

2 Kings 4

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[0 : 0 0] I'd like to turn, seeking God's help for a few moments, to this passage that we read from in the Old Testament in 2 Kings chapter 4 to Kings chapter 4. I really want to think about the passage as a whole, but perhaps the words that we find in verse 2 in particular would benefit us to keep in our minds just to focus our attention. In verse 1 we read, the wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried to Elisha, your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord, but now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves. Elisha replied to her, how can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house? Your servant has nothing there at all, she said, except a little oil. And I'm sure the narrative is well known to you. How can I help you? Some time ago I was reading a book by Leonard Griffith. The book was entitled In God's Time and Hours, and he was describing an experience that had been attributed to Cecil B. DeMille, and DeMille was a famous film producer, and he was also a man who was passionately interested in nature. He's reported to have said on one occasion, creation is a drug that I can't do without.

And this day when he was out, he happened to see, or he was privileged to see, a great big black beetle climb out of a stagnant pond. And it seemed to stop right in front of his eyes. And even as he looked at it, he thought that the thing was beginning just to gasp and to die. And as it was going through the throes of dying, a great crack appeared to open up in its back. And from that crack there emerged this gray mass as he described it. And as he watched, he was astonished to see that in the heat of the sun, in a matter of moments, this mass of gray, a shapeless mass, it was transformed into a vividly colored four-winged dragonfly. The man was astonished, and he was absolutely stunned. And he said to himself, well, if God does that for a beetle, will He not do more for us? Will He not do more for us?

And of course, we know that He will, and He does. We've only got to look at Calvary to know what it is that God does for us. We've only got to look into our own hearts to discover what God does with them. We've only got to look to heaven itself and to the things that God has said from the throne above, and even the giving of His Spirit into the world of our own day.

How can I help you? It's the words that I want to hinge your thoughts around here today. Or, if you like, in the authorized version of the Scripture, the same verse for 2 Kings 4 and 2, what shall I do for thee? I wonder if maybe God is saying that to someone here in the service this morning, someone who comes maybe in the same sort of state as this widow woman comes to Elisha so long ago that we read of here in 2 Kings 4 in a state of brokenness. And maybe we need to ask ourselves, well, where do we turn and who do we turn to when things seem to be going awry in our lives?

I want to think more today about the practical application of the narrative that God has given us here in this passage than any of the deeper theology that we might find within it. Maybe God is speaking to someone. Now, that's a foolish kind of a thing for me to say from a pulpit here. Maybe God is speaking to someone. Of course God is speaking to someone. He's speaking to everyone. He's speaking to you. He's speaking to me. This is why He has drawn us to be found in this place together today through all the different circumstances of our lives. He has taken us through all sorts of different experiences from different backgrounds with different temperaments to be before Him here together today as we sit and listen to His Word. And as we turn to this Word, we see that it is primarily concerned with a woman. And I want to think about this woman under three headings. First of all, she is someone who is intimidated in the world, and we can well understand that from her circumstances as outlined for us here in this passage. But she is also a woman that we discover as we go through it, who is intimate with the Lord, intimate with God. She has a relationship with Him. It might have been somewhat tenuous at the outset, but it was a strengthening relationship. And then, of course, she is a woman who is inspired by the Word, inspired by the message that she receives from the Lord through her servant, the prophet Elisha. Intimidated in the world because the world for her has become a very hostile place. We can see that so clearly. And for so many in our world, for so many in this city, maybe for some in the congregation here this morning, this world has become a hostile place.

[6 : 52] There are those in the congregation who serve in the police force. They know it to be a very hostile hostile city. They encounter all kinds of difficulties. They see all sorts of problems around them day by day.

And here is a woman who finds in her own day that she has problems, and in her brokenness, she appeals to Elisha. And the story goes that her creditors are closing down on her, or rather, her late husband's creditors. They are now closing down on her. And somehow, she finds herself in debt. But it's not told us as to how she finds herself in debt, other than it was a debt that her husband had accrued, or her late husband had accrued. And maybe she has already done all that is within her power to be able to settle it and to put things right, and everything seems to have failed.

Whatever she might have had in her possession, it has long since gone. And now this creditor is coming. Everything has been sacrificed, and she is desperate to hold her family together, to keep her two sons with her, to keep them alive, to keep them out of slavery.

And it is in this stage that she discovers that separation and slavery and poverty, they're all like great giants looming over her so menacingly. What does she do? Well, she lifts her eyes, we could say, not just to the hills, but to the Lord. We sung that glorious praise at the outset of our service. I to the hills will lift mine eyes. From whence doth come mine aid? And she lifts her eyes to the hills, and maybe as she surveyed the hills that were around her, she remembered that there is a God who created them. And she remembered also that her husband, her late husband, was a man who revered the Lord. That's what we're told at the very outset. Your servant, my husband, is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. He worshiped the Lord. Perhaps he had given himself into the kingdom of God.

Maybe he was part of the school of the prophets. Maybe he was known personally to Elisha. Obviously, he may well have been known personally to Elisha. She appeals, remembering that there is a God who is in heaven, and maybe also with a psalmist, she finds that recalling the presence and the power and the person of God, she finds a new determination within herself. And maybe like the psalmist in Psalm 118, she finds herself saying, I shall not die, but live, and shall the works of God discover.

[9 : 57] The Lord will meet us, dies is sore, but not to death given over. And maybe someone needs to say that today to themselves. I shall not die, but live, and shall the works of God discover.

Maybe you feel the oppression of life and the oppression of various things in life. Maybe it's problems within family, problems of finance, problems that cause despair as we survey the state of the world that is around us, and we don't know where to turn. Well, here is the place to turn. Lift our eyes not just to the hills, but to the heavens and to the God who sits upon the throne, the God who knows us individually, the God who knows us intimately, the God who is ready and willing and able to help us in all the different difficult circumstances of our lives. Oh, how different our world would be and the city would be and all our congregations and our denominations would be if we as the people of God would simply lay hold upon the Lord with this kind of determination. And we would have the power to speak for Him and to speak to Him.

How we need to consider these things. Perhaps this woman experienced a lot of opposition to her own situation and the faith that she was seeking to exercise here. Maybe when she thought that she would turn to Elisha, it's always possible that she talked to her neighbors and her friends and those who were around her. When they saw the state that she was in, they might have turned and said to her by way of discouragement, well, what good is your faith doing you now? Where is your God in the situation you find yourself in now? Do you find that people say that if you try to speak to them about God? Well, don't be discouraged by that in the slightest.

There might have been those who had suggested that her piety and the piety of our late husband was all a waste of time. And there are some today who would treat the Christian faith in that way. Some see it as our faith has been as a dead and decaying albatross. You know that bird that Coleridge describes in his rhyme of the ancient mariner? It's tied around the neck of this ancient mariner in that well-rehearsed rhyme.

Ah well, ade, what evil looks had I from old and young. Instead of the cross, the albatross about my neck was hung. There are many who think of Christian faith as being like that today, something that will simply hold you back. It'll hold you back in your professional life. It'll hold you back in your social life. It'll hold you back in society. It'll hold you back in every sphere of life. And we can see why people think in that way. And we realize that there is a sense in which we would have to agree that in so many respects that could well be the truth in this politically correct and hostile world as far as spirituality is concerned, if it's Christian spirituality. But we aren't a people who are to be discouraged. We are a people of faith, and we know that faith is to be exercised. And we know that there are many who have gone before us and many who are here among us who have discovered that faith is, as the Scripture says for us, it is as an anchor for the soul. It is steadfast. It is stable.

[13 : 52] It is something that we can trust. It is something we can build upon. And we are told by those who know of these things that to appreciate the worth of an anchor, you need to subject it to the stresses of the storm, the tides and the winds. And it is then we realize that there is a benefit here.

And if we transfer that in the metaphorical sense to this widow woman, see that here she is in the very heart of a storm. This is this widow storm. Everything is going wrong.

But she has this faith, and she appeals to this God. And she learned to say with the psalmist, the storm is changed into a calm at His command and will, so that the waves that raged before now quiet are and still. The wonder, the mystery of the ministry of the Word and the Spirit of God.

In the midst of all the turmoil and the trouble and the toil, there is the peace, there is the stability, there is the strength, there is the refuge, oh, that men to the Lord would give praise for His goodness then, and for His works of wonders done unto the sons of men. And you see, in the midst of that, though we despise the trials and the troubles that cause us so much pain, they have a habit of drawing us into this intimacy with God. And God uses them to that end so often. He draws us close to Himself that He might minister meaningfully to us. And there are times in life, and I'm sure that it was true for her, that it must have seemed as though God could not possibly be interested in the microscopic detail of her individual life in the light of all the greater issues that are taking place around her in the world. And we feel the same today so often. How can we go to the Lord with what seems to us to be the trivial problems that we have, when we look around and see the greater problems that many others are experiencing all over the world?

Terrible, terrible, terrible things. How can God listen when He has to engage with all the global and the universal issues that affects the nations? And yet we find that He does. Somehow mysteriously and even magnificently we can say, when we read the Word of God and put our own lives into its context, we realize, and recognize that it all forms part of a single cohesive whole, a plan that God has not just for time but for eternity. The boundaries are pushed back. So many in society, they see a beginning and the end, a birth and a death, and there it all is. And you make the boast of the gap that we've got in between.

[17 : 40] And when we come to the Word, we can see that what some call the end for us is a new beginning. Eternity is part of the equation as God works all things together for the good of those who love Him.

So often we discover in life that faith is the thing that survives where nothing else will survive. When we talk about brokenness, someone has written, God uses broken things as a defect, broken soil for crops, broken clouds for rain, broken grain for bread, broken bread for health and strength, a broken life for fragrance, broken sinners become trophies of grace in the hands of a healing God.

I forget who it was that wrote that, but we could add to it that it's all because Christ's broken body was nailed to a broken tree for a broken world to bring healing and wholeness to His people.

Our friend, are you one of Christ's people? Have you come to that place, that point of commitment? It's so important to do that, that point of commitment to make our calling and to make our calling and election sure.

Jesus is given in His sacrament in the words of the paraphrase of Matthew 26 and 26, and in the words of the body, Thus I give for you, for all take eat and live, and of this sacred right renew, that brings my wondrous love to view.

[19 : 30] And in her brokenness, she cries out to the Lord through His prophet Elisha, How can I help you? is the response that she gets from the prophet.

It reminds me of the words of Jesus in Luke 18 and 35. You remember how the blind man, he cried out to the Lord, the blind beggar.

And Jesus, He calls him and He goes to him and He asks him, What do you want me to do for you? And we can imagine the look of incredulity on the man's face when he's talking to Jesus, What would you have me to do for you?

Lord, that I would be able to see, did He even need to ask? Of course, Jesus didn't, but He wants us to ask anyway, how we need to bring out prayers to the Lord, out burdens to the Lord, out concerns to the Lord, out desires to the Lord. We need to call upon the name of the Lord. And of course, the Lord responded.

And Elisha asks this question here, How can I help you? And when this woman responds in the way that God would have had her to respond to the word, God's grace symbolized in the oil, it just flows and flows and flows into this widow's net. I'm sure you've experienced something of that.

[20 : 54] God, maybe in your heart, maybe in your trial, maybe in your confusion, there's that sense of unrest and hopelessness. No one seems to understand. There's no one more you can talk to, there's nothing else you can do, there's no one you can tell, and you turn to the Lord. And mysteriously, the grace begins to flow, and it flows, and it flows, and it flows, and it's flowing still. The grace of God, and in her case, symbolized there in the oil, it pays her debt, it secures her present situation, it guarantees her future and the future of her family. The Lord, she realized when she went through this experience, He was very near. It might have seemed to her for a time that she was forsaken, that He had forgotten all about her. But then she would realize that He was intimately bound up in the temporal as well as the spiritual affairs of her life. And the same is true for you and for me, my friends. The Lord is intimately bound up with us. We might think that we have wandered away from Him, but where can we go and be outside of His presence? Psalm 139 verse 7,

From thy spirit whither shall I go or from thy presence fly? Ascend thy heaven, lo thou art there, there if in hell I lie. Take I the mourning wings and dwell in the utmost parts of sea. Even there the Lord shall thy hand me lead, thy right hand hold shall me. Tell me, what do you have in your house?

Asked Cilicia. Your servant has nothing there at all, she said, except a little oil, and maybe she could have added so very crucially to that, and a little faith. And it probably felt to her as though her faith at that point with the battering that it had taken, it was now diluted somewhat. Maybe there was doubt mingled in there.

There might even have been a little hint of disbelief creeping in as well. But she is an essential element, that faith. And God's grace received by faith. And faith, we know, to be able to achieve anything, it must be exercised. So here her faith is tried and her faith is tested. And it might seem to us that this is a sore trial that this woman has been put through. And Elisha may be felt that way also, but he knew that for her there was peace lying on just the other side of her present pain, if she would have the faith to reach through and grasp it. And there seems to me to be a biblical principle there always, that that is where peace lies. When we find ourselves in troubled situations, on just the other side, if we will but hang on in there and call upon the name of the Lord, and reach out and grasp the peace that is promised to us in the Scripture. And for her, the big question would have been, does she have the faith, does she have faith enough to bring her emptiness into God's fullness? That God will meet her need. And we ask, well, what will make the difference here? And of course, it's her attitude. How will she react to God's Word, God's Word through as prophet? How do we react to God's Word? It seems to me that there were two things that could have happened here. She could either be inspired by the Word, or she could be insulted by the Word, by the Word that's outlined by Elisha. And that's the way it is in the world even to this day, isn't it?

There are those who will hear the gospel, and even as they hear it, there's a sense in which they feel almost like a rush of the presence of the Spirit of God. It's as though a light comes on somewhere inside, and they feel this sense of inspiration and this flood of hope. And they realize that there is something to reach out for, and there are others when they hear the gospel, and they are utterly, utterly insulted by it. Surely you cannot expect me in my day and age to believe in this kind of thing that you are propounding. Well, she was inspired by the Word.

[26 : 08] Go round and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons, and pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.

There's the test, really, when you think of it. And it was a kind of a test. Maybe she had hoped that what Elisha would have done would have gone to the treasury or the coffers of the school of the prophets and drawn out a sum of money that would have relieved her distress, but oh, what a blessing she would have missed. Here she is in this new situation, and we notice that when this is presented to her, the test is, will she honor the Word of the Lord, or will she honor the Word of the Lord?

And we notice that the promise is that the measure of the blessing that we see in the oil here is equated to the measure of our faith rather than to the giving of God. And we know that no effort on her part would have made, no effort of faith would have received no blessing. Had she listened to the things that Elisha had said, and she turned to her sons and said, will you hear what the man is saying to me? We have this tiny little cruise of oil, and he wants me to go and to gather all kinds of vessels, and I'm to pour from this tiny little jar. I'm going to pour it out so that all of these will be filled.

There's madness. There's no logic to it. I'm not going to even attempt it. I'm not going to embarrass myself by asking others for vessels and finding that this doesn't work. There would have been no blessing.

Or if she had said to perhaps her sons, go on, I don't know that this is going to do us any good, but maybe we should gather a jar or two together, and we'll close the door and we'll see if this will work. And if they had done that, and then she had tried to pour it, she would have found that it would have filled the vessels, and then it would have stopped, and she would have had a little blessing, but not a lot. But she does the right thing. She has great need. She has great hope. She might have had great neighbors who encouraged her, and God from that little jar, he just pours and pours and pours so bountifully. How she would have loved the verse of this psalm, my table thou hast furnished, shed and pressings of my foes. My head thou dost with oil anoint, and my cup overflows.

[28 : 48] You see, to this day the same is true. God delights to pour out the blessing of His grace on His people. Even this morning He loves to do this. And the invitation is bring your emptiness to His fullness.

Bring all the problems of life before Him that He might handle them. Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. I will give you rest. But there's a problem, and the problem that we have is that our heart by nature is already so full of so much that God despises that there's no room for His blessing. That is a very real difficulty. Sin of every kind lurks in every heart, in the natural heart. Sins that God despises, pride and envy and jealousy and covetousness and anger and lust and the likes. And really the test is similar for us in our own day. God would say to us, pour it all out. Empty your heart. Pour it all out prayerfully in confession before God, so that He might pour in of

His grace and blessing. His anointing grace. And that calls for faith, doesn't it? There are some, when they hear that message, they're simply outraged by it, and they say, no, I'm not going to get involved with the likes of that. There are others who say, well, there are one or two troubling me badly, and I will go. And they kneel before God, and they pour it out, and they tell Him about it, and they feel the better of it, and they've received a measure of blessing. And they know that there is something there, and there is something alive, and there is something worthwhile.

There are others who go, and they pour it all out. They empty themselves of all that is troubling them, and all that is weighing them down, and all that is holding them back in the spiritual sense. And they find that God and His grace comes in us a flood, and life is transformed. And once the blessing begins to flow like the oil on the widow's cruise, the receptive heart, it just fills and fills and fills with spiritual blessedness, that sweet, sweet sense of the presence of God. And the heart fills and it runs over with a peace that the world cannot give, and the peace that the world cannot take away. And the end result is God becomes our all-consuming passion.

Everything is different. Everything is new. The focus has totally changed, and our all-consuming passion in life is simply living supremely to glorify God that we might enjoy Him forever. And to be able to say with another, Now none but Christ can satisfy in another name for me. There's love, there's life, there's lasting joy, that we are living in life, and the Lord Jesus found in thee. That's how it seems to me it was ultimately for this widow who appealed to God. And as it was for her, may it be for you and for me as we close this service this morning. Let us pray.