

2 Kings 4:8-37

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Date: 29 October 2006

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[0 : 00] If you turn back in the Bible with me to the first passage I read this evening, 2 Kings chapter 4. I want to spend some time reflecting this evening further on the life of Elisha.

Those of you here this morning will know I talked then about the handover of power and office that takes place between Elijah and Elisha and how, while Elijah was the man appointed to begin the battle against Baal worship in ancient Israel.

Right at the very start of that battle a prophecy had been given that Elijah would start the battle but it would be his successor Elisha and particularly a king called Jehu who would bring the battle to its dramatic close.

And that the whole of Elijah's life, even the spectacular victory that he strikes against Baal worship on Mount Carmel where a massive number of the prophets of Baal are publicly humiliated and then butchered by Elijah.

Even that was not the end of the story. But the end of the story was only going to come with the arrival of Elisha and then Jehu. And so we turn tonight to this incident in the life of Elisha who's now well on the path to bringing the battle against Baal to an end.

[1 : 24] And we have before us one of the most touching miracles which Elisha will perform. Notice just in passing at the start how similar it is to the miracle performed by Elijah.

Elijah and the miracle of the widow in Zarephath which we find in 1 Kings 17 where Elijah not only provides miraculous food for this widow as Elisha does for a widow at the start of 2 Kings 4 but also Elijah raises the widow's son from the dead.

So right at the start of this story we know that we are being reminded once again that Elisha is following the footsteps of his master and yet Elisha will do even greater things than his master did.

And the Shunammite, the lady at the heart of this story has to be one of the most attractive characters within the whole of the Old Testament. Well the first thing we know about her is that she has such respect and affection for the man of God that she sees him passing through her village regularly.

She arranges for him to have an apartment, a flat, made on top of her house so that whenever he's coming through town he doesn't have to worry about where he's going to stay.

[2 : 47] It's an act of real altruism and kindness on her part. She's clearly a woman of considerable material means and she places him at the disposal of the man of God to make his life more comfortable and easier.

And in response to that though she has not asked for anything in return Elisha speaks to her about what he can do for her well is there something that she lacks?

Is there something he can do for her? Not as payment for what she's done but as a way of acknowledging the grace and the kindness of this woman towards her. I think you get something of the quality of the woman's character from the fact that her immediate response is I have everything I need.

I live among my own people. The impression you get from that response is she's very satisfied with her position in life and she's not done this kindness for the prophet with the hope of any gain.

She has done it simply to make his life easier. But Elisha doesn't let it rest there. Elisha probes further and his servant Gehazi reveals to him that this woman is childless.

[3 : 54] There is something she lacks in her life and that is she has no child. And we can sympathise with the idea of a woman who has no child suffering emotional distress and pain because of that.

Even today I don't suppose women are any different than this woman who's described for us here in 2 Kings 4. It would have been a void in her life that she and her husband were unable to have children.

But of course in the ancient world it would have been even worse. Not only would it have been a source of private grief, private anxiety, that she was unable to have children.

In the kind of society in which she lived where a woman's value was by and large judged by her ability to produce children. This would also be a source of some public anxiety, some public shame for her as well.

So it's amazing that the prophet sees this problem and grants this miracle, if you like. This woman receives the child for which she has not asked.

[5 : 02] She has not moaned or complained about her status to the prophet at all. And yet the prophet has performed under God this gracious miracle whereby she and her husband who we're told was too old probably to have children are able to have a son.

A son that they never asked for but a son who was wanted and loved and cherished all the same. And that's what makes the next event we are told about in the story so heart-wrenching and bizarre.

At some point in this boy's early life he is mysteriously taken away from her. The child that she never asked for the child that in one sense she never wanted, if you like is mysteriously taken away from her.

One day he's out in the field he gets a headache the next minute he's sitting on his mother's lap and the next minute he's fading away. The child is swept unexpectedly out of her life.

As unexpectedly, if you like as he arrives. You don't know how old he is the fact that he's described as sitting on his mother's lap indicates that he's probably not that old. But this tragedy opens up before us.

[6 : 15] What can we say in reflecting on this? Well first of all stay clear as you read through the story the woman is in agony over this. The way she cries out to the prophet towards the middle of the chapter indicates she's in agony.

This has deeply hurt her deeply wounded her. And that raises I think an immediate question for us as Christians. A question that perhaps we don't ask very often but is worth reflecting upon.

And that is why is death so painful? We read this story and we know we instinctively know that this woman's reaction is right. If your child unexpectedly dies it is right to be in an agony of soul.

If you knew somebody's child had died and they didn't care you would assume there's something wrong. But why is that the case? I would suggest that there's a sense in which if we look at the world around us death is the most natural thing there is.

Everybody it seems sooner or later dies. Everybody dies. There's nobody alive today who was alive 200 years ago. Death is a universal thing.

- [7 : 28] And you'd have thought that if it was natural it would not be so painful. Why does death always hurt? One can raise that question. One can also raise the question in another form.
- Why is it that if all things happen according to God's will this woman doesn't just say well the Lord gives and the Lord takes away and leave it at that. Why does she feel such pain?
- And why does the right of the king give no hint that she's doing wrong in feeling that pain? Why is she not criticized? Why does the right of the king say well this woman runs trying to profit but she should have just accepted that it was God's will.
- Why does the woman not do that? And I thought as I reflected on this three things three things came to mind. The first is that despite all appearances death is not natural.
- Death is unnatural. Death is despite being apparently the most natural thing in the world death is the most unnatural thing in the world.
- [8 : 34] When you read the Bible when you read the early chapters of Genesis what are you told? You are told that sin or death enters the world because men and women did not obey God.
- God did not design the world to include death. Death is an intrusion. Death is not natural. Death is an unnatural intrusion into God's creation.
- The famous Cambridge philosopher called Wittgenstein had a great statement I think about death. He said this. He said death is not an event in life it is a boundary.
- Death is not an event in life it is a boundary. What do you mean by that? Well he meant there is nothing else like death in life. You cross the road that is an event in life.
- You get ill and you get well again. That's an event in life. Death is an absolute boundary. It's not something that happens within your life. It's the end of your life.
- [9 : 39] It is a boundary. And as a Christian I think I would want to go on beyond that and say yes death is not an event in life it is a boundary and it is a boundary that should not be there.
- It is an unnatural boundary that has been put there because of human disobedience against God. We were not designed if you like to bump into that boundary and yet there it is stubborn before us.
- So the first thing we say about this woman is her reaction is a natural reaction to an unnatural boundary that she has come across in her life.
- Secondly death is total. there is nothing else like death in life. You can get ill and get better again. You can be injured and recover but you cannot die and recover.
- Death is total. It's absolute. You don't get a little bit of death. You're not a little bit dead. You're dead. It's a status.
- [10 : 44] It's not a process. It's a status. You're either dead or alive. You don't get a touch of death. You're dead. It's absolute and total.
- There is no revival or recovery. I remember it's a facetious story I tell at my own expense but I remember when I was a student writing an essay for my supervisor at university and I remember him throwing the essay back at me and saying Sir, I revive.
- I do not resurrect. And the point he was making was your essay is so bad. It's total. You cannot use this essay and make it into something good.
- It is totally bad. You've got to start again. Death is total. It is absolute. It is not a question of being revived.
- The only answer to death is resurrection. And thirdly, I want to suggest that death is devastating for those who are left behind.

[11 : 46] This woman is devastated. Why is she devastated? Because she's less than she once was. We are made to be human beings who live in relationships with others.

When God created Adam, he went on to create Eve because man was alone. There was no other creature on the face of the earth with whom man could commune in the way that he was able to commune his woman after she was created.

We are not made to exist on our own. When somebody dies, we are diminished. We are less than we once were. This woman was once a mother.

Now she's a woman who has lost her child. I was once a grandson. Now I'm a man who lost his grandfather.

When she was friends with somebody, now you're the person whose friend died. You are less than you once were. And it's painful to be reduced like that.

[12 : 52] So this woman is devastated because she is less than she once was. She is made less by the death of her son. And I would add as a final point as well, the last thing about death, the thing that is in some way so terrifying.

When you're faced with the death of a loved one, you're reminded of your own mortality. When you face the death of somebody you are close to, for a few inescapable moments there, you're unable to avoid the fact that one day you too will die.

Death is absolute. And one day death will come for you. So we can understand then when we read this, why this woman is traumatised. Yes, we instinctively know she's doing the right thing.

And she's doing the right thing and being traumatised for death, because death is, despite the appearances, unnatural. It is total. It shouldn't be there, and yet it is total. It is a boundary. And death is devastating to her, because she is less than she once was.

What about the woman's reaction to the son's death? This is interesting. The first thing she does, of course, is heads off to see the prophet.

[14 : 12] And it's arguable that in verse 23 and verse 26, she sort of misleads her husband, and she goes on to mislead the prophet's servant as well.

There's no hint in the text that she's criticised for doing this. The writer of Kings doesn't get all high and mighty and say that she shouldn't have told her husband that everything was okay and gone on away.

That isn't the writer's interest at this point at all. What the writer focuses on is the fact that this woman is utterly single-minded. to get to the man of God. That's an act of great faith.

Why is it an act of great faith? Because the man of God, the prophet, is the one from whom God speaks to Israel at this point. If you want a good example of how this woman is acting out of faith compared to others, compare Ahab's answer to Elijah.

You remember after all those years of drought in Israel, Ahab comes across the one man who can solve the problem. Ahab comes across Elijah, and what does he say to Elijah?

[15 : 11] Is that you, the troubler of Israel? The one man who can solve the problem, and Ahab's response is, Is that you, the troubler of Israel? Ahab is not seeking out Elijah for help.

Ahab will remove his head from his shoulders if he gets the opportunity. the same thing happens to Elijah in 2 Kings chapter 6, when the city is being besieged, and starvation comes to the city, and the king sees women bargaining with their children as to who will eat children to stay alive, and he tears his robes, and what does he say?

He doesn't say, I need to go to Elisha to seek help from the man of God, the one man to whom God feasts at this time. He says, so help me if the head of Elisha is not removed from his shoulders by sundown tonight.

When this woman goes to Elisha, what's she doing? She's not running to Elisha to have a piece of him. She's not rushing to Elisha to take him down. She's rushing to Elisha because she knows he is the one man who can help.

That's angry and that's heartbroken as she is. She's single-mindedly going to Elisha because she knows he is the one person who can help her.

[16 : 32] Of course, when she gets to Elisha in verse 28, we have this explosion of grief. Did I ask you for a son, my Lord? She said. Didn't I tell you don't raise my hopes? What's she saying there?

She's saying, I told you I was happy and yet you gave me a son only to take him away again. Why didn't you leave me alone? Interestingly enough, once again, the writer at no point criticises her.

Read the chapter, there's no criticism of this woman expressing her honest agony and pain at this point. It is perfectly all right, I'm okay for her to do so.

Her grief is legitimate. And notice the response of the prophet. The prophet does not turn around to her and say, well it all happened within God's will. That's true.

The child died and that did not happen outside of the will of God. But the prophet doesn't throw that in her face at this point. That should be some kind of comfort to her. The prophet responds by moving to help her.

[17 : 49] One of the things that often puzzled me about the book of Job is that all delights is near the end of the book of Job, delights is that you remember the story, Job has suffered these terrible agonies, his family, and his fortune has been swept away, and he's been swept with all kinds of painful illnesses.

Four friends gather around him, and three of them play versions of the same scene. Three of them say to him, look, you must have fiended in some way for God to be treating you like this.

You must have done something wrong and God's punishing you. But Elijah comes in at the end, the youngest man, Elijah, he waits till the older men have spoken, and then Elijah gives this great speech about how God is absolutely sovereign, and how God is in control of all things, and how Job's suffering, an act of sovereign God, and he's not to look for a reason, and he's not to question God, he's simply to accept God's sovereignty.

And you read the Elijah's speech and you think, this is great stuff, it's absolutely correct, and it is, it seems to be correct. But then at the very end of the book of Job, God himself speaks.

And you're just wondering, well, why does God bother to speak for any Elijah seems to have said it all for him? It seems that the only conclusion one can draw is, Elijah was missing something.

[19 : 11] For all the fact that he seemed to get everything right, what was it about Elijah that was inadequate? I think it's this, Elijah had no human sympathy for Job and his agony of predicament.

Elijah simply gave him the technical, theological response about God's sovereignty, but he had no human compassion for the man who was suffering.

And what comes through, I think, in this story so beautifully is that Elisha, yes, he would have known that God was sovereign, he would have known that this did not happen outside of the will of God, but he responds by trying to help the woman.

He doesn't help her by simply giving her a theological statement about God's sovereignty. He responds in his actions by showing that he feels for her in her pain and he will try to help her even if he is not ultimately successful.

So then, we have this woman running to the prophet and I think that is an action of faith and it contrasts so wonderfully with the response of Ahab and then the later king with Elijah and Elisha.

[20 : 18] And finally, we reach this scene in the boy's room, this rather bizarre scene. Jehazi gets there first and he places the prophet's staff on the boy, but it does no good. The woman, of course, will not leave the prophet.

She doesn't want Gehazi. She wants the prophet himself because the prophet is a man for whom God speaks. She doesn't want to deal with the prophet's servant. She wants the real prophet there dealing first hand with this.

And Elisha engages in this, what is quite frankly when you first read it, desire ritual, where he lies on top of the boy, eye for eye, mouth for mouth, hand for hand.

And it says he does that that the boy is mysteriously revived. The boy comes back from the dead. And one's left with a question there, what is going on here?

What is Elisha doing? I think what Elisha is doing here is he is trying to identify himself as closely as he possibly can with the boy in his predicament.

[21 : 21] He can't become the boy. He can't become the dead body of the boy. But what Elisha does is he comes as close to being that as he possibly can.

He lies on the child, presses himself against the child, eye for eye, mouth for mouth, hand for hand. He identifies himself as closely as he possibly can with the boy.

And the miracle is, of course, that the boy is resurrected. The boy comes back to life in this marvellous and mysterious way. Well, of course, as we read this story, it's great.

The Shunammite has this miraculous child, the child mysteriously dies, and then the prophet intervenes, and the child is mysteriously brought back to life.

Great. what does it say to us today? We all, I think, if we're not this person ourselves, we all know people who've had children that have died, and they've prayed long and hard for those children, and they've loved them and cared for them, and suddenly they've been swept away.

[22 : 34] Why can't we look to this passage, read it, pray it through, and expect those children to come back from the dead just like that?

Does this passage, is it just a nice story, or does it stand as a kind of discouragement to us, that, well, yeah, it happened in those days, but it doesn't happen today? I think the answer lies in who Elisha is, who Elisha points to.

I read that passage from Luke's Gospel, because I think we have a clue in that passage from Luke of the kind of thing that's going on here. Remember that passage in Luke's Gospel, for some reason, John the Baptist is in prison, seems to suddenly have doubts about exactly who Jesus is.

I'm not sure quite what's going on there. But he sends his disciples to Jesus to say, are you the one to come, or should we wait for another? Are you the Messiah, or should we be waiting for somebody else?

And Jesus gives a very interesting response. He doesn't say to John, well, rest assured, I am the one. Go back and tell John, yes, I'm the one. Jesus' response is, go and tell John the things I'm doing.

[23 : 54] Don't tell him the things you see. Lepers cure the leprosy. The blind have their sight to soar. The dead are raised.

Have you ever wondered about why Jesus gives that response? Why doesn't he just say, I am the one? He doesn't give that response because he knows John knows his Old Testament well. And he knows that John understands who he, John is, and therefore the kind of person that he used to look for.

Remember I read that passage this morning where the apostles say, people are told that Elijah is meant to come first. And Jesus says, Elijah did come first. Elijah's already been here and they've done him everything they want.

And the writer tells us, he's talking about John the Baptist. So John the Baptist is Elijah. John the Baptist is Elijah looking for Elisha. As Elijah begins the battle against Baal.

And Elisha brings it to a conclusion. So John the Baptist announces the coming of the kingdom and he's looking for that person who will bring the kingdom in. So when Jesus sends a message for Jesus, what does Jesus do?

[25 : 01] Jesus describes Elisha to him. He says, you go and tell John that all that stuff that Elisha did in the Old Testament, and you can go away and read the story for Elisha yourself. Naaman killed the leprosees, the blind received their sight, the Shunammite son was raised from the dead.

Jesus says, go and tell him. All of the things that Elisha is meant to do, I'm doing them. Therefore, the conclusion doesn't explicitly draw, I am the one to come.

And how does that then connect with this passage here? Well, what did I say Elisha was doing in the latter part of this passage? He was identifying as closely as he could with the son of this woman in his death.

what does the book of Hebrews tell us about the Lord Jesus Christ, especially Hebrews chapter 4? Jesus Christ is the one who identifies totally with humanity.

Jesus Christ does one better than Elisha, if you like. Because Elisha here tries to identify with this child and his death, so the Lord Jesus Christ takes flesh, lives among men and women, dies on the cross and rises again.

[26 : 23] Why does he do that? He does it in total identification with men and women, boys and girls, partake of the same flesh and stand under the curse.

In Elisha here, the importance of the resurrection of this young lad here is not that it sets up a paradigm, a pattern that either makes us despair because our own loved ones are not resurrected before our eyes, nor does it set up a magical formula, go and lie on top of a corpse and it will warm up and come back to life.

The purpose of this passage here is that it reminds us, it points us towards the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ that is to come. And that's why I can save you tonight.

If you have a loved one who has died, if you have someone who is dear to you who has died and you say, why haven't they been resurrected? From a biblical Christian perspective, one can say, they have not been resurrected yet.

Time is not at an end. The world has not yet come to an end. They are told in the New Testament that because Christ is raised from the dead, there will be a resurrection at the end of time.

[27 : 42] And those loved ones who have died united to Christ will be raised with him to go home. So, as we feel the agony of death around us, as we lose loved ones here and now, that's painful for all the reasons I outlined earlier on.

And it's perfectly legitimate to feel agony when that happens. it's legitimate to pour out your heart in lamentation to friends and to God himself when that happens.

But the glorious truth of the Gospel is there is a resurrection. Elijah points us towards that. Elijah points us towards the one who heals the leper, gives the blind their sight, raises the dead.

And the glory of the Gospel is for those who unite into Christ, for those who put their trust in Christ, you are united to him, both in his death and in his resurrection.

Praise God for the glorious good news of his Gospel. Thank you.