

God's Abundant Generosity

Introduction

When was the last time you came across an example of *crazy generosity*? I read about an act of crazy generosity just the other day and it warmed my heart.

A man in the state of New Hampshire in the US, shocked the staff of the Stumble Inn Bar and Grill, when he left them a 16,000 dollar tip after ordering a couple of hot dogs, some fries and drinks... Now, I can be blown away by a good hot dog as much as the next guy, but there is no hot dog on this planet that is 16,000 dollars good. What this guy did was crazy generous. One of the waitresses who worked that night was quoted as saying: "I've been doing this a very long time and I never thought anything like this would happen to me. It's just been a really rough year for all of us."

We don't live in a tipping culture, but in the US, waiters and waitresses rely on tips to supplement their minimal wages. Big tips therefore, make a big difference. Particularly in the economically uncertain times of covid.

Can you imagine someone being that generous to you? Do ever dream of being on the receiving end of that kind of generosity? Sometimes Ruth and I will dream together of a scenario in which our landlord, out of the goodness of his heart, simply decides to give us the house we live in.... We talk about what changes we would make, the things we would knock down or fix up. How awesome would it be to experience that kind of generosity?

Now while most of us will never come across such a crazy generous tipper or landlord, each of us has the opportunity tonight to encounter someone far better and far more generous. That's what this passage is doing for us tonight. It is revealing to us the almighty God who is both able and willing to be crazy generous to desperate and needy people. So what I'll do is look at this story in three parts – (1) the Huge desperation, (2) the Huge Provision and (3) the Huge salvation – and then we'll think about how we too can be saved and changed by God's great generosity in Jesus.

1. Enormous Desperation.

First, let's consider the enormous desperation of the unnamed widow in this passage. Read verse 1 with me:

4 The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

During my bible college years, one of the messages that was repeatedly given to ministers in training was the reminder to keep loving our wives. They did this because being the wife of a minister can be tough. They can feel the weight and stress of their husband's responsibility. Their household income may be lower than it might have otherwise been. The husband is often out a number of nights a week – which means she has to do the part of the night time routine with kids all on her own. Being a minister's wife can get tough and that's why we were repeatedly called to keep loving them.

Now, if being the wife of a minister can be tough in 2021, imagine the rough ride this ministry-man's wife may well have had in the time of Elisha.

She was married to one of the few faithful prophets in Israel. I can only image she would have felt the stress of seeing her husband pressured and persecuted for his faith during the evil reigns of Ahab and Jezebel. We were told back in 1 Kings 18 that Obadiah had to hide 100 of Israel's prophets in caves to keep them from being killed by Jezebel. Perhaps her husband had needed to go into hiding for some time. Perhaps his ministry meant that he was away for long periods of time. On top of these real possibilities we get the sense there was a real financial stress in her household. It would seem from v.1 that her husband had to borrow money to keep his family going. Now maybe he had a plan to pay it back. Maybe he had some extra work lined up that he was sure would pay the bills... But whatever plan he had, it comes to nothing when he himself dies.

And so, with the death of her husband, this woman, who probably hadn't had the easiest run, now finds herself in total desperation. Not only does she have the grief of losing her beloved husband, who in ancient times would have been the source of her provision. She also has the grief of thinking her two sons will now be sold into slavery to pay off the household debt.

And you can really feel her desperation can't you. We're not told that she simply *speaks* with Elisha – She “cries” out to him. And you can feel in her words a raw grief and even some sense of injustice at the whole situation.

It's like she's saying: Elisha, “my husband was a good man who feared the Lord. You know this! But now this!? Now, I have to see him die, now I have to watch my boys become slaves, now I have to become completely destitute!?” “May God help us!”

In her complete desperation this widow cries out to God by crying out to His prophet Elisha. And in a beautiful display of compassion, God generously provides. Which is what we see next.

2. Huge Provision.

Second, Huge Provision.

Most of us know the disappointing feeling that comes when we get less than what we had hoped for. The packet of chips that turns out to be only 1/3 full. The QLD holiday that gets washed out by a week's worth of rain. The medical treatment that provides only minimal relief.

We don't like it when we get less than we hoped for, but we love it when we get more than we had hoped for. I experienced this a couple of months ago, when a generous friend from offered to give us some firewood that he had cut up on his country property.

Now, I had expected that we would get whatever wood was left over from what his own family had needed themselves. But when he arrived, I discovered that he had had filled his enormous tandem trailer full of wood just for us. He had made a trip to and from the country, just for us. I couldn't believe how much he was giving us. It would keep us warm for ages. But, the generosity didn't stop there. After he had helped to unload it all, he then proceeded to give me this brand-new wood carrying sling that helps you to carry small loads into the house without the mess. I was blown away by the generous provision.

I had started the day with a few dodgy pieces of scrap wood, I ended the day with a mountain of pre-cut wood premium wood and a new carry sling. So now, every time I drive into a

servo and see those small bags of firewood selling for around 13 bucks a bag, it reminds me of the huge and generous provision from my friend.

Isn't it just awesome when your expectations are blown out of this world. And that's what happens here. This woman seeks God's help in her desperation, and she gets a lesson in just how abundantly generous the true God is. She starts the day with nothing, she ends the day with everything.

Read with me from verse 2:

² Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a small jar of olive oil." [so basically, nothing at all.]

³ Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. ⁴ Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

The narrator isn't really interested in telling us why the woman is told to shut the door. So it's hard to be sure. But maybe it was simply God's way of simply highlighting to the woman and her sons that they, and they alone, were the focus of His care and attention in this moment.

Now did you notice in verse 3 that Elisha expects God to be abundantly generous to this widow. "Don't ask for just a few jars" – "Trust me, I know God, and he's not going to be stingy – get as many jars as you can. He will fill them all. And in an act of faith, the widow does what Elisha says. In fact, she follows his instructions to a tee. Verse 5 tells us that:

⁵ She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring.

And I love her faith here. She is told of God's generosity and she believes it! There's no "too good to be true" hesitation with this woman. At no point do you get the sense that she is ready to quit. At no point does she say, "Well alright then, I'm sure God's done just about enough. I don't want to bother him any more." No, when every square inch of the house is full with jars of oil, still she asks for another empty! It's only when her son says to her: "mum, there's not an empty jar left", that the oil stops flowing (v.5).

This widow started the day with nothing (just a little oil in a little jar). She ended the day with everything. Wall to wall with jars of all shapes and sized full to the brim with oil.

It's similar to the way Jesus abundantly provides lunch for 5000 people out of a little boy's play lunch. God transforms nothing (or next to nothing) into a great big something.

It's a beautiful picture of both God's power and God's compassion. God is not short of resources. He has the power to bring something from nothing. And God is not short of love. He sees this widow's plight, He has compassion on her, He abundantly provides for her.

Now, we'll think in a moment how this act of generosity points us forward to God's greater provision in Jesus. But it's worth remembering at this point God's great ability and willingness to provide for the daily needs of His people. The God of this widow is the God of us.

That is why Jesus teaches us to pray "Give us today our daily bread" (Matt 6:11). Our heavenly father cares for us, and listens to our prayers for provision.

That's also why Paul reassures the Philippian believers in Phil 4:19:

¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Our God is not stingy. Our God is not powerless. Our God is abundantly generous and loving to his children in need. And I suspect many of you have tasted of God's goodness in this way. The provision of work at just the right time. The visit of a friend at just the right time. The delivery of a meal, just when you need it. The provision of grace and endurance that you needed to get you through a particular trial. God is powerful, God is loving, God is generous. We simply need to be like the woman and keep asking Him and trusting Him to help us.

Huge Salvation.

So, we've seen the widow's huge desperation. We've seen God's huge provision. Now we see the full glory of the widow's huge salvation.

Read with me the final verse. Verse 7:

⁷ She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

Sell. Pay. Live.

God's marvellous generosity saves this woman and her sons.

Now remember, this woman began this day with a double grief – not only the grief of losing her husband/provider. But also the grievous realisation that she was going to lose her son's to slavery.

But did you notice that this woman ends this day with a double salvation. Not only is she able to pay off the creditor's debts and save her sons from slavery. She (and her boys) are able to *keep* living off the rest of the proceeds. God has saved her from imminent disaster. God has saved her from future disaster. God has delivered to this no name widow, a huge salvation. Within a day, her world goes from huge desperation to huge salvation.

One of the movies I grew up on was Oliver! - the 1968 adaptation of Charles Dickens novel based around the story of Oliver twist. As many of you may know, Oliver was born and raised in poverty and eventually gets caught up with a bunch of pickpockets in London. But in a remarkable display of kindness and generosity Oliver is taken out of that world and adopted into the home of the wealthy Mr. Brownlow. The difference in Oliver's two worlds is like day and night – grimy, stinky, corrupt. Clean, safe, secure. The difference is so stark that He breaks out into song: Who will buy this wonderful feeling?.

This story captures so wonderfully how good it is to go from a life of desperation to a life of provision. All because someone has simply been so generous.

Can you imagine the wonderful feeling this widow must have had when she saw all the oil and heard those words: “Sell, pay, live.” That is something worth singing about.

It surely would have been a more wonderful feeling that receiving a 16,000 tip.
It surely would have been a more wonderful feeling than being gifted a 4 bedroom house in Watsonia.

This even trumps Olive Twist.

Yet here’s the thing about this passage. While it gives us a beautiful picture of God’s huge generosity and compassion, in many ways, this passage simply sets the scene, or gives us a preview of the greater generosity and compassion that God pours out in His provision of Jesus to desperate and needy sinners. If you want to experience the supremely wonderful feeling of a saved and changed life you will find it now in Jesus. He is the One who offers to provide us with the crazy generosity we all long to receive.

God save this woman from financial ruin by paying her debt with oil. Jesus saves us from spiritual ruin by paying our debt with his blood.

You see, God, in His word tells us that there’s a greater *spiritual* debt that we all have incurred. The debt of guilt due to our sin. God has found each of us guilty in his sight for the multitude of ways we have ignored Him as our creator and broken his commandments to love Him and love one another as He wants us to. It’s sometimes hard for us to fathom, but our sinful rejection of the Holy God, puts us in an more desperate position than the woman of this passage. We cannot pay our debt of guilt. And left to ourselves we would God’s just judgment for sin which is death – eternal death in a judgment the Bible refers to as Hell.

But the good news is that, that God doesn’t leave us in our desperation as sinners. Amazingly, He treats sinners with the same compassionate and love as He treats this widow. Out of his abundant generosity He gives us his Son Jesus, who pays our debt of guilt by taking upon himself our sin, and dying for it at the cross. He pays the penalty of death. We are given the promise of life. Paul expresses God’s merciful generosity and kindness to sinners like this in Titus 3:

*³ At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. [Desperately trapped in sin and the debt of guilt]. ⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us ****generously**** through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life*

Huge desperation due to sin. Huge and generous provision in Jesus. Huge salvation as we see Jesus washing away our sin, justifying us in God’s sight, and giving us the sure hope of eternal life. What a wonderful feeling!

If the widow ever needed a reminder about how much God generously loved and saved her all she would need to do is cast her eyes to all the jars oil left on her shelves and leaning up

against her walls. If you ever need a reminder about how much God has loved you and saved you all you need to do is cast your thoughts to the cross. All you need to do is think about the generosity of God that would lead him to give of his beloved Son for sinful people like us.

Huge desperation. Huge Provision. Huge Salvation.

Final Application.

Trust in the generous God.

So, what does all this mean for us? Well, the first thing it means, is that we put our trust in the generous God – who richly provides for us in Jesus.

We need to be like this widow, recognise our desperate state, and cry out to God for mercy. And we know from this passage, and from the good news of Jesus, that God is compassionate and generous. He hears the cry of desperate people. And he responds. Romans 10:13:

Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

God is not stingy with His salvation. He is generous. You just need to ask Him. And if you haven't done that yet, but would like to find out more about what it means to trust and follow Jesus, come and speak with me. Or sign up to our next Christianity explored course which starts on the 20th of this month. It is a good course that unpacks the extent of God's generosity to you in Jesus.

So that's the first thing I'd say. This passage, points us to God's generous and ultimate provision in Christ, and calls us to be put our trust in Him for salvation from our desperate state of sin.

Love like the Generous God.

But I think this passage also teaches to *love* like the generous God – particularly in our attitude to those who are in desperate need.

Throughout the OT God's people are repeatedly called to love like the God they claimed to follow. The prophet Isaiah says to Israel (Is 1:17):

Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.^[a]

Take up the cause of the fatherless;

plead the case of the widow.

Be like the compassionate and generous God you know. And it's the same message for Christians in the NT. Think about how James defines what God sees as "pure" religion – that is, a God-honouring life. James 1:27:

²⁷ *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*

How do we thank God for the generosity He has shown to us in Christ – One big way, is by showing God-like, Christ-like generosity to the needy and desperate in our church and community. If God cares about the no-name widow, we should care about the no-name widow. If God cares about the plight of fatherless boys, we should care about that too.

Now those who are in desperate need in our day aren't always going to be widows and fatherless children, but sometimes they will be.

I was distressed to discover this week that an elderly widow in our street, someone whom I've shared the gospel with, had a fall in her house, was taken to hospital and has been in a state of distress and confusion ever since. The message is that she will not be returning to our street. What should I do?

Generous love says that I don't just look out for her when I see her on our street, when it's convenient for me, but also when it's inconvenient. Generous love calls me to give of my time and energy to track down a contact number, organise a hospital visit, and go and see her. If my God loves the widow in distress, I must love the widow in distress. If my saviour gave of his life for me. I can give of my time and energy for her.

Who is it for you? It won't always be a widow. There are many other people who may be in desperate circumstances or simply need a good dose of generosity. I was encouraged recently by someone's interest in helping out with a particular child with special needs in Sunday school. That is an act of generous love to the child and their parents.

But there are other needy people:

- Those in our number who feel distressed by a particular physical or mental illness.
- Those who feel trapped in a horrible job.
- Those who feel trapped in a challenging marriage or relationship.
- Those who feel anxious about their finances and how they will pay the rent.

As you keep getting to know people, as you ask the occasional deeper question – you will come across desperate people. You may be one of these people (and if you are, please let us know). The generous love of God to this desperate widow should shape our love to those who are desperate in our midst. Sometimes that might require us to be generous with our time (driving someone to an appointment), sometimes our energy (chatting with someone when we just feel a bit tired). Sometimes our money or other material resources. Love like the generous God.

I'll close by reflecting on one last example.

Conclusion

In the first year of the two-year traineeship I did at church 11 years ago, I remember being quite strapped for cash. Being a ministry trainee isn't exactly a lucrative endeavour. And that's why I was so encouraged by the particular generosity shown to me by kind-hearted person following church one evening. This particular person was actually a missionary we supported as a church. He and his family were home on furlough and he had picked up a little bit of extra labouring work while he was back. He came up to me after the service and simply said, "hi Chris, I've earned a bit more money than I expected this week and I'd like you to have it." Then he put 50 bucks in my hand. Now that might not sound like heaps to you, but it was to me, and I suspect it probably was to him and his family as well.

That moment has always served as a wonderful example of Christ-like generous love.

How does that kind of God-honouring generous love become present in our lives? I think it happens as we know personally the generous God of this passage. The God who reveals Himself primarily in Jesus. The God who had mercy on our huge desperation. Who gave his Son to be our Huge provision. And allowed us, through faith in Jesus, to receive a huge salvation. Let's pray.