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Grace in the Details

II Kings 4:38-44

Intro: We're looking at the ministry of Elisha and the miracles that marked his ministry. These miracles are not just a demonstration of the power of Yahweh but a revelation of Yahweh's character and nature as He graciously extends His divine power to His faithful people who are living in a culture that has replaced the worship of the true God with pagan idolatry. The next 2 stories are short on details but they can still teach us about God and, if we'll take proper notice, they can even teach us a little about ourselves.

38-41 – the story is short but pretty straight forward. The sons of the prophets were having a get-together during a famine; ingredients were scarce but one of them went scrounging for herbs and found gourds: score! That should make good filler. But, as they began to eat, one gagged, another choked and then someone screamed. The vittles are vicious. The stew was inedible because somehow, it was harmful. What are we to make of this scene? Is this a warning against church pot-lucks? Are we to abstain from gourd vegetables? What does this story have to teach us?

The first thing we should notice in this scene is the situation of God's people. This famine was most likely evidence of Yahweh's judgment against Israel. Famine isn't always a divine judgment but God had given Israel a pretty detailed covenant that described what life in Israel was supposed to look like. The covenant also provided a dual list of both blessings and curses, depending on how Israel lived up to their side of the covenant. In the list of curses, famine was one sign of God's judgment upon Israelite unfaithfulness. So it isn't a stretch to say that the famine mentioned here implies that Israel in Elisha's time was enduring a degree of Yahweh's wrath for a season.

Of course, we can understand why. The northern kingdom of Israel has been in spiritual rebellion against their own covenant God from the very beginning so it's no surprise that they are suffering through yet another drought. What we often fail to consider and the reality that is thrust upon us in this story is that, while the rebellious Israelites are rightfully suffering the ravages of a famine, so is the believing remnant of the faithful. The sons of

the prophet under Elisha's supervision were part of the true church in the midst of an apostate nation but they weren't exempted from the famine that all of Israel suffered. We might expect a special exemption or maybe a believer's discount but there is no special provision for Yahweh's disciples here.

This is a slice of realism that many of us need. In this famine, God's remnant also suffered the effects of the nation's sins. When disaster strikes a nation or a region, it may not be divine judgment but God's people in that area are not generally evacuated beforehand. They suffer with the rest – some less, some more. If a nation is invaded by another belligerent country, the church in that nation shares in its woes and sufferings. There's no escape pod to retire to; no form to submit for an exemption. We need to come to grips with this lest we expect of God something He's never promised to give. God has promised protection and provision in the midst of disaster but not escape or exemption. This should also encourage us to intercede for believers in countries or regions ravaged by war or natural disasters.

If we consider these 2 miracles together, notice that between them, the verb form "to eat" is used 8 times. This hints to us the great interest God takes in even the mundane areas of human life. This reality directly dismisses the deist's concept of a divine Creator who speaks the universe into existence and then becomes indifferent to it. That's not the kind of God we see represented in scripture. The God of the Bible is very earthy – daily bread matters to Him. The Creator of the universe is very close to where we live!

You might say, "Aw, it's just a stew!" The fact that there was a famine tells us that food was not to be wasted in any condition. In the land of plenty, if you mess up part of a meal, you just chuck it out and start over. Not so in a famine. Under these circumstances, it's tragic when the stew is ruined or made harmful. There's a real dire need here. They are not just in danger of missing a meal; especially if they've already missed the last 5. So, this miracle isn't petty or trivial. It was a work of necessity as much as mercy. It's difficult for us in well-stocked grocery shelves of the West to possess a truly sympathetic understanding of the situation.

It's interesting how many of the stories about Elijah and Elisha have to do with food. Coming from an industrialized nation, we often fail to recognize

that life in the agrarian society of Israel was basically a subsistence level existence. Starvation and hard times were never far away. For westerners, food is a much smaller part of our household budget and the time it takes to gather that food is usually limited to how long it takes to get through the checkout line at the Rouses or Wal-mart. Life was very different in ancient Israel. In subsistence economies, providing daily bread often represented the largest expenditure a family would make and it also consumed almost every waking moment.

Needs that might seem frivolous to some turn out to be quite real and legitimate when we know the facts. Sometimes we may here a prayer request that seems trivial to our ears and situation but to the one requesting it, it's a necessity and God is interested in hearing their prayer even if we aren't. Isn't it great to know that our God is a God who's not above getting involved with the nuts and bolts of our everyday lives? What may seem silly to another brother or sister is important to Him. Remember what the first petition is in the Lord's Prayer: daily bread, it even comes before forgiveness of sins! Is Jesus implying that He understands us more than we know?

This is what I call flour power! It may seem a little strange but just recall the use of salt in healing Jericho's water supply in [ch2](#). The salt was an external sign of the miracle. Oftentimes, a visible sign or some obvious action will accompany biblical miracles. Jesus used these visible signs many times: in [Mk 7](#), He put His fingers in the ears of a deaf man with a speech impediment, then spat and touched his tongue with the saliva. We may discount these things as necessary props for ignorant unbelievers but if that's true, why did Jesus give us water for baptism and bread and wine to eat and drink?

Why does the Lord insist on using visible signs, even for us sophisticated believers? More than likely, it's to provide a peg on which to hang the memory of His work. God often mixes visible signs in with His mighty works so that His work may grip us and hold our memory captive. Not that He always uses visible signs but our wise Creator knows that sometimes the best way to our mind is through our imagination, so He may use attention-getting pictures instead of theological arguments. I'd venture to say, at their 20 year reunion, this class of the sons of the prophets had some animated conversations about this miracle. Visible signs are God's defense against

spiritual amnesia.

Also, not only does a visible sign accompany this miracle but the miracle itself is a prophetic sign, a preview of what is to come. The miracle involves the remove of harm and that is a precursor to the final reversal of the curse of sin prophesied in [Isa 11:6-9](#). This minor miracle is just a small sign of what's to come. Yes, it's only a pot of stew that is rendered harmless but it's a small glimpse of the day when, "they shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain."

Notice also, the fallibility of God's servants. The poor shlub in [v39](#) was acting with the best intentions but nearly sent all his classmates to the urgent care to have their stomachs pumped! I'm sure he meant well, was completely sincere and acting without any malice and yet, he committed a major gaffe. Can you relate? I can! Who hasn't acted with undisciplined zeal and ended up repelling instead of drawing people to Christ? All I need to do is go back on the notes of some old sermons to realize just how much divine power the Holy Spirit had to use to bless anyone from that mess. Mistakes I've made early on are in line with the foolishness of cutting up unknown gourds into a pot of stew.

Thankfully, the power of God overcame this harmful ingredient. What an encouragement it is for all of God's fallible servants. It's a relief to know that the Lord doesn't allow our errors to derail His kingdom or destroy His people. How many times has Jesus cushioned our foolishness, redeemed our errors and neutralized our stupidity? Sadly, it's the fear of mistakes that often prevent people from serving the Lord. There's no need to fear, He knows our abilities and shortcomings and still, He calls us to serve Him. Mistakes aren't the end of the world, as long as we learn from them.

[42-44](#) – Again, we're talking about food in the midst of a famine but, in the previous story the food was dangerous; here it's just inadequate. No slap on the donor but 20 loaves only goes so far. You didn't need a calculator to figure it out. So what can we learn from this inadequate supply of food?

First, we should be glad to see that faith still lives in a faithless land. This cheerful giver hails from the hill country of Ephraim. The first-fruits is a reference to the Law of Moses that said they were to be the provision set aside for the priests. But this guy brings his to Elisha, whose certainly not a

priest so what gives? The problem was that at this time in Israel, there weren't any priests that were still faithful to Yahweh. The only priests around were those of Baal or those involved with Jeroboam's bull cult. So, this man was recognizing Elisha as the one true representative of God left in the land. He was bringing his offering to the leader of Yahweh's remnant.

The text is encouraging because we see here a regular citizen of Baal-shalishah who is still serving Yahweh in the midst of an apostate nation. This means I Kings 19:18 is still true. God said He had reserved 7K in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal and here's one of them now! Yahweh was right; there will be a remnant of faithful believers in this corrupt and hardened nation. God does preserve a people in the thick and thin of evil society. Who knows where you will find them? Maybe in Baal-shalishah, or in Houma, or in Dularge?

Jesus Christ is preserving a people in every nation from the rot and decay of the society around them. No matter where you go on this planet, if you are there long enough, you will discover faith that still lives and even thrives in faithless lands. And there is no Ahab or Jeroboam that can snuff it out.

There's another big difference here from the previous miracle. The emphasis of the miracle here falls on the bare word of God. There's no visible sign this time around, no throwing of salt or flour, no stretching out over a corpse. To the objection of his servant, Elisha replies, "Give it to them because the Lord says they will eat and have leftovers." That's exactly what happened in line with the word of the Lord. God will feed 100 men with 20 loaves of bread if that's what He says He will do!

The classic passage that deals with Yahweh's word and Israel's provision is [Deut 8:2-3](#). God afflicted and tested Israel those 40 years in the wilderness. He reduced them to the point that they were dependent upon His supply of manna. He intended them to understand that man doesn't live by bread alone but lives by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. The Israelites needed to realize that they go on living not because they consume bread; they live because Yahweh has decreed that He would sustain them, whether by manna or some other means.

When a wilderness Israelite went out and found manna on the ground, instead of saying, Yay, breakfast they should have said, "See, Yahweh has decided that we should live another day." He needed to look beyond the

provided sustenance to the repeated daily decision that granted and supplied the sustenance. Yahweh's word may decide to feed His people with daily manna or with an inadequate supply of barley loaves – or well-stocked grocery shelves. If we enjoy this last privilege, we must never make an idol out of those stocked shelves but confess that they are only stocked because God had determined to feed me in that way for now.

What we have in this story is that the impossibility of v43 is met and dealt with, by the word of the Lord. It teaches us that God's word is more certain than even observable evidence. If it's a choice between what you can see with your eyes and what God promises, take God's word on it.

We must be cautious here to not imply or infer something that's not in the text. This story is not a promise that God will always supply His people with daily bread or that believers will never lack it. The situation of the faithful in the previous story should give us that clue. This text is not a promise that God will supply believers with daily bread in all circumstances without exception. The text simply teaches us that whatever God promises will come to pass. Food was brought but it's not enough, but God says it will be more than enough. If God declares that what is deficient will be sufficient, even abundant, then it will be so. It puts me right next to that manna-seeking Israelite saying, "If I eat today it's because God has decided that I will have enough. That's not a bad thought – it should lead us to praise!

This miracle also points forward and it calls to mind the feeding miracles of Jesus. Of course, Elisha's miracle is not a straight parallel of Jesus'. His feeding miracles are of the how-much-more kind. He's not feeding 100 men but 4K and 5K men (women and kids extra) and He had fewer loaves than Elisha. Jesus' provision is also the "eating and leaving" kind, though I'd say His leavings were much greater (12 baskets full). Clearly, those in that day who remembered Elisha's miracle were meant to realize that a greater than Elisha was in their presence.

But for our day, what we see have is a Savior who is not stymied or frustrated either by our own deficiencies or those we bring before Him. We may go around mumbling, "How can I?" which is just another way of saying, "What are these among so many?" Here's the thing: our deficiency is no crisis for Jesus' adequacy. Our own abilities, talents and resources always seem so ridiculously and depressingly short of what is needed for the task

God has given to us. But Jesus is always there to somehow make it enough – or much more than that.

But again, another caution: our deficiency syndrome is an absolute necessity. Yes, we should never allow it to prevent or prohibit us from serving the Lord in faith and obedience but, at the same time, we should never ignore it or forget about it. If we do, we may one day find ourselves proudly strutting the stuff of our Christian success before a Savior we think we no longer desperately need. That will be the end of our faithful service for Him.

Ch4 gives us 4 stories that reveal the supremacy of God's power over debt, death, danger and deficiency. It shows us that God's power is sufficient for every dire or mundane situation we may find ourselves in. He doesn't just care about the big problems of our lives but the little ones as well.

These 4 stories share a common theme of life rescued from death, of hope rescued from hopelessness. In each case, life is threatened: by economic tragedy and slavery, by the death of a n only child, by famine and poison, by a shortage of food. In each case the power of God through the prophet Elisha breaks into this hopelessness and shatters it with the word of life. 😊