

10-18-09 1 Kings 17:7-16 “Refined & Refreshed” (Part 2) by Richard Boatman

⁷ But after a while the brook dried up... ⁸ Then the LORD said to Elijah, ⁹ “Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰ ...As he arrived at the gates of the village, he saw a widow gathering sticks, and he asked her, “Would you please bring me a little water in a cup?” ¹¹ As she was going to get it, he called to her, “Bring me a bite of bread, too.” ¹² But she said, “I swear by the LORD your God that I don’t have a single piece of bread in the house...I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.” ¹³ But Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you’ve said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what’s left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again!” ¹⁵ So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her son continued to eat for many days. ¹⁶ There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers.

After the brook of Cherith had dried up, the Lord sent Elijah one hundred miles north to the coastal Phoenician town of Zarephath. Known for its superior polished glassware utilizing the sands of the Mediterranean, this village would be the center of refining and refreshing for the prophet and for a widow and her son.

We’ve discovered the journey of Elijah is a story of God’s provision. From the cutting place of Cherith to the refining place of Zarephath to the place of conquest at Carmel to the place of despair at Mount Sinai and finally to the place of departing when his mantel of anointing is passed to Elisha—God provides. And, as we saw a few weeks ago, God always provides at a place called “there.” “I have commanded the ravens to feed you *there*.” “I have instructed a widow *there* to feed you.” Though not always in the way we want, still, God always provides.

Again, last week we learned that Elijah’s request for bread was actually a compassionate demand unlocking the fear-gripped heart of this widow, receiving the little that she had in order to draw her into the unlimited provision of faith. The emphasis was on God’s refining. Today’s teaching is on God’s refreshing—a refreshing of our souls that comes through obedience.

What do you think of when you hear the word obedience? For many folks, *rules* come to mind...*lots* of rules...*lots* of *rigid* rules. If you follow them, things just might go okay. If you break them...you don’t even want to know what happens. When I was in fourth grade we started hearing about the eighth grade teacher, Mrs.

Bradfield. Though it would be four years before we had her, we already feared her. She was known in the hallowed hallways of Fox Valley elementary as “Bullwhip” Bradfield. By the time I was in junior high, I had cultivated an esteemed reputation for mischievous behavior and pushing limits. But when I entered Mrs. Bradfield’s room, it was with fear and trepidation. She had lots of rules and I tried to keep them. But one day I was chewing a piece of candy when suddenly, she was behind me. “What are you chewing?” she interrogated. Though it was candy, for some reason my lips said, “Gum.” “Gum,” she reacted. “You know you’re not allowed to chew gum in this class.” So I stayed after school and wrote a hundred times: “I will not chew gum in Mrs. Bradfield’s class.”

This is the image of obedience that many of us unconsciously carry into the Christian faith...*rules...lots of rules...lots of rigid rules*. It’s overwhelming. We can’t keep them all. In the Old Testament, there are over 600 rules to keep. We can’t do it. And because we can’t, many live under a constant condemnation. We grit our teeth, we make New Year’s Resolutions, we try and fail and resolve to try even harder, but we just can’t keep all the rules.

But then, by the grace of God—did you catch that?—*by the grace of God*, we find out we don’t have to keep all these rules. In fact, the New Testament tells us there is but one law, the law of love. And even this law of love, we discover, is not a regulation to keep but a person to relationally know. Love is a person—Jesus Christ. He fulfilled the Law. And what we could never do, he did.

So the call to obedience is not a call to try really hard to keep external rules. The call to obedience that refreshes the soul is a call to enter into Christ’s obedience to the Father. Over 140 times the New Testament says in one form or another that we are “in Christ.”

We must know who we are. An older man went to work for a seed corn company. When he was there, he was a great worker. But he’d often come ten or fifteen or even twenty minutes late. Finally, the warehouse foreman asked him to come to his office. “John,” the foreman said, “You are an excellent worker, in fact, the very best I have when you’re here. But you come in several minutes late a lot. What did people say to you at your previous job when you’d come in late like this?” John responded, “They said, ‘Good morning General, how are you today.’”

Hear me beloved, being in Christ means knowing whose we are. For in him, we enter into *his* perfect obedience to Father God; we enter into *his* ongoing ministry of love within the mission of the Father to not only redeem us but to restore us.

When Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my load is easy and my burden is light,” it was an invitation to follow him—to abide in him, to dwell with him—in *his* ongoing ministry to and from the Father, an invitation to join in the communion between God the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. Our call is not one of doing external acts but of living in Christ.

Let me illustrate what this means. Let’s say I call someone to follow me. I tell them their only task is to place their left hand lightly on top of my right hand and not remove it. Now I go about *my* work. I walk over to the piano and start playing a worship song to God. Their hand rests upon mine as I do so. I go to a bucket of soapy water, put my hand in the bucket and squeeze out a sponge and start cleaning. Their hand stays atop mine moving in the same rhythm. Then I take money and hand it to someone in need. Their hand is on mine. I have ministered to the Father through worship, serving and giving. All the other person has done is shadow my movements. He/she has entered into my labors through constant fellowship or communion, which means *common-union*. Through dwelling in Jesus, we live in the common-union between God the Father and God the Son.

So, the energy we exert is not primarily a physical effort to do certain external works, but the exertion of spiritual energy to stay attentive to abiding in Christ, in other words, to stay in communion with him. “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Frank Laubach was a missionary and educator to people in the Philippines and beyond, his techniques helping over 60 million people learn to read. His methods are still employed today through *ProLiteracy Worldwide*. Laubach was also a modern mystic who practiced staying God-aware at least “one second of every minute.” Regarding this holy experiment, Laubach said it took a great deal of spiritual energy to stay God-aware but that everything else became easy and fluid.

Many live such hectic, anxious-filled lives, moving from one calamity to the next or from one form of being stressed out to another. Our call to obedience is not just another “job” to add to our busy list, but an incredible invitation to be “yoked” with Jesus in his movements, entering into the mission of the Father in Christ.

The spiritual disciplines, indeed, all Christian education, as Professor Andrew Purves asserts—from the pulpit to the Sunday school class to the living room Bible study has but one central goal: communion with God, common-union in Christ. These disciplines put us in a place of fine tuning our attentiveness and increasing our resolve for “resting on his hand.” Anything less is to lose sight of the purpose. If the person shadowing my movements is distracted, my hand moves on but his/her hand is left behind just trying to “do stuff” in human strength. It’s lifeless

and exhausting. To stay in abiding communion, this person has to concentrate, guarding and attending to my movements and resist distractions. It takes spiritual energy, but everything else is easy, because I'm the one doing the real work. He/she is just resting on my movements. This is called living by faith.

In today's passage, Elijah addressed the greatest enemy to faith: fear. After the woman protested and plainly stated her expectation of dying, Elijah said, "Don't be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you've said, but make a little bread for me first. Then use what's left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD...says: 'There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the LORD sends rain and the crops grow again!'"

Elijah was offering her a miraculous abundance but fear might have robbed her of this powerful blessing. Over 300 times the Bible tells us to "Fear not." Isaiah 41:10 says, "Fear not, for I am with you..." Psalm 118:6 declares, "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" This addresses our fear of what people might think. The familiar Psalm 23 reminds us, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." 2 Timothy 1:7 proclaims, "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear; The one who fears is not made perfect in love." Remember, love is a person. To walk in fear means our relationship with Jesus is lacking some connection—our hand is no longer resting on his.

In following him, being "yoked" with Jesus, we must go where he goes. Think about the implications: to hold on to his hand means letting go of other things we hold to. Years ago there was a young lady we came across in our travels. She told us of a vision she had. In it, Jesus was calling her to himself and walking away. She held his hand but she was also holding onto the world, i.e. various idols in her life. She had to make a decision. The only way she could keep in step with him was to let go. Some ask when do we know that something is an idol? Are you willing to let it go in order to stay close and attentive to Jesus? If not, it's an idol.

To be in relationship with Jesus is to be refined and refreshed. There is no refreshing of soul like that which comes from union with Christ, being yoked with him, ever keeping our hand upon his. To do so, we will face fears, for we must always face that evil which would try to rob us of such victorious union. To stay in union, we will have to release our grip on other things. But when we have tasted of such sweet union, surely we will not refuse to "let go" in order to hold on to communion with our beloved Lord.