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# A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil

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Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Handful of Meal and a Little Oil," *Ensign*, May 1996, 29

We all welcome these newly sustained Brethren and their wives to the sweet association enjoyed by the General Authorities and their families.

In response to King Ahab's great wickedness, the Lord, through the prophet Elijah, sealed the heavens, that neither dew nor rain should fall throughout all the land of Israel. The drought that ensued and the famine that followed affected Elijah himself as well as untold others in the process.

Ravens did bring Elijah bread and meat to eat, but unless ravens carry more than I think they do, this was not a gourmet meal. And ere long the brook Cherith, near which he hid and from which he drank, ran dry. And so it went for three years.

As the prophet prepared for a final confrontation with Ahab, God commanded Elijah to go to the village of Zarephath where, he said, he had commanded a widow woman to sustain him.

As he entered the city in his weary condition he met his benefactress, who was undoubtedly as weak and wasted as he. Perhaps almost apologetically the thirsty traveler importuned, "Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." As she turned to meet his request, Elijah added even more strain to the supplication. "Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand [also]."

Elijah's pitiful circumstances were obvious. Furthermore, the widow had been prepared by the Lord for this request. But in her own weakened and dispirited condition, the prophet's last entreaty was more than this faithful little woman could bear. In her hunger and fatigue and motherly anguish she cried out to the stranger, "As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks [which tells us how small her fire needed to be], that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

But Elijah was on the Lord's errand. Israel's future—including the future of this very widow and her son—was at stake. His prophetic duty made him more bold than he might normally have wanted to be.

"Fear not," he said to her, "but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son.

"For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth."

Then this understated expression of faith—as great, under these circumstances, as any I know in the scriptures. The record says simply, "And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah." Perhaps uncertain what the cost of her faith would be not only to herself but to her son as well, she first took her small loaf to Elijah, obviously trusting that if there were not enough bread left over, at least she and her son would have died in an act of pure charity. The story goes on, of course, to a very happy ending for her and for her son. <sup>1</sup>

This woman is like another widow whom Christ admired so much—she who cast her farthing, her two mites, into the synagogue treasury and thereby gave more, Jesus said, than all others who had given that day. <sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the names of these two women are not recorded in the scriptures, but if I am ever so privileged in the eternities to meet them, I would like to fall at their feet and say “Thank you.” Thank you for the beauty of your lives, for the wonder of your example, for the godly spirit within you prompting such “charity out of a pure heart.” 3

Indeed I wish to do something a little more immediate in their behalf today. I wish to speak for the widow, the fatherless, the disadvantaged and downtrodden, the hungry, the homeless, and the cold. I wish to speak for those God has always loved and spoken of in an urgent way. 4 I wish to speak of the poor.

There is a particularly reprehensible moment in the Book of Mormon in which a group of vain and unchristian Zoramites, after climbing atop their Rameumptom and declaring their special standing before God, immediately proceed to cast the poor from their synagogues, synagogues these needy had labored with their own hands to build. They were cast out, the revelation says, simply because of their poverty. In a penetrating scriptural line that forever speaks to the real plight and true pain of the impoverished, the Book of Mormon says, “They were poor as to things of the world; *and also they were poor in heart.*” Indeed they were “poor in heart, *because of their poverty as to the things of the world.*” 5

Directly countering the arrogance and exclusivity which the Zoramites had shown these people, Amulek gives a stirring sermon on the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Teaching that Christ’s gift would be “infinite and eternal,” an offering to every man, woman, and child who would ever live in this world, he also bore witness of the mercy of such a gift. He listed all the ways and all the places in which people should pray for that atoning mercy, “for your welfare,” he said, “and also for the welfare of those who are around you.” 6

But this masterful discourse on the Atonement is not finished. With great directness Amulek says of these fervent prayers, “Do not suppose that this is all; for after ye have done all these things, if ye turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have [it], to those who stand in need—I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith.” 7 If this is the message to those who had so little, what must it mean for us?

Amulek uses here precisely the same theo-logic that King Benjamin had used 50 years earlier. After teaching the people of Zarahemla of the Fall of Adam and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, Benjamin saw his congregation literally fall to the ground, viewing themselves in a state of great need, viewing themselves, he said, as less than the dust of the earth. (The difference between this response and that of the Rameumptom set goes without saying.)

“And they all cried aloud with one voice, saying: O have mercy, and apply the atoning blood of Christ that we may receive forgiveness of our sins, and our hearts may be purified.” 8

With these people so teachably humble and with mercy, that loveliest of words, on every lip and tongue, King Benjamin says of the Atonement and the remission of sins:

“If God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are, doth grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, ... O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another.” “Succor those that stand in need of your succor; ... administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need.” “Are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same Being, even God, for all the substance which we have?”

“For the sake of retaining a remission of your sins,” King Benjamin concludes, “... ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants.” 9

We may not yet be the Zion of which our prophets foretold and toward which the poets and priests of Israel have pointed us, but we long for it and we keep working toward it. I do not know whether a full implementation of such a society can be realized until Christ comes, but I know that when He did come to the Nephites, His majestic teachings and ennobling spirit led to the happiest of all times, a time in which “there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift.” 10 That blessed circumstance was, I suppose, achieved on only one other occasion of which we know—the city of Enoch, where “they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them.” 11

The Prophet Joseph Smith had such a grand view of our possibilities, a view given him by the revelations of God. He knew that the real task was in being more Christlike—caring the way the Savior cared, loving the way he loved, “every man seeking the interest of his neighbor,” the scripture says, “and doing all things with an eye single to the glory of God.” 12

That was what Jacob in the Book of Mormon had taught—that “after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.” 13

I pay tribute to all of you, to all who do so much and care so deeply and labor with “the intent to do good.” So many are so generous. I know that some of you are struggling to make ends meet in your own lives and still you find something to share. As King Benjamin cautioned his people, it is not intended that we run faster than we have strength and all things should be done in order. <sup>14</sup> I love you and your Heavenly Father loves you for all you are trying to do.

Furthermore, I know that a talk in general conference is not going to cut through the centuries of temporal inequity that have plagued humankind, but I also know that the gospel of Jesus Christ holds the answer to every social and political and economic problem this world has ever faced. And I know we can each do something, however small that act may seem to be. We can pay an honest tithe and give our fast and free-will offerings, according to our circumstances. And we can watch for other ways to help. To worthy causes and needy people, we can give time if we don’t have money, and we can give love when our time runs out. We can share the loaves we have and trust God that the cruse of oil will not fail.

“And thus, in their prosperous circumstances, they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need.” <sup>15</sup>

How much that passage from the first chapter of Alma sounds like the wonder that was Nauvoo. Said the Prophet Joseph in that blessed time: “Respecting how much a man ... shall give ... we have no special instructions ... ; he is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide for the widow, to dry up the tear of the orphan, to comfort the afflicted, whether in this church, or in any other, or in no church at all, wherever he finds them.” <sup>16</sup>

Remember what the Book of Mormon taught us. It is difficult enough to be poor in material goods, but the greater pain is in the heavy heart, the dwindling hope, the damaged dreams, the parental anguish, the childhood disappointment that almost always attend such circumstances.

I began with a story of diminishing cornmeal. May I conclude with another. Amidst the terrible hostilities in Missouri that would put the Prophet in Liberty Jail and see thousands of Latter-day Saints driven from their homes, Sister Drusilla Hendricks and her invalid husband, James, who had been shot by enemies of the Church in the Battle of Crooked River, arrived with their children at a hastily shaped dugout in Quincy, Illinois, to live out the spring of that harrowing year.

Within two weeks the Hendrickses were on the verge of starvation, having only one spoonful of sugar and a saucerful of cornmeal remaining in their possession. In the great tradition of LDS women, Drusilla made mush out of it for James and the children, thus stretching its contents as far as she could make it go. When that small offering was consumed by her famished family, she washed everything, cleaned their little dugout as thoroughly as she could, and quietly waited to die.

Not long thereafter the sound of a wagon brought Drusilla to her feet. It was their neighbor Reuben Allred. He said he had a feeling they were out of food, so on his way into town he’d had a sack of grain ground into meal for them.

Shortly thereafter Alexander Williams arrived with two bushels of meal on his shoulder. He told Drusilla that he’d been extremely busy but the Spirit had whispered to him that “Brother Hendricks’ family is suffering, so I dropped everything and came [running].” <sup>17</sup>

May God, who has blessed all of us so mercifully and many of us so abundantly, bless us with one thing more. May he bless us to hear the often silent cries of the sorrowing and the afflicted, the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the poor. Indeed may he bless us to hear the whispering of the Holy Spirit when any neighbor anywhere “is suffering,” and to “drop everything and come running.” I pray in the name of the captain of the poor, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

*Gospel topics: Jesus Christ, Holy Ghost, Atonement, faith, generosity, neighbors*