Test of Generosity

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Father in heaven, we want to thank You today for Your loving kindness, and we ask Your presence now as we look in Your Word. Teach us to be faithful. Teach us, God, how You would want us to use the gifts, the funds, the talents that You have blessed us with. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I want to share with you today that when I was a kid, I *hated* pop quizzes. I prefer the take-home exams, where I can take it home, mull it over, come up with the right answers, and then come back to school. The pop quizzes didn't give me that much time, so I had to come up with an answer quickly.

There is a basic premise in regards to stewardship, and it is this: Before God can bless you with a lot, He has to entrust you with a little to see whether you would pass the test of generosity. Now, if you obey, you pass the test, and then you can receive the added blessing. However, if you disobey and you fail the test, you forfeit the added blessing. Obedience. Obedience is like a bridge that connects God's promise to His provision.

There's a young lady who told me a story recently. It was very intriguing to me. She got up one day as usual, went to her job, just eager to do her part. When she got there, the inevitable happened. She got a pink slip. No one likes to know that they are no longer employed. But for an entire year this young lady could not find a job. However, she determined to stay faithful in her giving, so she paid tithe and offering on her unemployment check. Whenever she got a gift card, she paid her tithe and offering. If she did some jobs, she gave tithe and offering. And she noted to me that she was *never, ever* without gas in her car. She was able to pay her bills, and really wanted for nothing during the entire year.

In the Scripture, whenever God speaks, our only recourse is to obey because His Word is as good as His action. It never, ever returns void. Now, Elijah understood the importance of the word, and so in the Scripture we have a very intriguing passage in I Kings, chapter 17, and I'll read it to you. It says: "And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years except at my word. Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, Get away from here. Turn eastward and hide by the brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan, and it shall be that you shall drink from the brook. And I have commanded the ravens to feed you there. So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and stayed by the brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he drank from the brook.

"And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, beause there had been no rain in the land. Then the word of the Lord came to him saying, Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you. So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, Please, bring me a little water in a cup that I may drink. And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, Please, bring me a morsel of bread in your hand. So she said, As the Lord your God lives, I do not have bread, only a handful of flour in a bin and a little oil in a jar. And see, 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 make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me, and afterwards make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth. So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah. And she and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the Lord which he spoke by Elijah.”

So please note from your Scripture, verses 2, 8, and 14 says, “the word of the Lord came.” “The word of the Lord came.” There’s a three-step pattern on three different occasions in this passage. There is a promise, a test of obedience, and provision. A promise, a test of obedience, and provision. Elijah had a pop quiz. Test one was found in verses 2 to 6. He received a promise of bread. His bread and water shall be sure. Ravens will come to feed you at Cherith. Now, I don’t know about you, but it will be hard for me to get up out of my house, out of a warm, cozy bed, and go live by a brook. But Elijah never hesitated. Obedience was critical. He followed the word, and immediately he went to the brook. And don’t you know it, when he got to that brook, there was provision waiting for him. Ravens—winged waiters, I call them—brought him bread and meat, not once but twice per day. And the brook provided water.

Checkmark: Elijah passed his first pop quiz. But something happened one day. He went to the brook and it dried up. What do you do when the provision that God has given you suddenly disappears? Introducing pop quiz number two. It’s found in verses 9 to 11. There Elijah received another promise—bread and water again. It will be sure. A widow will be able to feed you at Zarephath. Now, that’s a little better than a bird! So what did Elijah do? He didn’t question God. Immediately he obeyed. He followed the word and went to the city of Zarephath.

When you have experienced God’s faithfulness in your past, it makes it a lot easier for you to be confident in assuring others of God’s blessing to them if they also obey His command. Encouragement, fueled by experience, is a powerful motivational tool. When tithers share their experience of God’s blessing, it can then motivate others to be obedient as well. So there was a promise, he obeyed, and sure enough, there was provision. Just as obedience to God was linked to His provision in the past, here obedience to Elijah’s request was also linked to provision for him and for this widow. And *your* obedience should have the very same impact on others.

Well, is that the only pop quiz? No, there is a pop quiz number three. The widow had to experience God’s faithfulness, and in verses 12 to 16 she received a similar promise: bread and water shall be sure. Supply will not be exhausted. Rain *will* come again. And the little jar of oil and the little bowl of flour will never be exhausted. Now that’s a test of faith! She did not know this prophet, meeting him for the first time. But he said, “This is the word of the Lord,” and that might have caught her attention. So there’s a promise from God. What will she do? She followed what Elijah did—immediate obedience. She followed the word, and she put *first things first.* Giving Elijah his portion *first* was really a test of faith.

See, it takes faith to give out of your own state of need. But there was that promise, and she obeyed, and sure enough, there was provision. Elijah was fed, and her vessel of flour and that little jar of oil *never, never* was exhausted. It was never empty.

So we have pop quizzes, three of them in this chapter. There was always a promise, they had to obey, and then experience the provision of God. Is that the end? I don't think so, because all Scripture is given to us for our instruction as well, so there is a test, a pop quiz, for you, the listeners. It is found in Malachi, chapter 3, 10-11, and I will read that in your hearing: "Bring all the tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, and test me now in this, says the Lord of hosts." (It seems as though God is willing to have His own pop quiz.) "Test me now, says the Lord of hosts, and see if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour out for you such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sake so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field, says the Lord of hosts. And all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land, says the Lord of hosts."

Obedience. Obedience is still the bridge that links God's promises to His provision. And you must cross that bridge by faith, choosing to believe God's word above your worries, and giving back to God *first.* Now, that may be a little challenging for some of us, but take comfort in the assurance of Malachi 3:6 where He says, "I, the Lord, do not change." "I do not change." If God honored this pattern for Elijah, and He honored it for the widow, He will also honor it just for you. So in your life there will be a promise: your bread and water will be sure. God will open up the windows of heaven and will pour you out blessings that there will not be room enough for you to receive it. However, in order to receive it, there must be obedience. Be faithful in returning your tithe and your offering, and prove God, test Him now in these things. I guarantee you, as sure as His promise is, if you are faithful in obeying His word, there will be provision for you. He promises a productive and fruitful harvest, because the devourer will be *restrained.*

One of my favorite, favorite lines, found in *Counsels on Stewardship*, p. 90, reads like this: "Oh, what gracious, full, complete assurances are given to us if we will only do what God requires us to do. Take hold of this matter as though you believe the Lord will do just as He has promised. Let us venture upon God's Word, and in simplicity of faith, walk out upon His promise." It's time to cross the bridge. Go from promise to obedience, and certainly you will find God's faithfulness in His provision for you.

One of my favorite songs is "Standing on the Promises of God." He's a *faithful God.* He *will not lie.* As a matter of fact, He *cannot* lie. God will do what He said He will do. Be faithful to Him, and He will be faithful to you.

Great story, awesome testimony, but that really is just in the Scripture. Is there a live testimony that we can share that speaks to the same issue of promise, obedience and provision? I'm glad you asked. Yes, there is. As a pastor, one of the things that I have to deal with constantly is encouraging my members to be good and faithful stewards. I want to introduce you to a young lady who I will call Miss D.

Now, one Sabbath I shared in church the importance of being faithful to God and believing His promises that He will provide. At the end of the sermon, Miss D came up to me and with tears in her eyes said, "Pastor, I hear you, I know what you're saying is true. But can I tell you, my money is a wreck. I don't have enough to give. I can't pay my bills. How can I be faithful when I don't have enough?" I took her back to the Scripture again and put *her* to the test, and I said to Miss D, "Now, I will read you this Scripture again, and tell me if you believe God."

So we read the Malachi Scripture, verse 10, "Bring all the tithe into the storehouse and prove Me now, said God, I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour you out a blessing." And she smiled. "That

sounds good, Pastor, but you still haven't shared with me what can I do to increase my giving. How can I increase the money that I have right now?" And I said to her, "OK, let's cross this bridge by faith." So we agreed first that we will start with her budget, looking at where she might cut back and save, and then we will pray over her budget and ask God to help her to be faithful.

As we prayed, I shared, "God, please, give her just a little bit of Your provision so that she will learn to trust You more." So we parted ways. She went back to her job on Monday morning, and she was continuing the prayer herself. "God, just show me a little bit of Your provision." When she got home that evening, she got a phone call from her telephone company, and they indicated something strange. She had an overpayment on her bill! And she said, "Are you sure this is my account?" And the person on the other end said, "Yes, this is your account, and we will send you back a reimbursement for the overpayment." She was so excited that in that moment God showed her just a little bit of His provision.

After we talked about that I said to her, "Now, it's on you. Obedience is key. It is the bridge that you must cross for God's promise to connect with His provision." Well, she took God at His Word, and that Sabbath she showed me her tithe envelope and said, "Pastor, I'm determined to be faithful in my giving." We went along for a couple of weeks, and one day *my* phone rang. And there was someone just screaming on the other end, "Pastor, Pastor, you would not believe it!" And I said, "Who is it?"

"This is Miss D, and I want to share with you my testimony real quick!" She had just been called in to the supervisor's office, and don't you know, Miss D was offered a promotion that she had not even applied for. God was faithful now in opening the windows of heaven and really pouring out the blessings. Well, that only encouraged Miss D even more, and she determined to step up her giving. So now she was going to be faithful not only in her tithe, but she added a liberal offering every Sabbath. And she said to me, "Pastor, I don't even have to ask anymore. I *know* that God will be faithful, and one of the areas that He *will* provide in is, He will bless me with my own house, soon to come."

What a challenge! What was I supposed to do? Suppose God wasn't ready for her to have a house then. But we had come too far on this faith journey, and I said to her, "Let us do what we have done before. We will seek God's promise. We will obey His Word, and we will *expect* His provision." Now, that was over a year ago, and Miss D has been faithfully giving her tithe and a liberal offering, and expecting that God will do something miraculous for her one day.

And God did! He always comes through! It was just three weeks ago that we had a major celebration and housewarming for Miss D. God had provided for her just the home she needed, and she shared with others, "He did it because He promised He would." She was faithful in obeying His Word, and God always provides.

So, isn't that miraculous? Doesn't it seem sometimes that God does this for so many other people? And what about me? Someone might be thinking right now, *What about me? Will that apply to me? Will God provide if I sacrificially give?* I want to encourage you today to take God at His Word. Prove Him, He says, and He *will, He will* provide for you.

So, there *is* another pop quiz. Pop quiz number four. That is just for you.

God, we thank you for Your promise. We thank You that you give us faith to obey You, and we thank You that Your provision is always there for us. Bless us and keep us as faithful stewards, and help us to encourage others in the same pathway of faithfulness. These blessings we thank you for in Jesus's name, Amen.