

# Unlikely Champions: A Widow's Might

BY ALLEN WALWORTH

Scripture tells many stories about unlikely generosity champions, men and women who play out their lives, often in obscurity, except for the watchful eye of the biblical narrator—and God. They are champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the kingdom of God advances.

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On April 11, 2009, an unknown, unemployed 47-year-old woman took the stage of the television talent show, *Britain's Got Talent*. She was, by even the most generous account, frumpy in appearance, awkward on stage, and the personification of nervous fear as she walked out to the small piece of tape marking her spot at center stage, facing a large cynical audience accustomed to beautiful young talent acts, and a trio of judges chaired by the infamously harsh critic, Simon Cowell. She was a most unappealing and unpromising contestant, if ever there was one. But as the muffled laughter died down, Susan Boyle opened her mouth, and out poured the haunting lyrics and beguiling melody of "I Dreamed a Dream," from *Les Misérables*. It was a powerful and confident voice that seemed incongruent with the body from which it sprang. She sang like an angel set free, a muse filling the room—and the hearts—of everyone there. And as she sang the audience was transformed from cynics to converts. They listened in stunned silence for a few seconds, and then burst forth into standing ovation throughout the rest of her song. Every eye was wide with wonder, and wet with inspiration. And in that moment, the dream that Susan Boyle dreamed... actually came true.

It is a great story. Rags to riches. Anonymous to YouTube sensation overnight. From “no prospects” to “no limits” in an instant. Don’t you love the Susan Boyle story, as much as her beautiful voice? It makes you wonder how many other heroes and champions are living right among us, lacking only their chance to show the world their hidden gifts. What great business ideas fail to be born for lack of adequate capital? What potential leaders remain in the back of the room because they cannot summon the courage and hope to keep trying after early defeats? What loving hearts stay locked up in loneliness rather than risk opening up after experiencing betrayal or bereavement? What great novel or music remains unwritten because the author cannot face another round of rejection slips? By the way, it is not insignificant that before her “discovery” on the brightly lit stage of *Britain’s Got Talent*, Susan Boyle found a loving, nonjudgmental place where she felt free to sing, her one sanctuary where she felt safe enough to find her voice, and let it soar – as a member of the church choir in her tiny village.

But sometimes the most important moments in the human story do not happen on center stage, and they are not captured on YouTube. Some of the greatest human stories are not played out in front of thousands of adoring fans, nor affirmed by thunderous applause. This might be the patient caregiver who tirelessly tends the physical and emotional needs of a single bed-fast patient or family member. It is the pastor who serves for a lifetime in a small village, preaching to less than ten people on Sundays, shepherding his or her tiny flock through the years with steady and faithful service in the name of Christ. Or the persons with meager resources who nonetheless open their hearts and their wallets to share with others even less fortunate than they are, or who drop in a single coin as the offering plate passes by in church – a tiny drop in a vast sea of need, infinitesimal compared to larger gifts from those who give much more, but who sacrifice much less. Yes, these are the silent, anonymous champions of the human spirit. Upon their faithfulness the world turns, and the kingdom of God advances.



Both the Old Testament and New Testament tell stories of unlikely generosity champions, men and women who play out their lives, often in obscurity, except for the watchful eye of the biblical narrator – and God. Just two examples to illustrate, from 1 Kings 17 and Mark 12: both were widows, both were heroes of faith and generosity who would have played their roles in anonymity, unknown and forgotten by history, were it not for the recording of their stories in the pages of Scripture.

Remember that in biblical times, widows were at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder. In a world where a woman’s status was tied to her father or to her husband, a widow was left with little opportunity for protection or provision. There were virtually no honorable or well-paying

jobs for single women in this economic system. There were no Social Security payments or 401K plans. As a result, widows were usually poor, marginalized, and vulnerable, to be used and abused by the more powerful men in society. So it is not an incidental detail that Scripture tells the story of two widows, women who were heroic champions of faith and upon whose generosity the biblical story advances. They offer generosity precisely where we would least expect to see it. They are both unlikely heroes, indeed.

The widow in the story from 1 Kings 17:10-16 was even more unlikely as a champion of Israel's faith tradition, because she was a Gentile. Elijah had fled Israel during the terrible drought, and the threat to his life, during the reign of the evil queen Jezebel. And so God provided for Elijah in unusual ways while he was in self-imposed exile from his homeland. Sometimes it was ravens that brought Elijah food. But in this instance, God provided for the prophet through the unlikely provision of a widow who was down to her last meal – literally. And yet Elijah approached this stranger, and invited this Gentile, this desperately poor woman, to share what little she had left with him, and to trust that if she did so, God would keep refilling her empty cupboard, day by day. Isn't it amazing that she said "yes" to that audacious request? But she did. And sure enough, each day for an entire year, as she emptied her flour jar for that day's meal, God would refill it by the next day.

Notice that God did not give her an entire year's worth of flour on the first day. It was more like the gift of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. God wanted her, and wants us, to learn to trust God for our daily bread, and our daily life. Of course, we would rather trust ourselves, our portfolios, and our own ingenuity, wouldn't we? But not this widow. She took the leap of faith, and expressed her trust through the extension of generosity, every single day, for an entire year.

No wonder Jesus told her story as an illustration in his first sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:25-26). She is a true hero, a model of faith and trust and generosity for us all – even if she is a most unlikely one.

And in Mark's Gospel, as the clock was winding down during Holy Week, while Jesus was watching people drop their offerings for the provision of the Temple, he pointed out the remarkable faith and generosity of an unnamed widow who waited patiently in line among the wealthier donors (Mark 12:41-44). When her time came, she dropped in two small copper coins, worth very little compared to the larger gifts offered by most of the others in that line. As far as we know, she did not even know Jesus was watching her. But Jesus knew that those two coins represented her entire net worth. It was all the money she had. What in this world, or perhaps, what *beyond* this world, would cause this poor widow to give everything she had left to an ordinary offering at the Temple? We don't know her story. We don't even know her name. But you can be sure there is a story there. Behind every great act of generosity is a story, even if only known to the giver and to God.

Well, Jesus noticed. Sobering thought, isn't it, that Jesus might always be watching the offering? Think about that next time the offering plates pass by!

Jesus said to his surprised disciples that her gift was the largest one given, because the way God does accounting is not by counting the number of dollars in the offering plate, but by comparing one's gift to the dollars still in one's wallet or portfolio. What inspired that widow to drop her first coin, much less her second coin? As Jesus said, "she gave her very life." It was the same thing Jesus would do later that week on the cross, making it two times in a single week that all heaven was hushed in awe at the sight of it.

Does the world always take notice of these heroes? No. But it does not matter. For they play out their roles for an audience of One. God notices. God remembers. The kingdom of God advances. And that is enough.

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