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The Goodness of God

II Kings 4:1-37

Intro: We are about to begin a section of Elisha's ministry that is characterized by several miracles. Some may seem to deal with mundane problems while others address some impossible difficulties. But all of these miracles occurred and were recorded for the purpose of revealing Yahweh's amazing power to a rebellious Israel. At the end of [ch3](#) it was revealed to the army of Israel and her king the terrible extent that idolatry will lead it's adherents to when the King of Moab sacrificed his eldest son to the Moabite god Chemosh up on the city wall. As futile as this horrific act was in gaining the attention of Chemosh, it was this act that took the wind out of Israel's sails and caused them to retire from the battlefield just short of total victory.

As we will see in the next few chapters, Yahweh's power is shown to be victorious over debt, death, drought, disease and everyday difficulties. As such, it is a sustained argument for Israel to return and place her trust in a merciful and gracious God who is generous and omnipotent in His blessings and stop trying to live up to the horrific and ultimately futile requirements of pagan idolatry. You could even compare this section with the barrage of miracles performed by Jesus in Mark's Gospel ([4:35-5:43](#)). There Jesus is, yet again, providing Israel with clear and irrefutable evidence of His divine claims. It is amazing to me how often people yearn for the miraculous only to find that miracles fail to change their heart towards God's truth. In light of this, we can say that these miracles were meant to remind the faithful of Israel that Yahweh is the ever-present help to the helpless and the nameless.

Some of these episodes of Elisha's ministry are extended stories and some are just brief glimpses that are lacking in details. Our first text is one of those. It may seem like we are all well acquainted with the goodness of God and thus, we should be able to breeze through these stories quickly but I think that would be a mistake. No matter how familiar we think we are with the generosity of Go, it never hurts to remind ourselves again as to the gracious extent He is willing to go to assist His people as they walk with Him through this life. Also, there's a sense in which each of these miracles listed in [ch4](#) relate to the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf so we'll take our time

in dealing with each one.

1 – Here we see a nameless woman with double desperation. She's lost her husband to death and is about to lose both her sons due to debt. As a widow, her sons would be the only means of support for her but that's about to be carried away into debt slavery. But this woman is dealing with more than just this; we can pick up on the aggravation that marks her desperation: your servant feared the Lord... Her husband had been faithful to Yahweh and to His true worship at a time when such faithfulness could cost you something. It wasn't long since Jezebel was executing the faithful prophets of Yahweh and if that wasn't the issue, there was still the perverted state-sponsored idolatry of Jeroboam's bull cult that was the norm in Israel. Either way, this servant of Yahweh resisted the religious trends of the day; he swam against the current of his culture and government and yet, his family faces disaster.

Do you feel her pain? Don't we experience this same aggravation in a hundred different ways in our own spiritual walk? Faithful Christians, strong believers get cancer and even die from it; they experience financial struggles and the loss of family members or close friends. Some even experience the pain of severe persecution because of their stubborn faithfulness. "Your servant feared God, but the creditor is coming." Even dedicated people who are training for ministry have trials and difficulties. This is the perennial mystery that all believers face and as this widow is facing it, she seems to be asking if God has any provision for her in this dilemma.

We should also note that hers is still a faithful desperation. Where do we see her faith? In the fact that she cried out to Elisha, the servant of Yahweh. Notice how her faith just clings to hope, just informs; it doesn't speculate. She just lays the problem before Elisha – doesn't suggest a solution or hint at possible options. It's similar to Jehoshaphat's faith in II Chron 20:12 when, facing an invading horde he turns to God and states, "we don't know what to do, but our eyes are upon You." As this woman appeals to Elisha, Yahweh's servant, she's appealing to Yahweh; as she casts her burden on Elisha she casts it on Yahweh. She is in desperate trouble and yet, she still believes.

But there's more than just faith here, there's privilege in her desperation.

Yes, she cries out to Elisha but notice how eager Elisha is to help in [v2](#). Compare this to what we saw in [ch3](#), Elisha's scathing response to King Jehoram in the midst of an international crisis. He wouldn't have paid him any attention if King Jehoshaphat hadn't been there. The king had put himself beyond Elisha's concern and God's help. Not so, this woman? She brings her troubles to Elisha and all he can think of is how he can help. The difference between Jehoram and this nameless widow is: she has access to God in her troubles. You may not have any status in this world but if you're a Christian, what you do have through Jesus Christ is the privilege of access to bring your troubles to God's throne of grace. King David accurately describes this blessed mercy belonging to all believers in [Ps 142:2](#).

2-6 – The body of this miracle story provides insight into the typical ways God tend to work in the lives of His people. These are not absolute principles but common patterns seen in scripture and in our own experience. Notice where God begins: with our destitution. Elisha asks what she has in the house and her reply is meant to indicate a lack of resources. This flask of oil wasn't a gallon jug used for cooking but a small bottle used for anointing. It was a sign of her utter destitution. By mentioning it, she's stressing the meagerness of what she has or can offer. God often begins His work at the point of our inadequacies. He shows us how hopeless the situation is and then begins with the very thing that symbolizes our helplessness and makes it the means of His help.

Jesus operates in a similar mode in [Mark 6](#). He's been preaching to a multitude of people for most of the day and many are feeling famished. He turns to the disciples and asks, "How many loaves do you have?" ([38](#)). He didn't ask if they had enough because what they did have was grossly insufficient, but He began His work with those 5 loaves and 2 fishes. "What do you have in the house?" Next to nothing; and God often begins with that.

Next, notice what God stimulates. [Vs5-6](#) assumes her complete obedience and Yahweh's provision required it. The miracle occurred as she acted. Elisha gave her the instructions but he couldn't do this for her, she had to trust God herself. The miracle was performed according to the measure of her faith in borrowing the vessels. But is this not the ultimate goal of God's way in meeting the needs of His people? Is it not God's purpose to exercise and build our faith rather than to bypass it? God tends to pull us into the

process of His provision for us in such a way that our trust in Him must become visible. When God provides, he routinely does so not just to meet our needs but to build our faith and encourage our obedience in the process.

7 – Finally, notice God’s overwhelming kindness. Elisha gives her 3 commands: sell, pay, live. Yahweh granted her an abundance far beyond the immediate need. God had His eye on both the immediate emergency and the ongoing need. This shouldn’t surprise us because this is God’s typical way: to do more than we ask. He did it for this obscure, nameless woman. We don’t know her name but she gets more press than one of the most important characters in Israel’s history – King Omri. For all his importance, the author only gives him 6 verses in I Kings 16 but he gives this poor widow 7. This shows us that God’s desperate people matter to Him.

8-17 – This next miracle is similar to the account of Elijah’s time in Zarephath but Elijah was dealing with a poor widow while Elisha is being hosted by a prominent, wealthy woman with some standing in the community. She wasn’t just great in social standing and in wealth; she was great in perception as well. She noticed Elisha passing through town regularly and perceived he was a man of God and she wanted to serve the Lord by serving his prophet. She first began by feeding Elisha (and Gehazi) but then decided to add a room for them to rest from their journey. As they were enjoying her kindness, Elisha wondered what could be done for her. She refused the offer of a gift because she wasn’t looking for reciprocation. She had no pressing needs; she just wanted to be a blessing.

What can you do for the woman who has everything? Gehazi had an idea: she had no son and her husband was old. If nothing else, she would need someone to provide for her when he was gone. Elisha announced God’s gift (**16**) and the woman thinks it’s incredible – but the Bible doesn’t and it continues on in its matter-of-fact style in v17. This isn’t the first time this has happened in the biblical record. There’s the story of Sarah in Genesis, then Rebekah, then Rachel. In Judges we find Manoah’s wife was barren but becomes Samson’s mother and in I Samuel, Hannah’s tears and prayers result in the birth of Samuel. Here we have this Shunammite lady and in Luke we have Elizabeth.

But this miracle birth is unique among all these other instances of a barren woman giving birth. In all other cases, the birth is essential for the continuation of the covenant people or producing a great leader in a time of crisis for Israel. None of that applies here. This child will likely farm his inheritance until he dies. No great leader, no essential figure in redemptive history, we don't even know his name! What gives? Sometimes God gives such gifts just to make a woman happy with a child. Sometimes God's reasons are far simpler than we think. That's how God is. He delights to give good gifts not because we're prominent or useful but because He's just that kind of God. Often times God gives His gifts to His servants just to make them happy with His gifts. This shows the simplicity of God's goodness

18-30 – Ok, here's the rub: before Elisha met this woman, she had no needs but in **v28** – she's very needy. Notice that it was Yahweh's gift that made her needy! The poor widow of **v1-7** faced desperate need and now this wealthy woman knows the same. Social position is no guarantee against catastrophe. But, the real problem is that God had given her a gift only to take it away! She takes the boy and plops him down on Elisha's bed, it's his responsibility now.

What are we to make of God from all this? Is He a mean God? He promised her a son and then takes the son He promised? Did He make her happy just to increase the pain of loss? Does He lift us up just to press us down harder? This problem is not unique to this woman. God's servants have cried out in bitter distress over this same question for ages because they don't know why God has crushed them. What do we do in such situations? Where can we turn?

We can only do what this Shunammite woman does: she goes looking for Yahweh in the person of His servant. She rides off some 15-18 miles to Mt Carmel to find Elisha. When she gets to him she clings to him and won't let go. In a certain sense, clinging to the man of God is clinging to Yahweh. Not that Elisha is divine but he is God's authorized representative so to deal with him is to deal with Yahweh. So where does she turn? Where can she go? Only to the same God who has perplexed her – there's no where else to go and no one else to whom she can turn to. What can you do when it seems like God's mercy has turned to anger? Acknowledge the bitter distress and keep clinging to the God you don't quite understand. There's a word for that – the word is faith. And don't confuse faith with serenity.

27-33 – Elisha seems surprised that he didn't see this problem coming; it wasn't previously revealed to him by God. Here we see displayed the limitations of God's servant Elisha was limited in knowledge and in power; the only thing he could do is come to God in earnest prayer. The point of this section is not to stress Elisha's ingenuity but his utter dependence on God. His actions in **v34** are merely an extension of his prayer in **v33**. The power is entirely God's and Elisha can only pray for it, not command it. This text highlights the limitations of all God's servants.

This applies to those servants we admire the most. You may think of a particular pastor or Bible teacher that had an important influence on the way you think and believe. Maybe you had a mentor in your early years who disciplined you and helped you navigate the pitfalls that are familiar to the Christian walk. Maybe you had a friend whose testimony and prayers carried you through dark times. Those are all the Lord's gifts. It's crucial for us to remember that none of Christ's servants are as adequate as He is! However much we prize their help and admire their walk, we mustn't make idols of them. If we insist on making them pale substitutes for Jesus, they will surely end up disappointing us.

34-37 – Finally, we see the revelation of God's power. Unlike Chemosh in **ch3**, God's ears heard Elisha's cries and the boy recovered! 7 sneezes would be annoying but it was music to Elisha's ears. But, just like Elijah in Zarephath, this miracle is a clue: it's a sign, a pledge, a preview of the victory God can and will grant His people in the end. Why doesn't God do this now? For the same reason most dead people stayed dead in Jesus' day – it wasn't time for all to be raised. Jesus did raise some but not all because it wasn't time yet. His people will be raised on the Resurrection Day at His Second Coming. Until then, the Lord gives us previews of what's to come and the faithful in Israel were to understand from this story that Yahweh can deliver His people even from death.

The town of Shunem was located on the south side of the Hill of Moreh and there was another town just over the hill to the north, called Nain where Jesus famously cancelled a funeral in **Lk 7:11-15**. Although sons were raised in both instances, there are some stark differences between these 2 miracles. Elisha could only acknowledge the woman's bitter distress but Jesus tells the widow of Nain not to weep. That's a most absurd and

calloused thing to say, unless you have the power to deal with the cause of her weeping. Also, Elisha prays but Jesus speaks to the dead young man and he sits up. Luke 7 teaches us that Jesus didn't just prevent people from dying but was able to enter the realm of death and plunder its prey at will. Not even death can put you beyond the reach of Jesus' power or beyond the sound of His voice!

If the child's death is still upsetting to you and you can't seem to reconcile God's goodness with that tragedy then consider this: later on, Elisha will announce the coming of a 7 year famine and will advise this woman to relocate to avoid it. She goes to live in Philistine territory. When she returns she faces the difficult prospect of reclaiming her property. Well, it "just so happens" that Gehazi was speaking to the king of Israel and was recounting to him the events of this boy's resurrection when the boy's mother shows up at the palace! The king authorized the officials to return her property along with whatever income she had lost because of her absence. The death of her son and his subsequent resurrection turned out to be a great blessing in disguise. There's no way she could have seen that but God saw it and prepared her for it in advance. What seemed like harshness was actually God's plan of provision.

What does this miracle reveal to us about God? It shows that he is a God who delights to bless His ordinary people with His good gifts; who sometimes baffles us with the mysterious sorrow He brings; who places limitations on His servants so we won't esteem them too highly and who gives us a sneak preview that not even death will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I mentioned that the miracles in [ch4](#) can also be related to the work of Christ in our lives. The first miracle reminds us of the greatest miracle of all, the gracious forgiveness of our debt of sin to the Lord through faith in Jesus Christ. Of course, it didn't cost Elisha anything for God to provide the funds to pay back the widow's debt but, it cost Jesus everything to be able to forgive us our debt of sin.

Only God's grace can impart life, whether to a barren womb or to a dead boy and only God's grace can impart spiritual life to a dead sinner. It was God who gave the boy life but He used Elisha's ministry as the means to do it. It's the same with raising sinners from the dead. God uses holy

witnesses, concerned prayer warriors and loving saints to bring that life to them. It's the reality of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit working in us that enables us to carry the blessing of forgiveness of sin and new life in Christ to a lost and dying world. 😊