

2 Kings 4:1-7

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[0 : 00] Did any of you this morning get a card to the world's best dad? I wonder if anybody got that card. I didn't, I might mention, just in passing, but some of you may have done. It's maybe waiting for me at home, or, you know, I just, who knows? But some of you may have received that card. Well, I'm sure there are millions of cards that bear that inscription, millions of best dads. And I suppose that just reminds us that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, because presumably we can't all be the best dad in the world. And of course, those of us who have a reasonable, honest recognition of who we are know that we certainly are not the best dad in the world. So, who is that guy? Who is the best dad in the world? We are all flawed. We are all very flawed.

And there is no such thing as the perfect father. Or is there? The Bible speaks of God as our Father.

Father. Even those who maybe only have a passing familiarity with the Bible or with the church will be familiar with the words of the Lord's Prayer as it begins, our Father who art in heaven.

That's the language the Bible uses. It's the language God uses to describe Himself to us as a Father. Father. He is our heavenly Father. We could call Him our perfect Father. But is He really our Father?

Or does the Bible just use the picture of fatherhood to help us understand in some measure what God is like? The picture of a father, well, it tells us that He cares for His children, that He knows us, that He loves us. And so, it's nice picture language to help us in some way understand what God is like.

[2 : 13] Certainly, the words of the psalm that we're familiar with would maybe point in that direction from Psalm 103, like pity as a father hath unto his children dear, like pity shows the Lord to such as worship Him in fear. So, God is like a father, and we can learn something about Him by means of this picture. Is that what is being said?

Well, I think we can confidently respond to that suggestion by saying, no, God is not just like a father. God is, in His very nature, Father. He is eternally Father.

Before we ever came across the scene of time, before any of us or our first fathers were created, God was Father, Father of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Eternally Father. And the fatherhood of God is exercised in relation to us. We've already made the point that He has eternally been Father, but His fatherhood in relation to us is exercised in two ways. He is our Father as our Creator.

And so, in that sense, He is the Father of all men and women. We're reminded of the language that the Apostle Paul used as he spoke to those gathered in Athens. And he spoke not only of himself, but of all who were listening, some who rejected His message. And he was able to say, we are His offspring.

We are God's offspring. We are His children. He is our Father in that sense, as our Creator. But the Bible speaks of God as our Father in another sense, and in a much more particular sense, and that is, He is our Father as our Redeemer. He saves His people in an act of fatherly love.

[4 : 13] And in that sense, not all are sons of God. Not all enjoy God as their Father, but those whom He has redeemed, those whom He has saved. The Apostle John, in his gospel, in the first chapter, and verses 12 and 13, makes it very clear that to become a son of God in that sense is something that occurs when we believe in Jesus and put our trust in Jesus. We are given the right, the status of sons of God, a status that previously we had not enjoyed in that sense as our Savior, as our Redeemer. So, God is Father of all by merit of His status as Creator. He is Father of His own people by redemption. And within that context of redeeming love, the tenderness of His fatherly love finds expression very especially in the manner in which He is Father to the fatherless. We've sung the words used there by the psalmist in Psalm 68,

Father to the fatherless. And this morning I want to spend some time considering one occasion where God shows Himself to be the Father of the fatherless as He graciously provides for the widow of the prophet and her sons. And as we consider this account that we've read, we will do two things. We'll discover what God is like as a father, as our father, and so be better and able to relate to Him as His sons, if indeed sons we are. But I hope that also we will be challenged to be like Him in the exercise of our fatherly duties. Now that particularly for those of us here this morning who are fathers, that we would learn from God as Father that we might be better fathers. None of us are the world's best at, but we can improve. We can change. We can be better fathers than we currently are. And what better way of discovering how that can be so than by considering God our Father. But it's also true that though the challenge will be particularly for fathers, the challenge to be like our heavenly Father is one that is laid upon all believers. Well, as we turn to the passage there in 2 Kings and chapter 4, the manner in which we'll consider what we have in this account is in the following way. We'll think, first of all, of a father lost, then a father found, a father listened to, a father who provides, and then finally, more intriguingly, perhaps, a father for you. So, if you do have your Bibles open, and I would encourage you to do so in 2 Kings chapter 4 on page 371, let's begin by considering this truth of a father lost. Notice in verse 1 of our passage we read, The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha,

Your servant, my husband, is dead. The situation depicted by the cry of the widow is a desperate one. For her to cry, My husband is dead, would be tragedy enough, but there is more. What does she go on to say? She goes on to say, And you know that he revered the Lord? How does that make more acute the tragedy? Well, there seems to be at least the suggestion that the woman is laboring under the confusion of the injustice of it all. She says to Elisha, My husband revered the Lord. He was a good man. He was a godly man. He was a servant of God. Why has this happened to him? Why has it happened to us? We had a good family. We haven't done anything bad, and yet my husband is dead. I am a widow, and my sons are orphans. Might there be in her words a sense of injustice, of complaint? Is this how we have been repaid? And her conviction that her husband was a faithful man who revered the Lord clearly is not one that is shared only by herself. She's able to confidently declare to Elisha, You know that he revered the Lord. Her husband had been one of the prophets. Elisha would have known him well, and would have known that it was true what this woman said. And she lays hold of that. You know. You know.

You knew him. You knew what he was like. You knew what a faithful man he was, and now he's gone. And so, it is indeed a great tragedy that she is enduring. Just to give a little bit of background to this case, though we can't state what we're going to state with confidence because this is just one suggestion that is made. There is a body of Aramaic writings known as the Targum. The Targum were the interpretations given by the rabbis to the Old Testament, to the Old Testament Scriptures, and largely they date to the century before the coming of Jesus and into the first century.

And these were oral traditions or interpretations of the passages of Scripture. But in time, they were put into writing. There was great debate as to whether that was a good thing or a bad thing, but we leave that to one side. But within that body of writings, this passage is referred to.

[10 : 32] And in those writings, it's suggested that the dead prophet referred to here was Obadiah. Obadiah is made reference to in 1 Kings and chapter 18. And further, according to Josephus, a Jewish historian, a contemporary of Jesus from the first century, Josephus claims, and we can't know for sure if this is true or not, but it was his contention that this prophet Obadiah, if indeed it was Obadiah, had borrowed money to feed the young prophets of the company of prophets. If we had time to read the passage in 1 Kings, we would be able to appreciate the context a little better, but time doesn't allow us.

There was a need for food to feed the prophets, and so it is claimed Obadiah borrowed money in order to do that. And this is the debt that his widow is now loaded down with. If that's true, how more poignant that having borrowed money not for his own welfare but to help others, this is the consequence for his family. Could I say in passing that it probably is a salutary and very contemporary lesson for all of us in the management of our financial affairs. It's never a good idea to borrow money for day-to-day expenses. That will come back and bite us, but that just as a little aside.

So, the tragedy of this widow is compounded by the seeming injustice of the loss, but also even more dramatically by the imminent loss of her two sons. This debt that she has inherited from her dead husband, she had no means of cancelling. And we're told, she herself tells us, that the creditor, the one who is owed the money, is at the door. And as she has no means to pay the debt, the only way available to her is to hand over her sons, effectively as slaves, to the creditor.

Now, the social context, the cultural context is perhaps very different to our day, though perhaps not so different as we might imagine. We can think of the rather brutal means used by loan sharks to ensure the recovery of debts that are owed. Well, I don't know if this creditor was a loan shark, but certainly the consequence for this widow was really very tragic. And to make matters worse, if indeed they could be worse, everything would suggest that she has no family able or certainly willing to help. You see, in these circumstances in which she finds herself, the law of Moses provided for a means of rescue. And the means of rescue was what was known as a kinsman redeemer or a relative redeemer. And what was involved was that a close relative who would be aware of the desperate circumstances of their family member would be obliged to step in and to pay the debt that was owed, and so redeem the family from slavery and from poverty. And instructions are given in that regard in the books of Moses. Perhaps most famously we know of Boaz, how Boaz and his intervention in favor of Naomi and Ruth rescued them, redeemed them from their tragic status as widows with no means to provide for themselves. But no one steps up to the mark. No relative comes in and says, I will redeem the debt.

I will secure your future. I will ensure that you don't lose your sons, whether there were no relatives or whether they simply made themselves scarce, maybe because of the scale of the debt. We don't know.

[14 : 29] But she finds herself alone. She's widowed. There is the seeming injustice of it all. She is about to lose her sons, and nobody is there to help. Her situation is indeed a desperate one.

Can we begin to imagine her situation? Well, we can maybe begin, but we certainly can't appreciate it in any significant way. But we can describe it as beyond desperate.

But it's worth making the point that though we may find it impossible to put ourselves in her shoes, there are many today who would at least be better able to do so. In our society today, in the midst of all our seeming prosperity, debt and the crippling consequences of debt is one of the principal social problems of our days. And there are many people in deep trouble and in need of help, desperately in need of help, and many of them isolated and terribly alone. I wonder, is there a word here for us who are called to show our Father's likeness? So, a father lost and the consequences of it. But in what we go on to read in the passage, we can also discover of a father found. In her need, the widow cries out for help. She perhaps had already knocked on the doors of others and been met with indifference. We don't know. But we do know that she now turns to Elisha. And as she turns to Elisha as the prophet of the Lord, there is a very real sense in which she is turning to God Himself.

Elisha revered the same Lord that her departed husband had revered and faithfully served. And so, she cries out to God through Elisha. And the cry for help is heartfelt, it's honest, it's humble.

No demands are made, at least not overtly. The woman simply lays her case before Elisha. And she is sure that He will do the right thing by her. And He does. She lays her case before Him.

[16 : 52] Your servant, my husband, is dead. You know that he revered the Lord, but now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slave. That's the situation. No demands, no sense in which she is claiming that Elisha is duty-bound to do something about it. This is the situation.

Before we consider further the account and what it teaches us, even that is food for thought as to the manner in which we approach our Father in heaven. We too can and should approach Him in this heartfelt, honest, and humble way, and indeed encourage others to do likewise. Does it also not raise the question as to whether we who are called to reflect our Father's likeness are approachable for those who are in need? Elisha, whatever his manner was, he certainly was sufficiently approachable for this woman to come and seek His help. I wonder if the needy in our city would even think of turning to God's people, to Christians, for help. Would they even imagine that we would be interested or willing to help? But how does Elisha respond? Well, notice how Elisha responds there in verse 2. Elisha replied to her, how can I help you? And in posing the question, he becomes, in representation of God, a father found for this woman and her sons, one who will take the place of the absent kinsman redeemer, the kinsman redeemer who never appeared. And the widow is no longer alone. From the moment that Elisha asked this question, she is no longer alone. Even before she has any notion as to how Elisha will help, her greatest need has been met. He is there, and he is willing.

In the many needs that we have, different needs, maybe not the same kinds of needs, maybe not as dramatic as this woman, but in the many needs that you have, you can be sure that if you are trusting in Jesus, and in trusting in Jesus have been granted this status as a son or daughter of God, you have a heavenly Father who stands over you and asks you the question, how can I help you? Even this morning, perhaps, that is the question that God comes to you with, how can I help you? But God, through Elisha, asks the question of the widow. But we too are called to ask that very demanding question of others, how can I help you? How often do we hold back?

Because it's a very demanding question. The moment we ask the question, we're committing ourselves in some way to help, or else why ask the question? And so, we prefer to remain silent rather than place ourselves in that very difficult and compromising position. But Elisha is not concerned about that.

He responds to the widow with these words, how can I help you? A father found for this widow, but a father listened to by the widow. In verses 2 and following, the widow is given a number of instructions. They're quite surprising instructions. And we can just notice briefly what they are.

[20 : 38] The first thing we notice that is interesting, curious perhaps, is that Elisha, in seeking to help the woman. First of all, identifies what the woman has, what she can contribute, if you wish, in seeking or securing an answer to her situation. That's the next question he asks. There in verse 2, he begins with, how can I help you? But then he immediately goes on and says, what do you have? What do you have in your house? Now, it may have seen a strange question for this woman who was submerged in poverty, and she obviously considers that she has nothing. That is how she begins to respond, your servant has nothing. Your servant has nothing there at all. And then almost as if she ponders it for a moment more, almost apologetically, she says, well, yes, I do have something. I have a little oil. The word there in the original is a little jar, a very small jar, maybe used not really for kitchen use, but more for ceremonial purposes, just a little jar. That's what I've got. It's next to nothing.

That's all I've got. But she had something. As we approach our Father, our generous and willing Father, seeking His help as we do and as we can and as we must, it's also good for us to consider what He has already given us.

What are the resources He has already provided for us that could, in a measure, be the manner in which our needs could be met? And of course, that principle also applies as we would seek to help others, to identify all that they do have, maybe not in financial resources, but in willingness, in energy, in creativity, and in all kinds of other ways.

Elisha identifies what the woman has, but Elisha also trusts in God's generous and miraculous provision. He instructs the woman, as we've read, to gather empty jars and very tellingly indicates to her that don't just gather a few. Go around all your neighbors and gather as many jars as you can, as many vessels as you can. And at the moment at which the miracle is to take place, Elisha deliberately makes himself scarce. He's not present. He very explicitly tells the woman, go into your house, close the door, and then begin to pour the oil. Why does he do that? Well, surely he does that, that there would be no misunderstanding that the one who is providing for the widow is not Elisha, but God Himself. Perhaps if Elisha had been present, he would have received the gratitude and the glory, and Elisha doesn't want that. He wants it to be very clear that it is God who is providing. And so he says to the woman, go in, close the door, and then pour the oil.

Elisha is confident that God will be able to respond to her need, desperate though it is. And I'm left with the nagging question for myself, and perhaps some of you can apply it to yourselves.

[23 : 50] Do we as Christians have that same confidence in our Father, not only with regard to our own needs, but in the measure that we would commend our God to others? We are called to do that. We are called to commend our God to others who are in need of different kinds. And do we have the confidence that Elisha had?

So there are instructions given. Instructions given by the Father who is providing for this widow. God is Father through Elisha. But of course those instructions need to be listened to. And the woman clearly, as we read, does listen and obeys the instructions given. I wonder how she felt when she was told to gather all these vessels and to go into her home and to start pouring from this tiny little jar. It just seemed so ridiculous. It seemed so inconceivable that anything could result from it. Did she understand what was being asked of her? What did her neighbors think? What did her own sons think? But she obeys. She trusts and obeys. And just imagine when she first began to pour from that little jar. She has all these vessels round about, and she's got this little jar, and she begins to pour for the first time. I wonder how she felt, what sense of excitement, what sense of doubt perhaps, of what's going to happen. Is anything really going to come out? Is it going to carry on pouring? This is just, this can't be true. And yet, as she pours and pours and pours and pours, the vessels are filled, one after another after another, until the final vessel, and each of them full to the brim, filled by this little jar. God had wonderfully and miraculously provided for her. And the woman is blessed quite literally in the measure of her faith, which evidently was very great, because a great sum of money was secured by the sale of this oil, as the passage goes on to indicate. The woman listened to the Father's instructions. She trusted and obeyed and was blessed in that measure.

A father listened to, but also, as we draw things to a close, a father who delivers. There's a sense in which we've already very clearly made reference to that. But verses 5 to 7 speak of the way in which the widow's trust is vindicated by the father's provision. The father shows himself to be both personally interested in and powerfully able to provide for the fatherless family. This God is not only a powerful God who can do great miracles, but a personal God who is concerned for this widow.

And the provision that he makes is what we might describe as generously sufficient, generously sufficient to pay her debts and to leave a balance that would allow her to carry on living with her sons in a measure of comfort, if not a luxury. The father delivers. He delivers. Of course, he delivers. He is a God who delivers. He loves, and he is able to provide, and he does. And so, I say to you, Christian, this morning, behold your Father God. This is the God you are blessed to have, a God who is personally interested in you, a God who is personally concerned for you, a God who is powerfully able to provide for your deepest needs. Behold your Father God, but also, I say to you, share your Father God with others, and indeed reflect your Father God to others.

A father lost, a father found, a father listened to, a father who delivers, but finally, a father for you. The passage ends that the widow went and told the man of God the outcome of the miracle, and he said, go sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.

[27 : 54] We've already made reference, fleetingly, but reference to the manner in which Elisha, in representation of God, acts as a kinsman redeemer for the widow.

And in that context, we pose the question that is answered for us in that verse 7, what is the money secured by the sale of the oil used for? Well, having read the story, we know what it will be used for. It's used to redeem her sons. She had this huge debt with her creditor, and as a result of this huge debt, she was going to lose her sons. But now, with the money secured from the sale of the oil, she is able to pay off her debts and redeem her sons. And so, in that way, very, very explicitly and very evidently, God is acting. God Himself is acting through Elisha as her kinsman redeemer. God is the kinsman redeemer in the account. And as we recognize that, so we can also recognize that the significance of this story, of this true story, goes beyond our discovering that our Father God is good and generous, though He is. It goes beyond discovering that we must, as fathers, or simply as Christians, to seek to be like Him. That is a lesson that we can draw. But the story goes beyond those lessons, and it points forward to Jesus Christ, to the one provided by the Father to redeem His people. You see, we as men and women, each and every one of us, like the widow, are submerged in a debt we cannot pay. It may not be, and indeed for most of us, it's not a financial debt. That isn't our fundamental problem, but we are all submerged in a debt of sin. As we were sharing with the children, we miss the mark. We fall short. And as we fall short, so this debt is accumulated, and we simply cannot pay. There is nothing we can do that would cancel the debt. Like the woman, we are in a desperate circumstance, and no one is able to help. Even if there were those willing, there is no one able.

To help. The debt is too great. Listen to the words of the psalmist as he describes the human condition in this regard in Psalm 49. No man can redeem the life for another or give to God a ransom for him. The ransom for a life is costly. No payment is ever enough. But in response to our desperate plight, and born of his deep fatherly love, God sent his only Son and our elder brother Jesus, as our Redeemer, our kinsman Redeemer, our relative Redeemer, Jesus is the one who has paid the ransom price to secure our freedom and redemption. I commented on the reading in Colossians at the beginning of the service, and how there Paul speaks of how at Calvary these documents declaring the great debt that we had were nailed to the cross, publicizing, declaring that the debt was canceled. See, the canceled, the debt of our sin canceled by the death of Jesus in our place, taking upon Himself the punishment that we were due, our debt that we were due. Our debt canceled. The price paid to secure your freedom, your redemption. And the redemption that is secured for us is a generous redemption, just as with the widow who not only secured the freedom of her sons, but discovered that there was still more left from which to live. So, God provides for His people a redemption that encompasses freedom from sin and the consequences of sin, but also freedom to live a new life in the service of God, to the glory of God, in the enjoyment of God. Again, in the words of the psalmist, plenteous redemption indeed. And so, this account, rooted and grounded in the Old Testament, nonetheless points forward to Jesus, to Jesus as the great Redeemer of His people, to Jesus the one who has paid the price of sin, who has canceled the debt that we have accrued in our place, the one in whom we must put our trust, the one in whom you must put your trust, that you might know that freedom and that redemption that He offers to you. And so, the Father who cares for the widow, He is a Father for you. He is a Father for you also. The world's best Father. Do you know Him? Is He your Father? Are you His Son? Are you His Daughter?

Perhaps for you this morning, He is posing you that very inviting question that Alicia posed to the widow. How can I help you? How can I help you? He is here, He is willing, and He is able to help you.

Let us pray.