

2 Kings 4:1-44 // A Remnant Saved

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[0:00] So it's 2 Kings 4, 1-7, then 42-44. The widow's olive oil.

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elijah, '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 small jar of olive oil. Elisha said, '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. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.

[1:08] She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her, and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, 'bring me another one.

But he replied, 'there's not a jar left. Then the oil stopped flowing. She went and told the man of God, and he said, 'go, sell the oil, pay your debts.

You and your sons can live on what is left. The feeding of a hundred. A man came from Baal Shalashah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe corn, along with some ears of new corn.

Give it to the people to eat, Elisha said. How can I set this before a hundred men, his servant asked. But Elisha answered, 'give it to the people to eat, for this is what the Lord says.

They will eat and have some left over. Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord.

[2:20] I speak to God. One day, Elisha went to Shunam, and a well-to-do woman was there who urged him to stay for a meal.

So whenever he passed by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, 'I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God.

Let's make a small room on the roof and put in a bed, table, chair, and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.

One day, when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, 'call the Shunamite.

So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, 'tell her, you have gone to all this trouble for us.

[3:19] Now what can we be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army? She replied, 'I have a home among my own people.

What can be done for her? Elisha asked. Gehazi said, 'she has no son, and her husband is old. Then Elisha said, 'call her.

So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. About this time next year, Elisha said, 'you will hold a son in your arms.

No, no, my lord, she objected. Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant. But the woman became pregnant, and the next year, about that same time, she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, 'my head, my head. His father told a servant, 'carry him to his mother.

[4:26] And after the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Lamont, thanks for reading that. If you could keep your Bibles open there, that would be really helpful.

And you can find an outline on the back of the notice sheet as well to follow what we're doing with this. So please do look at that just to keep track. And let's pray. Let's bow our heads, and I'll lead us in a prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks. And we ask that where we're struggling, you would reassure us. Where we are drifting, you would restore us.

Where we've fallen into error in our lives or our thoughts, you would correct us. And by your Holy Spirit, will you be at work to change us now for what's pleasing to you.

[5:36] Holy Spirit, lead us, we pray, in the way everlasting. For we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, 2 Kings 4 is a big chapter.

We could have looked at it over four weeks. But there are some themes across these scenes that it's really helpful to see together. So that's what we're doing. We're seeing this chapter the life of God's faithful people when the people around them have turned their back on God.

Imagine, as we think about Israel at that time, a nation with a great history with God. He's rescued them. He's brought them to a land he promised them. He's given them his word.

He's given them his presence. And now they've forsaken God. They worship idols instead of the God of the Bible, Yahweh, the God who is there. And each scene in this chapter brings us into the experience for a faithful person of God holding on to God's word in that environment.

So in verse 1, it's the wife of a man from the company of the prophets. The company of the prophets are the people who stayed faithful to the living God at that time. And this is the wife who's now a widow.

[6:53] In verse 38, it's the company of the prophets meeting with Elisha. And in the final scene of the chapter, in verse 42, a man comes to Elisha and he brings with him the first fruits of his harvest that he's used to make some small loaves of bread.

So he's offering things to the living God through the faithful prophet. So how does it go for the faithful people of God in a land that's forsaken God?

Well, in our first scene, we meet this widow whose debt means that her sons are going to get sold. She says to Elisha in verse 1, 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. So that's striking, isn't it, how far Israel has fallen. God gave Israel this purpose that as they walk in the path of his commands, they would shine out to the rest of the world.

And one of the things he commands them is to care for widows in their midst. But instead of that, the debt collector is coming to enslave her sons. Then for Old Testament Israel, their relationship with God is very closely tied to the land God's given them.

[8:10] There are blessings for faithfulness tied to the land. There are curses for disobedience, again, tied to the land. So that tells us what's going on in verse 38. If you look there, Elisha returned to Gilgal, and there was a famine in that region.

In other words, God is now withholding his favor from them in the way he'd warned them he would, because they've rejected him. And it leads to the problems of those final two scenes in the chapter. One where the company of the prophets are cooking, and one of them goes out to find some vegetation to try and just beef up the meager stew, and puts something in that's poisonous, and there's crucial danger in the pot.

And then in verse 42, A hundred men have gathered to hear Elisha, and they don't have enough food. They're hungry. And we feel the pain of the chapter most sharply when we go with Elisha to Shunem.

Again, it's a faithful woman. We see that in verse 8. Whenever Elisha passed by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, I know this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God.

[9:22] Let's make a small room on the roof, and put in it a bed and a table, a chair, and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us. So on the screen, I've just put a picture there of what this might have looked like.

Typically, in the ancient Near East, the home would be a first floor home, just one story. And this well-to-do woman uses her resources sacrificially to put this upper room on top, where Elisha can come.

There'd be an external staircase to get up there. And you can see that she is demonstrating where her allegiance lies by this, because she's providing for Elisha all that he'd need to keep him, and therefore keep the word of God through him in the land.

A bed so that he can stay, and a desk and a lamp so he can work and have his ministry. And one thing that we see again and again in 1 and 2 Kings is you demonstrate what you think of God by how you're responding to his word.

There's no place for someone saying, well, I love God, but I won't live by his word. I won't listen to his word. And we see that with the kings. We see that with the people. And here is a woman saying, I'm sticking with God, and so I will uphold the ministry of his man, his faithful prophet.

[10:46] Then the woman experiences just how kind God is to his faithful people. She was a childless woman. And in verse 16, Elisha gives her the news. About this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms.

There's the promise. She can't believe it. It would take a miracle. So she responds, no, my Lord. Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant. But verse 17, the woman became pregnant, and the next year she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

And if that were the end of the story, we'd think it's a lovely story about the kindness of God. You can trust him. But in verse 18, some years have gone by. The child, now a young boy, runs out to his father, shouting, my head, my head, in the field.

We don't know if it's a hemorrhage or something to do with the heat of the sun. But what we do know is that it's sudden and it's shocking. The boy is brought to his mother. He's on her lap. By midday, he's died. Devastating. And these scenes in this chapter are showing us what it's like for the real people of God, the faithful people of God, living in the real world under the judgment of God, where famine affects everyone, greed and destitution affect everyone, death and grief affect everyone.

[12:08] And it's important for us to understand that because that's the world we live in today. When we look at the world around us through the lenses of God's word to understand what's going on, this world is chaos, isn't it?

There is wickedness everywhere. There's death everywhere. There's sickness everywhere. So much so that people look at it who are not Christians and what do they sometimes say?

God can't be there because the world is such a mess. But the Bible gives us the means to understand that, that this world bears the hallmarks of a world under the judgment of God.

We see that from places like Romans chapter 1. That's the world we live in. And when you become a Christian, it's not like Star Trek. It's not like you can kind of be beamed up out of the dangers of this world to avoid them and be protected from them.

And that means when bad things happen to Christians, we're never to think it's because we didn't have enough faith. If only we'd had more faith, that wouldn't have happened.

[13:14] God would have shielded us from it. If you live your life faithfully to God's word, anything that can happen to anyone in the world could still happen to you. But against that bleak background, God teaches us in this chapter about his character and about his salvation.

So our first point on the sheets, the one thing needed for God's salvation. In all four scenes we see it, people run to take refuge in the man of God.

The widow in debt in verse 1, she cries to Elisha for help. The prophets with the stew, they run to Elisha. Man of God, there's death in the pot. Everyone in this chapter does exactly what Elisha tells them to do.

They trust, they take him at his word. And in the middle we get the response of our woman from Shunem, where her son has just died in her lap. Heartbroken, in verse 21, she carries him up the stairs.

She lays him on the bed she'd had made for Elisha. What a picture of where trusting the living God has left her. Bereaved.

[14:22] And she's absolutely single-minded on where she'll go next. She's got to get to Elisha. So she doesn't even tell her husband what's happened. But we get a wonderful insight into the woman's faith in verse 23.

As she summons a servant to get a donkey from her husband so she can go. In verse 23, her husband asks, why go to Elisha today? It's not the new moon or the Sabbath.

Now that's really interesting. Because on the new moon and the Sabbath in Judah, you would go to the temple in Jerusalem to meet with God. But this is the northern kingdom, Israel.

Now they can't go to the temple anymore. Where would they have gone on the new moon and the Sabbath? I take it her neighbors, they'd have gone to worship Baal, a false god. Or they'd have gone to the golden calf at Bethel to worship there.

But this woman, her husband knows, when it's a new moon and the Sabbath, my wife, she goes to the word of God. She goes to Elisha. She's made it her habit.

[15 : 25] She builds her life on the word of God. And she's our model in the chapter. A woman committed to God's word. And I suppose the question for us is, is that something that people would be able to see about you?

What would it look like for those closest to us to be able to say, if there's one thing I really notice about them, it's that their priority is meeting God in his word. I remember an older man saying once to me that the one thing he most remembers about his dad was he was a man of the Bible.

A working class man who, through his life, didn't read much else. But morning by morning, he knew his dad would have his Bible open and be reading it.

Well, the woman heads for Mount Carmel for Elisha as fast as she can go. And twice she meets people on the way who could divert her. It's her husband first, then it's Gehazi, Elisha's servant. He meets her on the way and he asks her, are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right? She says, everything is all right. And I take it she's not just being British there.

[16 : 35] Because she's not British, right? So it's not like, yeah, it's okay. But it's not okay. What's happening is she is trying to avoid anything that would stop her getting to God's Savior.

And she falls at Elisha's feet. And look at her distress. He describes her in verse 27 as greatly distressed. And then in verse 28, we hear it come out of her.

Did I ask you for a son, my Lord? She said. Didn't I tell you, don't raise my hopes? This is the crucial moment in the chapter.

That's the critical question, isn't it? She had a specific promise from God. Was she right to put her hope in the God of the Bible? Or was she wrong to let her hopes be raised by his word?

It encapsulates a great difficulty that can come to any of us in life. She had a very specific promise from God. We've got the promises of God's word to us in the Bible.

[17 : 39] And things might happen to you in your life that leave you perplexed like she is in that moment. And thinking, well, I believe from the Bible that Jesus loved me and gave himself for me.

I believe God's promise that he's for me. But I cannot make sense of why this has happened to me. I cannot make sense of why God would have allowed it to happen to me.

And in moments like that, this Shunammite woman is a great model for us. Think about what she could have done when her son died. Elisha is far away.

She's far away on Mount Carmel. And what she could have done is, in her bitterness, turned from God. To live the way of her neighbors around her. But she runs empty-handed to this man of God. God's Savior Judge. Still willing to trust him and ask him for mercy. It reminds me of the Apostle Peter. In John chapter 6, when people are going away from Jesus.

[18 : 42] Because his words are too challenging. And Jesus says, are you going to go as well? And Peter says to Jesus, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

This is the one thing that's needed. To cling to God's Savior Judge empty-handedly. And ask for help. And it means, secondly, we see the astonishing scope of God's salvation.

In verse 29, Elisha sends Gehazi to run on ahead of him and the Shunammite woman. He says, took your cloak into your belt.

Take my staff in your hand and run. Don't greet anyone you meet. And if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face. And he does that and it does nothing.

And he returns to meet Elisha and the mother on their way back. And he says, the boy has not awakened. I don't know if that rings any bells for you. I think it's remarkably like the moment in Mark chapter 5.

[19 : 42] When Jesus is with Jairus. Who has begged him to come and heal his daughter. And they're on their way to Jairus' house. And people come from the house to Jairus.

And they say, your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore? And Jesus turns to him and says, don't be afraid. Just believe. So they keep going.

And in verse 32, Elisha goes up to the room where the dead boy is lying. And let's read from verse 33. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord.

Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy. Mouth to mouth. Eyes to eyes. Hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm.

Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room. And then got onto the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, call the Shunammite.

[20 : 42] And he did. When she came, he said, take your son. She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out. Is that the only time?

I think that might be the only time Elisha speaks directly to her. Take your son. And you realize that the Lord allowed the Shunammite woman's son to die so that he could demonstrate to her and to you and me that you can trust him not just for the present but for your future.

He's the God who can give you life even when the jaws of death have already closed over you. And the four scenes across the chapter expand our view of God's salvation for his people.

He saves from debt in scene one when he provides the widow with abundant oil. That means she can pay off her creditors. But what he's also doing is he's saving her family.

He's restoring her sons who otherwise will become slaves. He saves from danger when Elisha puts flour in the poisonous pot. And he tells them to serve it and they're safe.

[21 : 53] And here in the town of Shunamm, he saves from death itself. And from the grief of death. And I think we have to find a balance in how we take encouragement from these miracles.

I believe God can heal today. And at times he does heal today. In answer to the prayers of his people.

At the same time, the Bible doesn't give us specific promises to declare for any particular individual. And specific promises that God would bring into our lives now.

The kind of saving work that he did through Elisha. In fact, God's powerful works here through Elisha are incredibly rare even in the Bible.

Between the time of Elijah and Elisha and the time of Jesus, we barely see a miracle for centuries. Some happen in Daniel's time. But really they're incredibly rare.

[22 : 55] These kind of supernatural moments. So for any of us in life now, we can find that we may well meet with all kinds of grief and struggle.

With any of the things going on in this chapter. Debt, danger, bereavement, death. And in those seasons of life, the promise we hold on to is that Jesus is coming.

He's coming in saving power. And he's going to put everything right. And on that day, our prayers will finally be answered. He's going to give his faithful people healing and freedom forever from harm and danger and death.

And he'll wipe every tear from our eyes. I think of this Shunammite woman. I think about the Saturday night when I was 20 and my sister phoned me to tell me that our cousin Simon, who was 13, had been killed.

He'd run out in front of a car on the road and a taxi had knocked him down and he died. And being at the funeral and seeing my auntie there grieving the loss of her son.

[24 : 04] And as far as I can see, she has faith in Jesus. And I wish Elisha had been there. But on days like that, which come to all of us in some form in life, nothing else that you choose to live for can help you.

And you can pin your hopes on the promises of God because Jesus speaks to us through the ages in Revelation 1 and says, I am the living one. I was dead.

And now look, I'm alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades. So he can open the doors and bring people out again to be reunited with loved ones.

That's a future promise for us that we can trust. And alongside that future promise, what this chapter reveals to us about our God is how kind he is to his faithful people in the present.

And we shouldn't diminish that by thinking, well, these things will happen in the future. The more we come to God empty-handed in this life and throw ourselves on his mercy, the more we open ourselves up to experience his kindness.

[25 : 20] For some of us, the battle is, can I really trust God about the future? Will the day of Christ really come? And the tears of relief of the Shunammite woman are a picture of that future for us.

But for others of us, the battle is more, can I really trust God in the present with what's going on in my life today? Can I really trust him enough to live a life of radical, obedient trust?

Can I step out in faith for him courageously? Can I be generous towards him lavishly? Can I walk the path of his commands resolutely? Or are you afraid that if you do that, you might lose out on what would really make you happy?

Well, the kindness of God to his faithful people in this chapter, in these scenes, it reveals to us God's character for us today to encourage us.

We really can trust him with our today as well as with our future. And to help us with that, we see our third point on the sheets there, the familiar shape of God's salvation.

[26:30] In this chapter, it's as though God leaves us a calling card for his savior. I was thinking it was like a calling card. I was thinking of Batman. In Batman, the Joker, his nemesis, whenever he does something, he leaves a card out so that people know when they see the card, they know whose work it is.

I mentioned this at staff meeting where we discussed the passages and Jonathan pointed out that it's serial killers who have calling cards. So I realized that the illustration doesn't work brilliantly well. But the idea is that when God acts in these chapters through Elisha, it's as though he leaves out a card for us to say, when you see a pattern like this again, you know whose work it is.

It's God's savior. And the strange thing for us, if you're familiar with Jesus in the gospels, is that we now look at it the other way around, don't we? So when we hear of Elisha's feeding miracle, we think, this is strange.

What was this before Jesus? Because there's a hungry crowd and there's just a few loaves of bread and they're all fed and then there are leftovers. So that centuries later, when a vastly larger crowd are together in the wilderness and someone brings their man of God five loaves and two fish and he feeds the hungry crowd and there are 12 basketfuls of leftovers, we go, ah, we know who this is at last, the one foreshadowed by Elisha.

[28:03] And then one day his disciples follow him to the town of Nain. Here's a picture of Nain today. You can see it's on a hillside, the town of Nain, so it's just on the north side of that hill, just near the Sea of Galilee.

And in Luke 7, Jesus approaches the town gate and a widow's only son is on the beer being brought out dead in a funeral procession. And Jesus says to the widow, don't cry.

And he touches the beer on which the son is laid and the bearers stop and he says, young man, man, I say to you, rise. And the dead man sits up and speaks and Jesus gives him to his mother. And they would have known that day that it's just on the other side of that hill, less than two miles away, is Shunem. You see it on the map here where Elisha had laid himself on this boy in his upper room and God had raised him and Elisha could say to the mother, take your son.

Why does God leave us the calling card? He wants us to have confidence that this is true. I take it he knows our propensity to waste our time worrying about whether or not it's true and so being half-hearted and hedging our bets with Jesus.

[29:24] So as he sends Elisha, whose name means God saves, just as Jesus' name means God saves, he gives us this trail of breadcrumbs, a series of miracles that have Jesus' fingerprints all over them so that when Jesus follows the pattern of the miracles and he surpasses them, we know he is the one to run to and bet your life on.

And the great surprise in all of this in 2 Kings 4 is that Elisha is saving anyone at all. That's our fourth point, finally, the clock that's ticking on God's salvation. Hanging over this book in the Bible is that God said to Elijah in 1 Kings 19 that judgment is coming on Israel and it's coming at the hands of an assassin, Elisha.

And that judgment is inevitable now. Elisha succeeded Elijah in chapter 2 so we're expecting that right away but instead we get this extraordinary section of the Bible full of God saving people who trust his word through Elisha.

Why? Not because the judgment has been cancelled. The judgment is coming and it comes in chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Kings. So the message of these chapters is not God's saviour judge won't do any judging.

It's there's been a delay in the judgment in God's mercy. A stay of execution. A short window of opportunity where you can run to God's appointed judge and he will save you.

[31:00] And that's a critical lesson for us today because we live in exactly that same kind of window. When John the Baptist prepared people for Jesus coming he warned them.

He said his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Jesus himself says I've come to bring fire upon this earth and how I wish it were already kindled.

And then Jesus goes around doing the work not of a judge but of a saviour.

Everywhere he goes people run to him and he saves them. The self-righteous are outraged that he'll accept anyone. Why? Not because the judgment will never come but because there's a window of time now where the message is come and be reconciled to God.

Come with nothing to offer. Come to Jesus whatever you've done and you'll be saved. The clock is ticking. To drift from him or to delay running to him would put us in grave danger.

[32:10] But come to him today and we find a saviour you really can put your hope in. He cancels our debts because he paid for them at the cross. He sustains us because he himself is the bread of life who says with him we'll never go hungry and never be thirsty.

And where the Shunammite woman's great distress shows us the immense cost of losing your only son God says to us in Jesus that he has freely given us his only son.

to die that sin bearing death for us so that he could give us hope. Let's pray together. Gracious heavenly father we praise you for your generosity your kindness and your power that raised our saviour Jesus to life.

Bringing him out from the tomb having smashed death to bits and we ask that you will help us to rejoice in how trustworthy his promises are and set our hope on his word and build our lives on it for our good and for your glory.

Amen.