THE HALF LOAF OF BREAD

Forty-year-old Valentina hadn’t eaten a crumb in more than six months because of a food shortage in the country of Georgia. Maya offered her some bread. “Please, take this,” she said. “You once walked 15 kilometers [nine miles] to help us. This is a gift that I want to give you, but you are refusing to accept it.”

Valentina finally relented. The women decided to divide the bread with a knife from the kitchen of the house church, where about 40 people gathered regularly to pray and read the Bible under the leadership of Valentina’s husband, Adventist Pastor Pavel Dmitrienko.

Partway home the couple met an elderly woman on a bridge, who asked, “Daughter, would you happen to have some bread?” Valentina immediately removed the half loaf from her purse and presented it to the woman.

The elderly woman wept as she accepted the bread. “Thank you,” she said, tears streaking her dirty cheeks. “I haven’t eaten in three days. You’ve saved me.”

“It was a real sacrifice—and it made us happier than ever before,” said Valentina years later in an interview. This week’s narrative will highlight the importance of the God-first principle. When adopted, it will lead us to imitate Jesus, considering others’ well-being before our own. By thus becoming God’s representatives, we are assured that all our needs will be provided by Him.*

*Adapted from a text of Andrew McChesney, https://www.adventistmission.org/%E2%80%8B-when-pastors-wife-gave-away-a-half-loaf-of-bread.
Write out 1 Kings 17:8–16 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out 1 Kings 17:13, 14. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
HEATHEN OFFERINGS VERSUS OFFERINGS TO GOD

The northern kingdom of Israel was deep into idolatry at the time of King Ahab. About 60 years earlier, in a political move intended to protect himself, Jeroboam, Israel’s first king, diverted the religious focus away from both Jerusalem and the worship of God in the temple—God’s storehouse. In place of it, he instituted the worship of idols, inaugurated multiple sites for worship, and instituted priests outside the tribe of Levi.

Omri, Ahab’s father, moved a step further to promote idolatry. Willing to secure a peace treaty with the Phoenicians, he married his son Ahab to Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon and worshipper of Baal. To please his wife, Ahab built a temple for Baal, and she brought a large entourage of Baal priests—in practice, making Baal’s worship the state religion.

Worshipers of Baal believed that he was the god of fertility, associated with rain and dew—crucial elements in providing for their maintenance. But by rejecting God, they were disconnecting themselves from the Source of life, the real Provider of all things.

This situation brought deep anxiety and despair to the heart of Elijah, who was a faithful worshipper of God. From his retreat in the mountains he decided to pray unceasingly and fervently for his nation, asking God to use any means, even judgments if necessary, to bring His people back to Himself.

God answered Elijah’s prayer and sent him to Ahab with news about judgment. There would be no dew or rain—the very blessings attributed to Baal—except at the word of the prophet, God’s representative. Taken by surprise, the king was unable to express any reaction. Meanwhile, at God’s command, the prophet ran to the brook Cherith, hiding himself there. He would drink water from the brook, and the Sustainer of all life ordered ravens to feed Elijah twice a day with bread and meat. As it happened to Elijah, there must be no worry about maintenance for those who are doing His work and are in the very place designed by Him for them.

After some months of drought, those who were formerly scoffing Elijah’s message had the chance to rethink their position. But they refused to humble themselves before “He who created nature [and who] controls her laws, and can make of them instruments of blessing or of destruction.” (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917], 125.)

Seen as the reason for the catastrophe, Ahab and Jezebel wildly searched for Elijah. They believed that by killing the prophet, their gods would be appeased. Unable to find him, the couple killed all of God’s prophets, except 100 whom Obadiah, the God-fearing governor of Ahab’s house, managed to hide and to feed in a cave.

Still willing to placate the gods, Baal’s priests kept offering costly sacrifices. But they were of no avail, and the drought became worse. Here is a marked difference between almost all pagan offerings and the regular offerings expected by God. While the first are frequently given before the expected blessing to earn merit or to appease their angered gods, regular offerings to the God of heaven are always given after the blessing, in grateful recognition of it. If there is no blessing, no tithe and no regular offering are expected, because our giving should always be a grateful response to His giving.
A KEY PRINCIPLE FOR LIFE

After the brook dried up, Elijah was told the place and the person to whom he should go. By selecting a widow to provide for him, the least likely person, God planned to highlight His power to provide, teaching lessons of trust to both.

Not being an Israelite, she was, however, a true follower of God, walking according to all the light that she had. So, it was not an uncommon thing that even during the drought, she would hand a glass of water to that thirsty traveler. When the prophet added a request for a morsel of bread, she told him that she did not have bread and was just planning to use the last handful of flour and the final amount of oil to prepare one for herself and for her son. After that, they were expecting to die. How frequently our expectations fall short of God’s possibilities!

God’s answer to her is also directed to all God’s children who are struggling with difficult issues. First, she was commanded not to fear (see 1 Kings 17:13). Even though fear is something natural to our decayed condition, it is frequently an indication of lack of trust. It is useless, as no amount of human anxiety can improve God’s already perfect love and care for us.

Afterward, the prophet said something that sounded a little strange. Even knowing that this was her last amount of flour and oil, Elijah instructed the widow to “make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son” (1 Kings 17:13). The sequence was unmistakable. He should receive the first morsel.

Was not Elijah behaving in a selfish manner? Was he not supposed to consider others first? As Elijah was God’s representative, and as God should always be considered the first (Rev. 22:13), she was supposed to give to the prophet the first part, as if it were given to God Himself.

“For thus says the Lord God of Israel” in the next verse (1 Kings 17:14) is a clear indication that God was the originator of that request. It is always to be blessed that we put Him first.

This special, sacrificial offering, given after God’s call, was a transaction of faith with God and not with the prophet. Sacrificial giving may be asked by God to individuals and become a test of faith (present truth), as in the case of Noah, the Zarephath widow, and the rich young ruler, just to mention three. The two first gave all in trust that God would provide something better for them (and He did!). On the other hand, by refusing to give at His request, the rich young ruler lost everything sometime later.

Before the widow could answer, Elijah assured her that if she would put God first, she would be provided by Him until rain would fall again (v. 14). Ellen G. White says that “those who in everything make God first and last and best, are the happiest people in the world.” (Ellen G. White, Messages to Young People [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1930], 38.)
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Deuteronomy 11:10–17
Deuteronomy 28:15, 23, 24
Revelation 3:19
2 Chronicles 7:13, 14
Matthew 6:33
Hebrews 13:2
Isaiah 58:10, 11
Matthew 10:40–42

What other verses come to mind in connection with 1 Kings 17:8–16?

Review your memorized verse from 1 Kings 17:8–16.
A Family Saved by the God First Principle

The Bible says Jesus is “the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (Rev. 22:13). As Creator and Owner of all things, He does not depend on any human estimation to have that preeminence, because He is inherently so. When we say that we want to “put God first,” we are saying in other words that we want to recognize His primacy, demonstrating it in practical ways.

But how do we do it? Among other things, we put Jesus first when we spend time in communion with Him every day (personal, familiar, or collective worship) before doing any other thing; when, like Daniel, we do not replace our scheduled time of worship by any another activity, even at the risk of life itself (Daniel 6); when God’s business (to benefit and to save people) has precedence over our own businesses (to provide for ourselves); when we formally (and informally also) seek His sanction and blessing before becoming one flesh with our opposite-gender life companion (spouse); when we renounce any different sexual inclination we may have and accept God’s pattern of opposite-gender love relationships; when we keep the Sabbath, even at the risk of losing income; when we pray, seeking for guidance, before any purchase or business transaction; or when, in trust, we return the tithe and regular offerings before any other expense is met.

Those who are serious about following Jesus know that the recognition of His primacy will be reflected in the sequence of events in their daily schedule. What comes first determines what we value. When speaking about material needs, Jesus assures that “all these things will be added” to those who seek “first” His kingdom and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33). Those who think that they seek His kingdom and His justice, but do not do it “first,” should not expect God’s supernatural provision in the same way. Like the Laodiceans, they may be badly mistaken about their religious experience.

As we saw before, returning to God the regular offering after any income is a practical way to put Him first. It is a reminder that God should receive the first and the best part of all that we receive from Him, before any expense is met. Not that we are able to benefit or to feed Him. On the contrary, by our being regularly reminded of His goodness, our faith is strengthened, and we are challenged to trust Him more as the Provider, producing emotional rest and peace of mind.

The Zarephath widow’s narrative confirms in a practical way one of God’s expectations about our giving patterns while forwarding His kingdom and supporting His workers on the earth. It indicates that a special blessing is reserved for those who not only sacrifice something to honor the Lord, but do it first, even before looking for their own needs. It is an exercise of trust, a decision to live under Jesus’ umbrella.

As in the case of the widow, putting God first will especially affect the way one relates to others. When someone accepts the Lordship of Jesus, His missionary service for the good of others also becomes a joyful priority. The “me after you” principle, practiced by all true follower of Christ, was also adopted by such patriarchs and prophets as Abraham, Isaac, and John the Baptist.

When Christ’s missionary work in favor of the salvation of others becomes the priority in life, all the disciples’ needs will be provided, as in the case of the Zarephath widow. “If men will become channels through which heaven’s blessing can flow to others, the Lord will keep the channel supplied.” (Ellen G. White, Counsels on Stewardship [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1940], 36.)
TRUST IN LITTLE THINGS

The coming of Elijah on the very day when the widow feared that she must give up the struggle to sustain life tested to the utmost her faith in the power of the living God to provide for her necessities. But even in her dire extremity, she bore witness to her faith by a compliance with the request of the stranger who was asking her to share her last morsel with him. (Ellen G. White, Counsels on Stewardship, 173.)

No greater test of faith than this could have been required. The widow had hitherto treated all strangers with kindness and liberality. Now, regardless of the suffering that might result to herself and child, and trusting in the God of Israel to supply her every need, she met this supreme test of hospitality by doing “according to the saying of Elijah.” (E. G. White, Counsels on Stewardship, 173, 174.)

And in return, her life and that of her son were preserved. And to all who, in time of trial and want, give sympathy and assistance to others more needy, God has promised great blessing. He has not changed. His power is no less now than in the days of Elijah. No less sure now than when spoken by our Saviour is the promise, “He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward.” Matthew 10:41. (Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917], 131, 132.)

To His faithful servants today Christ says, “He that receiveth you receiveth Me, and he that receiveth Me receiveth Him that sent Me.” No act of kindness shown in His name will fail to be recognized and rewarded. And in the same tender recognition Christ includes even the feeblest and lowest of the family of God. “Whosoever shall give to drink,” He says, “unto one of these little ones”—those who are as children in their faith and their knowledge of Christ—“a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.” Matthew 10:40, 42. (E. G. White, Prophets and Kings, 132.)

From hours spent with God He [Jesus] came forth morning by morning, to bring the light of heaven to men. Daily he received a fresh baptism of the Holy Spirit. In the early hours of the new day the Lord awakened Him from His slumbers, and His soul and His lips were anointed with grace, that He might impart to others. His words were given Him fresh from the heavenly courts, words that He might speak in season to the weary and oppressed. (Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons [Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1900], 139.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How do you explain that a God of love, who claims to respect free choice, chastises those who leave His ways (Rev. 3:19)? How can this be true love?

What is the devil’s intention in leading people to believe that as a God of love that He never chastises and neither blesses in a special way those who are faithful?

As courage is a virtue that depends on fear to exist, how would you define courage?

What can you do the night before to make it easier to put God first every morning? What are your plans for your devotional time?

What measures would you suggest to a friend that asks you how to put God first in their financial life? What should someone do to be able to return tithe and regular offerings before any expenses are met?