healthily exist without giving of their means to the Lord. Even Christian men would soon grow covetous if God took not His tithe. If there were no portion for the Lord’s poor and the Lord’s work in the world, it would come to this—the greedy shoveling in of all we have and the putting of it by for our children and our heirs—the adding of house to house, and field to field till we were left alone in the world. There would scarcely be the possibility of Christianity in us if God did not require from us as a loving token that we should contribute to His work.

Then there is another reason. It puts such honor upon us to be allowed to give to Christ! I do not know how you feel, but when I am permitted to give anything to Him who opened His five wounds for me, who gave heart and soul, and all that He had for my redemption, I am full of delight! When I receive I fall flat on my face, but when I am permitted to *give*, a hand is laid upon me to lift me up and I rise honorably accepted with my gift. You would all feel honored if you were permitted to present a gift to a queen—how much more to give to the King of kings! The cattle on a thousand hills are His. If He were hungry, He would not tell us. If He were thirsty, he would ask no drink from us. But yet in condescending love He comes to us, and His Church comes to us, *informa pauperis*, and begs us to assist to support His work among men! And when we give cheerfully to Jesus we are *honored* in the giving!

In the case before us God commanded a widow woman to sustain Elijah. Now, if there must be money found for the Church, why does not our exalted Head send a few rich people who shall give all of it, and let the poor go free? The Lord very graciously does send a few richer Brethren who give by far the larger proportion of all religious contributions. But I have always noticed that our Lord will never send a *spiritual* Church enough rich people to let them be able to do without the poor, because His intention is that the blessing of being *allowed* to give to Him should come as much to the widow of Sarepta as to Joseph of Arimathea.

It is His intention that His rich people should give in proportion, but He never wishes that anything should prevent the very poorest contributing their penny and receiving the consequent blessing. “I have commanded a widow woman to sustain you.” It was a good thing for the widow woman to have such a task assigned her! She was to sustain a *Prophet*. It was an *honor* to her and it was no loss to her. What the Lord’s servant took with one hand he gave back with the other. And very often we have seen that if God lets His servants give to Him by shovelfuls, He will return it to them by wagonloads at the back door! He will never be a debtor to His creatures.

Of course, if they give to *receive* again, they do not give at all—they are only *investing* for themselves. But when they give with a free, willing heart, they shall receive even in this life and certainly in the life to come, an abundant recompense. Therefore, let the poorest always cast their mites into the treasury. On the first day of the week let every man lay by in store, be he rich or be he poor. Let none appear before the Lord empty, but bring Him an offering with joyful heart.

IV. Lastly, the text is a specimen of UNEXPECTED INTERPOSITIONS. Here is a Prophet to be sustained. He cannot be hidden away anywhere in Israel for the king is hunting after him. He must go into another country. Who will support him? Jezebel belongs to Sidon, if, therefore, it is once known that Elijah is in Sidon, he will be seized. But a widow woman living just on the border is prepared by God to entertain the Prophet. None of us would have thought of such a thing, but so it was—God unexpectedly finds the right woman who does the work in the right way—whose very obscurity and poverty contributed to the security of the Prophet.

Let us believe in the unexpected interpositions of God. He lets His people reach an extremity and then it is His opportunity. You have said, “The last card is played,” then God has come in. The ship has gone to pieces, the soldiers are talking of killing the prisoners, the sailors mean to get out into the boat and escape, and yet “some on boards, and some on broken pieces, they all come safely to land.” Rest upon God and remember that He has servants everywhere—he can help you when you have not a friend left and He can turn your bitterest enemy into your best assistant. And this confidence, Brothers and Sisters, should dwell in the Church of God in all the times of her need.

How many, in this matter, sail upon the wrong tack! Years ago it used to be thought that if somebody, when he died, would endow a Chapel, what a good thing it would be because then there would be something certain to keep it up. But there has never been, that I have ever known, a single place in our denomination in which an endowment has not proved a crushing curse! The Lord will not have us contrive to do without Him—He will cast us on Himself! A Church of England paper charges me with wishing to endow the College. I never had such a thought! I would not accept such a thing!

I will spend now, at once, all I can get for the needs of men are great and pressing. Peter and Paul, whatever they had, would have used it personally and immediately for the spread of the Gospel and then left the next generation to do their own work—with the living God to help them as He has helped us! If we should ever come to a point in any of our enterprises, so as absolutely to need help—if there was not any rich person found to help us—God would *command* a widow woman to do it! If there remained no friend on earth, He would send an angel to do it! He will never suffer any enterprise that is carried on with a single eye to His glory, and with simple faith in His promise, to know real lack. He may try it, but not destroy it.

Lastly, this also is true with regard to men for Christ’s Church. We ought to expect that God will raise up men to preach the Gospel in places where we never thought they could be found. He found a widow woman at Sidon to feed the Prophet. I should not wonder if the coming man should be found in Whitechapel, or St. Giles, or a Roman Catholic seminary, or the shoe-black brigade. Perhaps the mighty Evangelist and lover of human progress may even be found in so unlikely a place as among the bishops! It may be possible for Jesus to find Apostles among the frequenters of the turf.

When God would have the greatest Apostle to preach the Gospel, where did He find him? Among the *bigots*, a Pharisee of Pharisees! When He would kindle a morning star for England—a man who should translate the Scriptures and deliver the pure Truth of God—where did He look? Why, He found a Popish priest, one Wickliffe of Lutterworth! When He would send forth a man who should thunder against the Pope—a man with a brow of brass and a heart of iron to be a bold defender of the faith—where did He look for him? From a *monastery* He selected a monk with a shaven crown! “Come here, Luther,” said He, “I have commanded you to preach the Gospel,” and away he came.

The Providence of God may yet make Mr. Disraeli the instrument of dissolving the unholy union of Church and State. Grace may, in the same way, select the greatest blasphemer to become the most useful preacher of the age. I am expecting that my Lord will do such things. Every day I expect to hear that there are converts in high places—that the highest Puseyites have left the Church and denounced the ceremonies which once they doted on! I expect to hear that the Roman Catholic cardinals have begun to learn that salvation is by faith and not by works!

Why not? It is what our Master has done before, and all power is given to Him in Heaven and in earth. He called a widow woman to feed His Prophet, and He has found His instruments in the most unlikely places. Why should He not again? He can choose the mightiest trees and make them fair as the cedar of Solomon’s temple! He can raise up children unto Abraham out of the stones of Jordan’s stream! He can take men who were full of devils, even till they were called Legion, and make them sit at His feet, and afterwards tell of the glory of His power!

Rest, then, in God, you doubting ones! Think not His Church is in danger. His cause goes on in spite of foes! It must do so! Pompey said once, “I have only to stamp my foot, and all Italy will turn to soldiers.” God has but to lift His finger, and all *lands* shall be supplied with preachers! Charles I threatened the citizens of London, that if they did not behave themselves a little more loyally, he would take away the court from London. But the Lord Mayor replied, “If His Majesty does not intend to take away the river Thames, we shall do exceedingly well, after all.”

Even so, if Jesus shall abide with us, and His Spirit shall dwell among us, we can lose a thousand helps and fare none the worse. If we can but have the benediction of the Father, and the smile of the Son, and the dew of the Holy Spirit, we shall still rejoice in the Lord, and in His name set up our banners, for He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

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