

Fundraising Is for the Birds

Critical lessons from the life of Elijah

By Ron Haas

Fundraising gets a bad rap among some Christian leaders who are uncomfortable with asking for money. They cite George Müller and Hudson Taylor as examples of great Christian men who told their needs to no one but God. Some modify that approach and are willing to share "full information" with donors, "but no solicitation." Others go so far as to suggest that personal solicitation is an unbiblical method that Christian organizations have adopted from the world.

This is a serious discussion for ministry leaders. What are the biblical methods for raising funds, and what strategies cross the line? Paul writes: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Tim. 6:17–18). What does this command look like in real life?

The story of God's provision for Elijah (1 Kings 17) is a compelling example. The chapter opens with Israel facing a severe drought and subsequent famine. But God generously provided for Elijah in the Kerith Ravine, east of the Jordan. Elijah drank from the brook, and twice a day ravens brought him bread and meat.

Elijah's situation might be similar to the fundraising strategy of many Christian organizations. Gifts appear out of the blue, but no one really knows who sent them. Every day development staff open letters filled with pieces of bread and meat. Once in a while, the ravens drop a big chunk of bread in the form of an estate check. But like Elijah, some ministries are seeing their money brooks dry up.

Thankfully, God's provision is not restricted by the severity of the famine, nor is he limited to one method for meeting our needs. He instructed Elijah to go to a widow in Zarephath whom he had commanded to give food to Elijah. God's ways are not our ways. If we were in the same position, we might think a better plan would be for God to send us to someone who had resources. But Elijah didn't question God; he just obeyed.

When Elijah arrived at the village gate, he met a woman gathering sticks. In a customary greeting, he asked her for a drink of water. As she was going to get it, Elijah called out, "And please bring me a piece of bread." This doesn't seem like a big request, but for this woman—who was gathering sticks to bake a last meal for herself and her son—it was outrageous.

She protested. She barely had enough for her family, much less a stranger. Elijah responded with a bold request. He told her to go bake the last cake of bread as she had planned, but he told her to give it to him instead. He added a promise: If she would put God first, her flour and oil would never run out. It's counterintuitive— it's faith.

God had commanded this widow to supply food for Elijah, so why does it seem like she didn't get the message? For those who take the position that all one needs to do is pray and God will supply, it seems that in this account, the widow should have offered a meal to Elijah without being prompted. Instead, she expressed fear and the stark reality that she simply didn't have enough to share. Isn't that the tension we all face when considering giving a gift? "If I give to the Lord, will I have enough for myself?"

Elijah's request made the widow consider other options. Responding to Elijah, she said, "As surely as the Lord your God lives," not "my God" (v. 12). The act of asking set everything in motion. The widow had to trust that Elijah's God would meet her needs, if she put Elijah first. She stepped out in faith, and the Lord miraculously supplied her needs. This account teaches at least four positive benefits of proactively asking for a gift.

1. Asking Tests a Donor's Priorities. The widow had a simple plan for her resources: Gather a few sticks. Make a fire. Bake a little bread. Eat a last meal. Die. Elijah's request shook her up. She had to reprioritize how to manage her resources, as meager as they were. Elijah's asking radically tested her faith. She had to give first to receive God's blessing. Would she believe and let go of what she had, or hoard it for herself and die?

Today's donors face the same challenge. Do I lay up treasures in heaven, or do I keep them for my security on earth? How can I be sure that God will open the windows of heaven and pour out his blessings? We want to give by sight and check our bank balances first. God wants us to give by faith. When a development director asks for a gift, he gives a donor something new to consider. Perhaps making a generous gift wasn't even on the donor's radar. A request for support gives a donor an opportunity to respond in faith with a generous gift.

2. Asking Triggers God's Blessing. Who really benefited from Elijah's request? Elijah did; he received bread. But the big winners in this transaction were the widow and her son. Before this encounter, they were doomed to starvation; afterward, they had abundant flour and oil for as many cakes as they desired. She literally went from famine to feast in one act of faith. Who benefits when a donor gives to a ministry? The ministry does, because it has the resources to fulfill its mission. But the major beneficiary of the gift is the giver. Paul encouraged the Philippians with this principle: "Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account" (4:17). As a ministry leader, when you get to heaven, donors will thank

you for having asked them to be generous to your ministry. They might even ask why you didn't ask them for more.

3. Asking Teaches the Asker to Trust God. In today's fundraising environment, a development officer would have run an asset screening on the widow of Zarephath and relegated her to the direct-mail-only file. Fundraisers fall into the trap of rating donors based on external indicators. What do they do for a living? Where do they live? What kind of car do they drive? Generosity is not necessarily connected to a person's net worth. In fact, some wealthy Christians are paupers when it comes to giving.

Perhaps fundraisers should learn from this passage and base major donor qualifications on internal characteristics and move to the top of their donor lists those who are "rich in faith" (James 2:5). People in dire straits are forced to rely on God. Ministries need these prayer warriors more than they need money. Instead of approaching small and midrange donors through impersonal methods, maybe we should treat them with greater honor and ask for a gift in a personal visit.

Jesus said the widow gave more with her two mites than all the gold of the Pharisees combined (Luke 21:1–3). We typically interpret this passage to mean that she gave more as a percentage because she gave all that she had, 100 percent. But could it also mean that God, in a miraculous way, multiplied her gift exponentially greater than all the other gifts? Maybe instead of seeking only donors with great capacity, fundraisers should solicit donors with great faith.

4. Asking Establishes Long-Term Relationships. One serious downside to direct mail and other impersonal forms of fundraising is that they create distance between the asker and giver. Personal solicitation bridges that gap. It's a conversation between friends. For Christians, it's a family discussion. Some Christian leaders are afraid to ask for money for fear that it will strain relationships. But asking for a gift actually begins relationships that will last for eternity.

Because of Elijah's asking and the widow's act of faith, Elijah, the widow, and her family enjoyed food every day until the famine subsided. Imagine their fellowship around the table as they rejoiced in God's amazing provision. Think of Elijah's spiritual impact on the widow's son as he listened to God's word every day for months. Christian leaders who avoid personal solicitation and neglect to cultivate deep relationships miss incredible ministry opportunities.

Great things may happen when you ask boldly for a gift. God uses the request to stretch both the asker's and donor's faith. When the donor responds generously, no matter how meager the gift may seem, God honors that step of faith and miraculously provides for the giver and the asker.

If engaging donors by asking is such a large part of God's economy, why are Christian leaders so hesitant to step out in faith? Elijah's experiences demonstrate that God meets our needs in many different ways. Praise the Lord for the ravens who deliver God's blessing. And praise the Lord for those who have the faith to ask boldly and for those who give generously when asked.

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