Fearless in the Face of Want

A handful of flour, a little oil, and the word "Do not fear"

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, May 3, 2020
PASSAGES	1 Kings 17:8-16; 1 Kings 17:1-6; Matthew 6:31-33; John 6:5-13; Luke 4:24-26; Mark 10:45
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:57:23 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

When Elijah met a widow preparing her last meal, his first words were "Do not fear." God sustained them both through a handful of flour and a little oil. He is still our sustainer, he still works through ordinary means, and in a season of shortages his people should push back the spirit of fear by living generously.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We are not sustained by the supply chain, H-E-B or Walmart. God is our sustainer, and he has not become miserly.
- It is easy to believe God knows our needs; it is harder to believe he will meet them. Jesus says "all these things" twice – the Father knows you need them all, and will add them all.
- To seek first the kingdom is to do the will of the King before filling our own needs – the way Christ gave his life for ours.
- God uses means. The miracle of the loaves happened in Jesus' words, but it was worked out in the disciples' hands.
- The widow served God at her lowest point, probably because generosity was already her habit. A lifetime of faithfulness shapes how we act under pressure.

- Fear makes us miserly and closes our fist; faith opens the hand to serve and bless others.
- Generosity toward people unlike us – even those far from God – can show that our faith is real.

▶ 1:00:29

Hope Chapel was still meeting online, its board weighing the health protocols for reopening, when Geno thanked the people who had sewn 160 masks for the Salvation Army – two each for eighty men in recovery, one to wear and one to wash. Then he turned to his subject: how to sustain a generous heart in the face of shortages.

A society that gave in to fear

▶ 1:01:03

The news was full of talk about disrupted supply chains for milk and meat. But when the shortages first hit, he said, society gave in to fear and hoarded instead of sharing. “I just want to encourage the people who belong to Jesus not to be afraid. God knows what we need, and he will supply our needs.”

▶ 1:02:46

Some would call that a Pollyanna view from someone who has never faced want. Perhaps, he granted. “I’m not here to defend myself or my teaching. I’m here to talk to you about what the Bible says.” His call was for the people of God to be fearless – which means generous, sharing what we have with those we love and those far from God, and so showing an authentic faith in a God who supplies.

The widow of Zarephath

▶ 1:04:51

Before the text: Elijah had told the wicked King Ahab, married to Jezebel and promoting the worship of Baal and Asherah, that it would not rain until he returned with the word of the Lord (1 Kings 17:1–6). Elijah fled east of the Jordan to the brook Cherith, where ravens fed him. Then the word came again.

> "Then the word of the LORD came to him, 'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.' And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.'"
>
> 1 KINGS 17:8–11 ↗

▶ 1:07:09

> "And she said, '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.' And Elijah said to her, '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."'"
>
> 1 KINGS 17:12–14 ↗

"As the Lord *your* God lives," Geno noted – not hers. And "that we may eat it and die" is the first glimpse into her life: in her mind, this was the last meal. Elijah's answer, "Do not fear," was the message of the whole sermon. "If you don't hear anything else, hear that."

▶ 1:09:34

> "And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he 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."
>
> 1 KINGS 17:15–16 ↗

A clear miracle – but it began as a simple exchange between two people in hard places. Geno asked the church to read the news "with a careful, clear-eyed faith" that says: we may suffer, and I will prepare for my family, but I will also think of those less fortunate and walk in a generosity that bears witness to the goodness of the God I serve.

1. God is our sustainer

▶ 1:11:17

Elijah had no visible means of support, and God fed him – by ravens, then by a widow. Ahab had an army; Elijah had the Spirit of God. "It was not a fair fight." The drought had a purpose: to show that the Lord is God, not Baal or Asherah. So when suffering comes to a society or a family, Geno suggested, step back and ask what God's purpose might be, rather than turning angry and fearful. We read these stories because God has not changed. "He has not all of a sudden become miserly and afraid."

▶ 1:13:31

> "Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."
>
> MATTHEW 6:31–33 ↗

Believing God knows our needs is easy enough, Geno said; believing he cares enough to meet them is where we get hung up. Notice the word *all*, twice. "God is not miserly and just barely provides for us."

▶ 1:17:28

What, then, is authentic faith? To seek first the kingdom is to come under the authority of the King: do his will and display his character – integrity, grace, holiness. Geno quoted Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*, one of his favorite books: when we do not seek the kingdom first, we do not seek it at all. Seeking it first also means serving the needs of others before our own, because that is the nature of Christ, who came to give his life as a ransom for many. "He did not seek to save his life. He sought to save our lives."

▶ 1:20:03

Both Elijah and the widow obeyed under pressure. Elijah, a wanted man with a price on his head, crossed from one territory outside Israel to another – Phoenicia, home of Baal worship and of Jezebel's own royal family – to be fed by a poor widow. "I think that takes an immense amount of faith." Her obedience was to give her last flour and oil to a stranger, first. Both were in need: he needed somewhere to hide, she needed food, and God put them together. "That's what God does. He uses us to serve the needs of others."

2. God uses means

▶ 1:23:53

Not everything we receive from God is a flat-out miracle, though if we look closely we may see the miraculous behind it. God uses methods and resources common to us – for the widow, flour and oil; for Elijah, a journey and a word. When someone says, "How did you know to do that for me?" and you answer, "I just felt prompted," the Lord is at work through a simple meal, a bag of groceries, shopping for a shut-in.

▶ 1:25:28

When the disciples told Jesus the crowd was hungry, he said, "You feed them." A boy's five loaves and two fish were blessed, and as they handed it out there was always more for the next person, until five thousand ate and food was left over (John 6:5–13). "The miracle certainly occurred in the words of Jesus, but the outworking of the miracle occurred in the hands of the disciples, through means." So what means are at your disposal? As fear and hoarding spread, "let us, the people of God, go in a different direction." Come over, I'll feed you. I have two of these; take one.

3. The widow had faith

▶ 1:28:23

We are told little about her faith. She was despairing. But even at her lowest point she served the prophet, and in Geno's reading she recognized him somehow as a man of God, so in serving him she was serving God. Seek first the kingdom, worked out literally. It also suggests she had lived a life of kindness, so under great pressure she simply did what she had always done.

▶ 1:29:36

Geno admitted he can be mean at times and snap at people he loves, and prayed he would be a kind and gentle old man. Then he told a story that brought him to tears as a young, single man. A visiting speaker had just come from his mother's nursing home, sad because Alzheimer's had taken her recognition of him. A nurse stopped him on the way out: every morning about five o'clock, she said, your mother kneels by her bed and prays for you by name and for your ministry. "Lord God, let it be the case that when I'm old and my mind is gone, I'm still praying, still believing, still trusting, still honoring you." It takes a lifetime of faithfulness to act that way under pressure.

4. Push back against the spirit of fear

▶ 1:32:57

"In a time of scarcity we honor God by walking in generosity instead of fear." Fear makes us miserly and closes our fist tightly around what we have; faith moves us to help others even when our resources are small, and to live with an open hand. The widow believed the report, acted on it, and was rewarded. So the question is personal: do I believe God will sustain me, and how will I live in the face of the fear coming our way?

▶ 1:34:35

This is one of the stories Jesus used in Nazareth, after he read from Isaiah 61 and announced it fulfilled. The town saw only "Joseph's son," and he could do few miracles there for their lack of faith. Then he angered them:

> "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow."
>
> LUKE 4:24–26 ↗

They thought they deserved something special for being Israel. Jesus did not deny their place, but God loves all people, and sends his word to whoever will receive it. Elijah was provided for among people who worshiped Baal and Asherah, by a widow who probably did not follow Israel's God, trusting a man who was not from around there.

▶ 1:37:45

So our task is to go into the world – into the relationships God gives us – and, when the sheltering in place ends, be among those who say, "Let me help; here, I have some." When people ask why, "I'm showing you the love of God in a practical way, because I believe God takes care of us." That is especially true with people unlike us, Hindu or Muslim friends or those who have told us they are far from God. When we share our meager supply, Geno said, they may see something real in our faith – and it may please God to light the fires of revival in the city.

▶ 1:40:37

In the questions afterward, someone asked whether he was promising every Christian a miraculous supply. No, he said: the story illustrates the nature of God and backs up Jesus' words, not a formula for how God will act every time. Jesus knew his followers would suffer want and still told them to trust and seek the kingdom first. "Even if you don't trust my words or my sermons, please trust in Jesus." He pointed to friends who had ministered for twenty years in India, where tens of thousands of house churches among the very poor have learned to be generous with one another and found God providing – while declining to depend on Western money.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 1 Kings 17:1–6
- 1 Kings 17:8–11
- 1 Kings 17:12–14
- 1 Kings 17:15–16
- Matthew 6:31–33
- Mark 10:45
- John 6:5–13
- Isaiah 61:1–2
- Luke 4:24–26

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. When shortages or financial pressure come, what does fear tend to make you do with what you have?
2. Geno said it is easier to believe God knows our needs than that he will meet them. Where do you find that gap in yourself?
3. What ordinary means – a meal, groceries, an errand – might God want to use through you right now?
4. The widow did under pressure what she had always done. What habits are you building now that will show up when you are under pressure?
5. Who is one person, perhaps someone not like you, with whom you could share generously this week, and what would you share?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt serves as Hope Chapel's senior leader and was guiding the church through its online season and the board's plans for reopening. Married more than forty years, he counts Richard Foster's Celebration of Discipline among his favorite books and took live questions by text after this message on scarcity and generosity.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP0h6--exBU&t=3443s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.