

# MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

## PUT MONEY IN ITS PLACE | LETTERS FROM MY FUTURE SELF

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Alright, well today we're wrapping up this series called *Letters To My Future Self*. A couple of weeks ago I said that, really, this series came out of a time in which, at the end of last year, I just sat down and I was kind of thinking through some things that I needed to work on in my own life and I thought, "You know, if I were to receive a letter from my future self, what are some of the things that I might hear from myself based upon what some of my current and ongoing struggles often are?"

And, honestly, with the list that I came up with, this would have been way too long of a series. So I had to narrow it down to three. And that's really where this series came out of: What do I need to hear?

In that sense, this has been a very personal and somewhat of a vulnerable series because I just know that these are three things at the top of the list that I need to hear. I'm just trusting that probably a fair number of you need to hear them as well.

So, if I were to receive a letter from my future self, I think, undoubtedly, I would have something to say to myself about anxiety. That was week one. And then I know for sure that I would need to talk to myself about learning to forgive others so that I am not entrapped with a bitter heart. And Ryan did a great job with that last week.

And this third thing made it on the list as well. We're going to talk about it today as we wrap this up. And if I were to put this in letter form, it might say this:

"Dear Aaron,

Please put money in its place."

Now, I want to start today's teaching with a personal confession. Here's my personal confession. Periodically throughout my adult life, I have stressed and worried about money and personal finances. And I'm just going to go out on a limb here and say that I'm not the only one.

According to the American Psychological Association, about 75 percent of us stress about money and personal finances on a regular basis. Now, here's the thing. It's regardless of what you make.

I used to think... When I was a younger man, newly married, making a whopping \$19,000 a year (you know she married me for my money), I had all of this student loan debt and rent for the first time. And I was thinking to myself, "One day it won't always be this way

because I'll get a raise. I'll get a promotion. We won't be in this state. And once I get to a certain income level, then I can relax. Then I can enjoy life. Then – then! – I can finally be generous.”

But not only has that not necessarily been personally true, it's also not statistically true. There is an economist by the name of H. F. Clark who came up with something known as the **25% rule**.

Some of you might recognize this. It's the idea that most of us say, “We would achieve financial peace,” whatever that means for you, “if we just made about 25 percent more. If we made 25 percent more regardless of what our current income level is now, then we would finally relax. Then we would finally enjoy life. Then we would finally be generous. If we just made 25 percent more.”

And that is statistically not true because, as many of you can probably attest, what ends up happening is that the chains move. You get a raise, you get a promotion, and then you have a tendency to ratchet up your lifestyle with the raise: more kids, more responsibility, a recession or two, inflation and you're like, “Man, I'm making way more than I thought that I ever would, why is that financial peace continues to evade me?”

And there is an economic reason for that. But there is also a spiritual reason for that. So, here's what I've learned and am continuing to learn about myself. And it's simply this statement right here:

### **If my financial world is unhealthy in any way...**

If I'm upside down financially in any way, what does that mean? Well, for starters:

- Too much debt

Most of us would go, “Yeah, that's a no brainer. I've got too much debt. I'm not going to be at financial peace.”

- Not saving enough

The Bible teaches in Proverbs that a wise man saves an inheritance for his children's children, which requires at least some sort of intentional forecasting and a savings plan.

Here's another one:

- Saving too much

And that leads to the next one:

- Not willing or unable to be generous

I'm not willing or I'm unable to be generous. What about this one right here?

- “Stealth” stinginess

Do you know what I'm talking about there? Stealth stinginess happens when you go to lunch with a friend and the waitress comes over and says, "One check or two?" And for a second you're like, "Two?" You're like waiting for the other person to go. You're really kind of hoping maybe he will pay because you just had an unexpected bill due. I guess I'm the only one. It's really quiet in here. Alright? You guys are like, "We never do that, pastor. We're judging you."

Maybe you're just;

- Stressed about it all the time

What about this?

- Causing arguments with your spouse or loved ones

Is it causing arguments with your spouse or loved ones on a regular basis? That's an indication of being unhealthy. I'll just give you a couple more:

- Tempting you to do unethical or dishonest things

Has it tempted you to do some unethical or dishonest things? And the last thing:

- Taking on more work/trips/projects to "provide" for the family you never see

Maybe you're taking on more work/trips and projects to provide for the family you're seeing less and less of.

I would imagine some of you could add a couple of things to that list. And if any of those are true, that might be a signal or an indication that your financial world is unhealthy or upside down. And it leads to the rest of the statement:

**It's just a matter of time before it begins to effect/reflect the condition of your heart.**

It's just a matter of time before it begins to effect, or you could say it this way, it's actually reflecting the condition of your heart. And this is why Jesus would say these words in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 21. Jesus would say:

*"For where your treasure is,"*

That word *treasure* is just the Bible's word for money. When Jesus said that He wasn't talking about a little chest with gold coins at the end of a rainbow. He was talking about money. That's the Bible's word. He said:

Wherever your money is, *"there your heart will be also."* Matthew 6:21 (NIV)

Jesus knew this really important truth. My bank account and the condition of my heart are intimately linked together. And for a long time I didn't see the connection between the two. I thought, "Well, if my heart is in a healthy space, then my personal finances will

be in a healthy space.” Jesus would say that it is the other way around. If your finances are in a healthy space, then your heart is going to be in a healthy space.

Now listen. I’m not talking about greed. I’m talking about misplaced trust. In other words, in who or what am I looking to give me this sense of peace that I’m longing for in my heart?

I can remember when I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, very vividly, this conversation that I had with my dad. And this is where it began for me, when I began to put my trust in money rather than the provider of the money.

I was talking to my dad. My dad, at the time, drove a 1987 Ford F150 pickup truck. It was baby blue with chrome wheels. This thing was so sweet. I loved it so much.

And I remember I was riding with my dad. We were going somewhere. My dad had actually had a couple of business deals that went down in the 80s that had gotten him into some financial challenges. And so he had to make some difficult decisions. And one of those was that he needed to trade that truck in and get something less expensive.

And I remember that was the day he told me. I was so bummed, “Dad, don’t get rid of the truck. I love this truck so much.” And I’ll never forget what he said because it lodged itself not only in my sub-conscience, but in my heart. He said, “Well, Aaron. It’s either the truck or groceries.”

And I remember at the time I didn’t even know what to do with that. It was something that impacted me so much that I sort of buried it. I sort of snuffed it. I didn’t bring it up or think about it until I’m a young man, in my 20s, newly married, all kinds of financial obligations. And that thought re-emerged in my heart once again.

I remember thinking to myself, “I never, ever want to be in that position.” So, what happened is I just put way too much emphasis... Here’s what... It was subtle. I thought to myself, “I need to be the one to provide.”

Now, listen. You and I are not... It’s a noble thing to want to provide for your family and future, but we’ve got to understand this. We are not provider. God is provider, we are stewards of what He provides.

So, God is owner. I am manager. God entrusts us with a certain amount of resources, whatever that may be, and then we’ve got to order them right or this can end up happening in our lives:

**Whatever you and I put our trust in, by definition, becomes a god.**

Whatever you and I ultimately put our trust in, by definition, that’s a god. And so, when we begin to put our trust in our resources, what ends up happening is, “Well, it’s up to me to provide.” And we end up finding our...

Here's a big one. We find our sense of security in our bank account.

Anybody like me? You've got this number in your bank account. It's sort of subjective, and when your bank account balance drops below that line, you start to feel uneasy. It's this idea of, "I've begun to put my trust in this amount." We find our sense of security and identity...

Now, here's the problem with all of that. Only God can give us a sense of security and identity. Only He can provide. And I think that in times of economic crises, like what we're in right now... Are we in a recession? Are we not? Inflation—all of this stuff that is happening right now.

Maybe you are in a time of unemployment, or maybe massive credit card debt. Or maybe you lose a job. Whatever it may be, what ends up happening is that it reveals what we have ultimately been putting our trust in.

And money, more than anything else, becomes God's chief competition for the affections of our heart. It becomes a functional savior. We begin to look to it to do for us what only God can do, which is one of the reasons why, regardless of where you land politically, the number one issue for the left and the right is the economy. It's because it has become our functional savior. It is the thing that we look to.

And I think this is also the reason why Jesus taught on the subject of money more than any other subject, including the subject of heaven and hell combined. Do you know that Jesus taught on the subject of money more than love and forgiveness? And some of you just misheard me and you're leaning over to the person you came with and you're like, "He didn't really do that. I thought He taught about giving."

I said he taught about money. And there is a difference. Oftentimes we get a little bit uncomfortable when we talk about money in the church, for all kinds of reasons. And I understand all of the reasons because we just assume that if a preacher is going to talk about it, it just means give it. But the Bible has 800 verses that address this subject, including budgeting, saving, debt reduction, investing—there is all kinds of wisdom in the Scriptures over this issue of our lives, primarily because it can become God's chief competition on the throne of our hearts. And we oftentimes overlook the wisdom God's Word gives us.

Here's what I want you to hear me say, really clearly today, and I'm speaking to, primarily, Christians who are in the room. If you are not a Christian, if you're not a follower of God, then I think the wisdom of the Scriptures can apply to your finances, and you'll be blessed for it. But I primarily want to say this to Christians: personal finances are a discipleship issue. What you and I think about, how we relate to our bank account, that is a discipleship issue. And the Bible speaks so much to this issue.

If we don't look to God's Word to disciple us in this, here's my question: where else are we going to look? Who else is going to disciple us? If we don't disciple the next generation, the culture gladly will and is. Is Visa going to do it? I don't think Visa is going to disciple us in this. Should we look to the spending habits of the government? I hope not. So, we've got to look to the wisdom of God's Word.

And Jesus would say this in Matthew 6:24, He says:

*"You cannot,"*

Notice the definitive word there. You cannot. He doesn't say it is difficult. He doesn't say it's going to be a challenge. He doesn't say it's going to be hard but possible. He says:

*"You cannot serve both God and money."* Matthew 6:24 (NIV)

And actually, the Aramaic word there is *mammon*. So this is not necessarily like looking to a dollar. Any of you remember when we went through the book of Romans a couple of years ago, and this last year we went through Daniel? I said that Babylon was a real city that no longer exists, but the spirit of Babylon lives on behind the culture in which we live.

The same thing is true with mammon. Mammon is the spirit behind the dollar. It is a very confused system. So Jesus would say... Money is not good or bad. Money is neutral. Jesus would say, "Mammon is the spirit behind the dollar that is inflating you. It's the thing that causes you to hold tightly to your bank account or the thing that causes you stress or have arguments with your spouse. That is mammon. That is the spirit behind it. And He says, "Your heart will be committed to either God or mammon. It cannot be both." And that's what Jesus teaches.

We could summarize everything that the Bible teaches about it this way:

**Money is a great servant but a horrible master.**

So, in 2023, you and I are going to need to put money in its place. We're going to lead it so that it doesn't lead us. It's a test we all face and it's a test that a guy named Elijah faced as well. So if you have your portable flat screen in your pocket go ahead and pull it out and find 1 Kings 17.

If you recall, two weeks ago we started this series with Elijah. Elijah is this prophet. And we're going to end this series with him as well. Elijah went through anxiety. Elijah is also going to go through this challenge as well—trusting in God as provider.

So let me give you a little bit of context for what we see happening in 1 Kings 17. There is a drought that is in the land, and it has caused this famine. And Elijah is a prophet, so he comes to the people, and he basically says, "Hey, God is withholding the rain." And here's why. The people were worshiping the false god of rain by the name of Baal.

I want you to see the connection. People—their hearts and their affections were wrapped up in Baal, who is the false god of rain. So God says, “Okay, I’ll withhold the rain.”

And I just can’t help but notice some similarities between a famine and a recession. And as you might imagine, Elijah’s message was not a very popular one, either then or today, so the people wanted to kill Elijah. Somebody should have warned Elijah of the occupational hazards of being a prophet.

And God says to him, “Hey, Elijah. I will keep you safe and I will provide for you.” And He tells him how. We’ll pick it up in verse 2. Follow along with me:

*“Then the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go to the east and hide by Kerith Brook, near where it enters the Jordan River. Drink from the brook and eat what the ravens,’ not the football team, birds ‘...eat what the ravens bring you, for I have commanded them to bring you food.’” 1 Kings 17:2-4 (NLT)*

So let me stop right there and go, this is so unusual. For starters, God is the One who caused the famine and the drought. And God is going to lead Elijah away from the Jordan, which, by the way, is the source of water in the middle of a drought. He goes, “Go the opposite direction of the Jordan. And it’s totally okay because I’ll just have some ravens bring you some food.”

“God, you could just door dash me a sandwich.” It’s like, “I don’t think that’s very sanitary. I’m not quite sure of the whole raven meal plan, God. That doesn’t seem like a very wise strategy.”

But, as we’re going to see all through this story, Elijah has more faith than I do. So it says in verse 5:

*“So Elijah did as the Lord told him and camped beside Kerith Brook, east of the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat each morning and evening, and he drank from the brook.” 1 Kings 17:5-6 (NLT)*

So what I want you to see is that Elijah was in need and God provided. Now, God provided in a very unorthodox way. God provided by having a bunch of ravens deliver him food. And I’ve got to ask the question: why?

This is one of those things that seems so unusual, why would God have ravens bring Elijah food? And I think that the reason why is because God wanted Elijah to trust Him no matter how crazy it might have sounded. And I think that, right there, is a challenge.

I know, at least for me, when it comes to finances it’s this question right here:

**Am I willing to trust God even when financially it doesn’t make much sense?**

Am I willing to trust God, as Provider, even when financially it doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense? And sometimes what the Bible teaches us about money and material possessions doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Now, not so much the budgeting, saving, and investment part—all of that actually makes really, really good sense.

I've read a number of finance books that are not Christian, whatsoever, and they will oftentimes borrow from these principles that we see in Scripture, including—there is always a chapter on tithing, and it's never connected to anything spiritual.

So what the Bible has to say about all of that stuff is really, really sound. It's usually what the Bible says about generosity that is counter-intuitive and it just doesn't feel right.

Let me give you an example. Most of us have probably heard this principle. It's found in the Scriptures: It is more blessed to give than to receive. And I could ask for a showing of hands about how many of you believe that, but I'm not going to because I know that most of the hands are going to go up in the room because you're in church.

Even if you don't believe it you're going to be like, "Well yeah, I don't want people to see my hand down on that question." So I think most of us would raise our hands like, "Yes. We believe that. It is more blessed to give than to receive." But I would just presume that we don't really believe that.

Let me give you another example. Let's just say right after the service, it's over, you're walking out to your car, and I go running after you, and I catch up to you and I go, "Listen. This is just between me and you. I've got \$1,000 in my pocket. You can have it right now. You can spend it on whatever you want. Or, you can take \$1,000 of your own money and you can give it to somebody else in need. You decide. This is just between me and you. I'm not going to tell anybody what you decide." I don't care who you are, you're going to have to stop and think about that for a moment. Right?

Now, I would say the vast majority of you would probably go, "Okay, I'm going to take \$1,000 of my own money and give it to somebody because I really do believe it is more blessed to give than to receive." But you're not going to do it that easily. You're going to stop and you're going to really wrestle... I know I would. I would really wrestle with that. But if I really, really believed that it is more blessed to give than to receive, I'd be like, "Thank you so much. Thank you for this opportunity. I'm going to go do it now." But, yet, it feels counter intuitive.

I think the same thing is true in the circumstances that Elijah is in. And it doesn't seem to make a whole lot of sense to Elijah either, but he trusts God anyway. He obeyed and God supplied. Look at what it says in verse 7:



*“But after a while the brook dried up, for there was no rainfall anywhere in the land.”* 1 Kings 17:7 (NLT)

Alright, just so we are clear, God sends Elijah to the brook and Elijah obeys and goes to the brook. And now the brook is beginning to dry up.

This is the question I just want to ask you today. Are any of you standing next to a dried-up brook right now? You feel like you’ve been obedient to God, you feel like you’ve been trying to do things His way, you feel like you’ve been trying to honor Him in this area of your life, but the bank account is running dry.

Maybe you’re late on your mortgage payment. Maybe college tuition came due. Maybe you’re watching some of your investments dry up in this economy and you’re standing next to a brook and you’re saying, “God, I hope You notice that the water level is dropping.” You’re waiting for Him to do something. And in the wait, that’s usually when it becomes very clear to you who or what you are ultimately putting your trust in.

I think here’s the challenge. Trust God even when the future seems uncertain. Even when you are standing next to a brook and it appears as if it is drying up, you say, “God, I’m going to put my trust in You. I’m going to trust what You say rather than what I feel.”

Several years ago I read a book by a guy by the name of Henri Nouwen called *Sabbatical Journey*. In it he talks about how he befriended some trapeze artists. And he said he got to know them and the craft. If you know anything about trapeze artists, there is a flyer and there is a catcher.

The two of them have a very specific job and they can’t get that confused. The job of the flyer is to let go of the bar and reach out and trust that the catcher will catch him.

Now that’s not hard, but that’s difficult. Right? When you’re the one flying through the air, everything within you wants to take control. But he said that most accidents happen when the flyer tries to catch the catcher rather than reaching out his hands and trusting the catcher to catch him.

Oftentimes I’ve found myself in that situation financially. When the brook has run dry, I feel like I’m flying through the air and everything within me says, “Catch the catcher.” Everything within me says, “Hit the panic button. Hold on to money. Worry about it. Obsess about it. Get a side-hustle.” Right? Make sure that I can provide. And God simply says to you and to me, “I want you to trust, trust that the catcher will catch you.”

In verse 9, God gives Elijah some further instructions on what to do because now the brook is drying up. Look at what it says in verse 8:

*“Then the Lord said to Elijah, ‘Go and live,’ circle, underline, highlight the word live. ‘Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon.’”* 1 Kings 17:8-9 (NLT)

So, He doesn't say go visit. He doesn't say, "Hey, pack a bag." He says, "No, pack your boxes.

Now what you need to understand about Zarephath is this is enemy territory. Elijah is an outsider.

This last week as I was studying this I thought to myself, "If I'm Elijah, and I'm trying to anticipate what God is doing, here's what I would assume. 'Oh, yeah. I get it. God's going to move me to Zarephath and I'm going to bring my unique skill set to the table.'

"I'm going to meet somebody who has a network in this foreign place and the two of us are going to come up with a business idea and a plan. We're going to go pitch it to *Shark Tank* and then we're all going to get filthy rich. That's probably what God's got in mind. The brook dried up. Now He's giving us a business plan. That's what's happening."

Let's look at the text and see if that is what it actually is, verse 9:

*"I have instructed a widow there to feed you."* 1 Kings 17:9 (NLT)

Okay. No business plan. No *Shark Tank*. You've got to sit there and go, "What? Now, wait a second, God. Really? First the raven meal plan and now You're going to impose upon a poor widow. It doesn't make any sense at all."

Now, to Elijah's credit he still believes. Look at verse 10:

*"So he went to Zarephath. 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?'"* 1 Kings 17:10 (NLT)

Now, keep in mind they are in a drought. So he's trying to minimize his need. Do you ever do that? So he says, "Hey, just bring me a little sippy cup of water."

And I think she was very annoyed by this. She didn't know who he was. She's just doing it to be polite. She goes and gets the water. And then look at what it says in verse 11:

*"As she was going to get it, he called to her, 'Bring me a bite of bread, too.'"* 1 Kings 17:11 (NLT)

It's like, "Just a little sippy cup of water and just a little bite of bread." That was the last straw for her. Look at the widow's response in verse 12. I totally have ton of sympathy for her. Look at what she says. She says:

*"I swear by the Lord,"* what's the next word? *"your God,"* not my God. You are a foreigner. Your God has caused this drought and this famine. I swear by your God who I don't have allegiance to:

*"that I don't have a single,"* now notice all of the minimalist language. She doesn't have:

*“a single piece of bread in the house. And I have only a handful of flour left in the jar and a little cooking oil in the bottom of the jug.”*

And then she says this:

*“I was just gathering a few sticks to cook this last meal, and then my son and I will die.”* 1 Kings 17:12 (NLT)

To which, if I was Elijah I would go, “So is that a no?” Just notice this demonstrative language. She’s irritated. Now, if I’m Elijah, I’m immediately going, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to put that on you. You’re right. You’re right.” That would have been my response.

And I just want to push pause right here on the story and ask a question that really kind of bothers me a little bit. If I’m really honest as I read this narrative it honestly bothers me. And here’s the question. Two words: Why her? Why her?

In fact, in the New Testament it says that pure religion, undefiled religion, is looking after orphans and widows in their distress. Not taking their last meal. So why would God tell Elijah to do this? Why would he say to this widow, “You be generous?”

It just seems to me like there would have been a whole bunch of other people in that town who would have been much better off to actually step up and meet his needs. Mainly, I don’t know, read the names off of the Forbes list. Or just look at somebody who is riding the nicest camel. I don’t know. Who would have more resources to be able to provide for Elijah.

And I think that there is a part of us that really can relate to her in the sense that when we have fallen on difficult financial times, when it’s our 401K that’s down, when it’s our student loan payments that are due, when it’s our credit cards that are maxed, when it’s our job loss we excuse ourselves from what God says about generosity.

We say, “Well, I’ve got to pass. I think that my neighbor can actually step up and meet this need. God, have you seen what they drive? I think they have enough. God, have you seen her handbag? She doesn’t think we know how much she spent on it, but, oh, we know. We know. We saw it on Pinterest.”

So it’s like, “They’ve got more margin.” So here’s what we do financially. We do this the same in every other area of our life. We compare our insides with other people’s outside. And we just assume by looking at them, “Well, they have enough. Why don’t you ask them?”

Here’s the principle that we learn from God asking this widow:

**God invites everyone to be generous, regardless of circumstances.**

God invites everyone to be generous, regardless of circumstances because it is not about the amount, it’s about the heart.

Several years ago my wife and I went to go see a movie. The theatre was relatively packed, and we were kind of sitting in the middle up toward the top. About half-way through the movie the sound goes out. So the picture is still playing, but the sound is out. And I'm like, "Oh, man. Maybe it will come on in another minute or two. And a minute or two go by, no sound. And here's the thing, I started to go, "Man, somebody needs to go say something, but not me."

I was in the middle toward the back. I would have to climb over all of these people. Here's what I started to do. I started to judge the people sitting on the aisle. And I was like, "They are in a position where they could easily slip out, talk to management, no sweat, come back, don't have to climb over anybody." But they are not moving. They are just sitting there stuffing their faces with Milk Duds and some popcorn.

And it's like we are back in the 1920s or something, watching this motion picture. And then my wife said to me, "You need to go say something." So I got up and went and I said something.

I think oftentimes that's what happens. I think that, especially when it comes to the body of Christ we just sort of look around and we say, "Somebody needs to step up and meet that need, but not me, because I'm not in a position to."

And one of the things that we just learned from this is that God takes away all of our excuses because if He asked this widow to step up to meet a need, why would He not ask me to as well?

In 2 Corinthians 9:11 Paul writes this. He goes:

*"Yes, you will be enriched,"* there is a difference in being rich and being enriched, *"in every way so that you can always,"* always, regardless of circumstances, *"be generous."* 2 Corinthians 9:11 (NLT)

I think the other lesson that we learn from her is simply this:

**God is more interested in our availability, not our ability.**

One of the dominate narratives of the Bible is that God accomplishes great things through our weakness. And to God it is not the amount. You know it's not the amount for Him, God already owns everything. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He's like, "I'm not interested in your breadcrumbs. I already own the whole feast." It's about your heart. And since your heart is connected to your treasure, He wants your heart. That's why He asks you to trust Him with your treasure.

So, let me go back to my original question. Because I've got an answer. Why did God choose this widow? And I think that the reason why He chose the widow is perhaps the same reason why He chose the shepherd boy named David to take down a giant named Goliath with a few smooth stones and a slingshot. It's the reason why He chose a teen-

aged girl named Mary to be the mother of Jesus. I think it's the reason why He chose an uneducated fisherman by the name of Peter. It's to demonstrate that His power is made perfect in our weakness.

God says, "I just want to know if you are available. I just want to know if you're willing to trust Me with what you have, because it's not really yours anyway. I'm the provider. You are the steward."

Well, in verse 13... Golf claps on a money sermon are so good. Verse 13—he makes her this promise:

*"But Elijah said to her," I love this, he goes "Don't be afraid! Go ahead and do just what you've said, but make a little bread for me," what's the word? Say it out loud, "first." Hold onto that. "Then use what's left to prepare a meal for yourself and your son." 1 Kings 17:3 (NLT)*

Does anybody else see how backward that seems? If I'm Elijah and I'm imposing on this widow and I'm the guest, I'm the foreigner and she's looking out for her son, here's what I would have said. If I was Elijah I would have said, "Hey, listen. Why don't you go ahead and prepare a meal and if you have a serving left over keep me in mind." That's what I would have said. "Hey, if you could just spare a few crumbs after you and your son—make sure you guys fill your stomachs first, and then give me whatever is left over."

He doesn't say that. He says, "Give to me first." Once again it's going to sound kind of rude. That seems kind of selfish. But understand that the reason why this narrative is in the Bible is to teach you and me something about where we put our trust.

I think that is very important. That word *first* is there first because this is the principle that the Bible teaches over and over again. It's the principle known as first fruits.

Here's the idea. As a Christian, somebody who is following after Jesus, you say, "You know what? God, I'm going to be generous toward You first. That way I get paid, the first part of my paycheck, God, is going to go to You first." And I'm not necessarily inclined to do it that way. I'm inclined to pay all of my bills first and then put a little bit into savings first, and if I've got anything left over, then I can be generous with it. And percentage wise, that's what most of us do.

But God would say, "Hey, trust Me with this first." Not because God needs your money but because He wants your heart, and He knows that your heart always follows your resources.

Deuteronomy explains why we give to God first. Deuteronomy 14, verse 23 says the purpose of tithing, that means giving God the first 10 percent of your pay, is to always put God first in your life so that He can work through you to meet the needs of a hurting world. And the reason why God asks us to do this is to right-size our hearts.

I know all of the exceptions. I've been a pastor for over 20 years. And inevitably I'll probably get an email this week from a person who will say, "Now, pastor, you know that tithe is Old Testament, and we are under grace now. So it no longer applies." And I would agree, and I would disagree. I would say that the tithe preceded the law. The law didn't come up with the tithe, the law actually reinforced the tithe, but the principle of the tithe can be found prior to the law, therefore the principle of the tithe can be found after the law as well.

Jesus didn't abolish the tithe, He actually affirmed it. Now I will say this. We would never treat it legalistically. It is not tied to your salvation. It is not tied to your spiritual depth. In fact 2 Corinthians says, "Don't give under compulsion." In other words, "Don't let anybody twist your arm or guilt you into giving because God loves a cheerful giver." And you can't be cheerful if you feel that you are obligated to do so. It is a principle. And here's what you are doing when you trust God with the first 10 percent... This is why the Bible never says give the tithe. The Bible always says return it. Bring it.

So let's just say, hypothetically, that Ryan and Stephanie Bramlett go on vacation this next week and Ryan calls me and says, "Hey, Aaron. I need a ride to the airport. Why don't you come over to our house. And here's the deal. You can take our car to the airport to drop us off. And as a thank you, we'll let you drive our car during the week."

And I'm like, "Okay. Great." So, I go over. I pick up Ryan and Stephanie and their family. I take them to the airport, "Guys, have a great trip." I drive their car all week long as if it was my own, which means I'm doing lots of donuts in the parking lot and all of that fun stuff. And I'm playing music super loud.

Then I go back to the airport when they come in. I pick them up. I drive them back to their house. And I pull into the driveway and help them with their bags. As we're standing at the door it gets a little bit awkward. And I look at Ryan and Stephanie and I say, "Hey, guys. While you were gone, God's really been working on my heart. And Lindsay and I have been praying about it. And we just decided that we want to give you this car." Ryan is going to look at me, "Dude, what have you been smoking? This is not your car. I loaned it to you for the week. You are returning it."

That is the same thing when it comes to our resources and income. And I have a tendency to think of myself as owner. Here's the deal. God is like, "You are not the owner. I've always been the owner. You are the steward. So you are just simply returning to me a portion of what I already have." Not because God's got financial problems, but because God desires your heart.

Now, why 10 percent? I don't really know. I think I could ask God that one day when we get to heaven. Here's my guess though. After doing this a really long time, it's that 10 percent of your resources—that's enough to get your attention and thus form and shape

your heart. It's not enough to sink you financially, but it is a step of faith, especially if you've never done it before. And I think that is what God is after.

Well, let me finish up the narrative in verse 14. It says this:

*"For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'There will always' now that is a promise, '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!' So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her family continued to eat for," how many days? "many days. There was always enough," there was always enough, "flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the Lord had promised through Elijah." 1 Kings 17:14-16 (NLT)*

So let me wrap this up by just giving you two take aways from this narrative. Alright? Here's the first one:

### **Commit to taking the next step in your financial stewardship.**

Would you commit to taking the next step in your financial stewardship whatever that might look like for you? I said this a little bit earlier. There are over 800 verses in the Bible that deal with things like budgeting, saving, investing, debt reduction. What area of your life right now is causing you financial stress, which you need to get in order and take a next step?

For some of you maybe you're living way beyond your means. You may need to ratchet that back. Some of you may be, "You know what? I need to get rid of these credit cards. They are not doing me any good." Maybe you just need to go, "You know what? We need to start saving something." What's the next step in your stewardship?

Now here's the deal. We want to help with this. So I want to encourage you to sign up for something called *Financial Foundations* class. It's a five-week small group that gathers together, and we want to help you be a better steward with what God has temporarily entrusted to you.

Here's the deal, by the way, you could actually give 10 percent to God legalistically and still dishonor Him with the remaining 90 percent, because you are steward over the whole. How do we steward resources in such a way that God would say, "Hey, well done good and faithful servant."?

So I want to encourage you to sign up for *Financial Foundations*.

[www.tpcc.org/financial-foundations](http://www.tpcc.org/financial-foundations)

We've had about 750 people go through this since we started it a couple of years ago. Over 90 percent say they would recommend it to others. And 70 percent said budgeting and stewardship were the primary takeaways. So take a next step.

Here's the next one:

## **Commit to taking the next step in your financial generosity.**

Would you commit to taking the next step in your financial generosity wherever you might be?

Now for some of you that might mean you're newly married, you just started working, and you've never really tithed before. You've never really done it. And maybe you say, "You know what? We're going to trust God with the tithe."

Maybe for some of you, you've gotten away from it, and you need to come back to it. Maybe for some of you you're like, "I don't know if we can do 10 percent." But what is your first step in that?

As a pastor saying this to you, I don't want anything from you. I want something for you, and I want you to trust God in this area of your life. That's why in Malachi it's the only time God ever talks trash to us is in this area. God says, "Test me in this and just see if I won't come through."

So I just want to encourage you to try the tithe. I've been doing this pretty much every year in the 15 years that I've been here, just try the tithe. And we'll put a safety net underneath you. Try it for three months. Try it for six months. Just see what God might do.

Here's what you're doing when you are tithing. You are breaking the spirit of mammon over your life and you're actually inviting God into your finances and finding that it's actually enough. Really, it's not putting you out on anything. You are inviting God's blessing over the rest of the 90 percent.

So, I want to ask you to do this. Try the tithe for the next three months, six months, whatever it is. And at the end of that time if the flour jar is empty, just simply contact us and we will give it back. Now, don't say, "Well, I'll give a thousand dollars in cash, and I don't really have a... Don't do that because we'll know."

I've been doing that challenge every year for 15 years and you know we've only returned money one time, just to one person. And we are willing to do that. That tells me that people have tried this, and God has come through in significant ways.

And by the way, I understand that some of you, it's your first time back to church in a long time. And you've told your spouse, "I don't want to go to church because all they ever talk about is money. And see, the first time we came, he's talking about money." And you are like, "I don't trust organized religion. I don't trust pastors of a big church; they've got ulterior motives."

I can't do anything about your trust level, so I would just simply say, don't give it here. I'm serious about that. The Bible says not to give under compulsion and to be a cheerful giver. Man, if you don't trust me, then don't give it here. Give it somewhere else.



But if you trust me as your pastor and this is the place where you are spiritually fed and you are on mission with us then trust God. And know this. I take it very seriously that one day I will stand before God, and He will hold me accountable to the way that the dollars were stewarded around here. And I'm way more afraid of God than you. So, just understand that.

Besides all of that, somebody knew what I was teaching on this week, and he was like, "Man, are you nervous to teach about money?" And I'm really not because Jesus taught on it so much and because the Bible addresses it so much and it has a tendency to be one of the number one issues of stress in our lives. I just learned a long time ago, as a pastor, I'm kind of like a quarterback. Sometimes I've just got to stay in the pocket and throw the pass and I'm going to get hit and I just know it. As long as I can make the pass, that's fine.

So, once again, God's got a bigger truck than you do, and I want to make sure that I'm keeping the whole counsel of God. I just know this. Some of you won't like it. And that's okay. I still believe in these principles. Not only that, but I also believe in the vision and mission of our church.

And for me... I want to show you something. I've got some good news and I've got some bad news. Here's the bad news. All the way back to the 1940s, church attendance in the western world has been on a steady decline—throughout most of our lifetime. But it's accelerated here lately. And the fact of the pandemic has accelerated it even more.

Some would say that that trend can't be reversed. We've been in it so long that the vortex of that, we're caught up in that and we're just racing toward more and more irrelevance.

I'm actually not that intimidated by that because God's power is made perfect in weakness. And the whole principle of the mustard seed, the city on the hill, the bright light... The bride of Christ has been through a lot in the last 2,000 years. I don't think that trend is going to take her down.

Now, I'm going to give you some good news. Did you know that the slowest generation to come back, physically, to church since COVID is the boomers. But the generations fastest to return is the millennials. And I actually look at that and that's a lot of optimism and a lot of encouragement in that, but the future of the church is in really bright hands.

We are on the precipice. We're not playing church here. We're not just showing up every week and singing a few songs and hopefully have an entertaining message that we can apply one or two things to our lives. We are literally trying to change the world. And the church is God's plan A.

So here's my desire. I don't have any desire to do anything else with my life than to be a pastor. And I don't have any desire to be a pastor with any other church than this one, for some of you that's good news or bad news depending upon how you want to receive it.

But I just want to say this, "God, if you would, for the next 15, 20, 25 years—whatever it is, whatever run we have, God, here's what I want to do in my lifetime. I want to make the biggest impact for Your kingdom that I possibly can before I go to the grave."

And I desire to take our shoulder, as a church, and lean it in to the trends we see and maximize the opportunities with reaching the next generation. And what if, what if, go with me on this, what if we could reverse the trend of the declining church? Not our church alone, don't hear me say that, but what if we helped? What if we help reverse the trend to give people hope.

I can't think of a better thing to be a part of than the mission and the vision that God has given us as a church. It requires resources to be able to do that. And I know that when you get a group of people who are trusting God with their finances, there isn't anything that God can't do.

When I was a younger pastor, I'll close with this, I sat down with a mentor of mine, a guy by the name of Bob Russell. Some of you might recognize that name. Bob served as a pastor of Southeast Christian Church down the road in Louisville, Kentucky for over 40 years and just did an incredible job. Bob is filled with all kinds of wisdom. I've learned so much from him.

And I remember sitting down with him at lunch one day and he asked me how I felt about teaching on money and personal finance. So we were talking about that, and he goes, "You know, Aaron, don't ever shy away from it." And he goes, "Every time I taught on money and personal finances, do you know what went up?"

Now, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed so I just looked at him and I was like, "The budget?" And he replied, "No. Every time I teach on money baptisms go up." And he said, "Here's why. Because if people are willing to trust their finances to Jesus, what else are they going to keep from Him?"

God desires your heart. So today in these last few moments together as we do a little reflection can I just ask you, regardless of who you are or where you are right now—what's the one thing that you need to do here today?

And it's very possible that the one thing you needed to hear today is actually the same thing that made you a little angry today. But the Holy Spirit wants to convict, and push, and prod. Right now God desires you to trust Him in this very personal area of your life. Please put money in its place and God upon the throne of your heart.

Father, thank You that You are provider and that we are stewards because that takes a whole bunch of pressure off. Father, forgive me where I've tried to do Your job for You, as a flyer I've tried to catch the catcher.

God, I'm just assuming that I'm not the only one. So, today, I just ask that in these last few moments together that we would resist leaving early, that we would resist getting up out our the seats and running for the door.

But we would just sit here long enough to say, "I'm listening. I'm listening. What is it that You want me to do? You asked Elijah to do something very uncomfortable, you asked this widow to do something uncomfortable so what uncomfortable thing, God, are You asking me to do right now? Speak, for your servant is listening."

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.