

2ND KINGS

Week 5, chapter 4

As we continue in the Book of 2nd Kings, Elisha is now firmly entrenched as the most spirit-filled and honored prophet in Israel. Even in the story in chapter 3 of Moab rebelling against Israel, and the subsequent attempt by **Y'horam** King of Israel to form an army along with Judah and Edom to put down this rebellion and retake Moab as a vassal state, we find the miraculous works of Elisha involved.

Recall that the Israelite army decided to attack Moab from the southern approach, which was through desolate desert terrain. And that after 7 days of marching through the wilderness they had run out of water and the places that they expected to find springs and streams were dried up. Out of desperation the kings of Israel, Judah and Edom decided to humble themselves and seek the counsel of Yehoveh by means of his Prophet Elisha. Elisha told them that God would rescue them because He wanted Moab destroyed. They were to dig ditches to be used as reservoirs that God would then miraculously fill up with water to sustain them. A God-ordained flashflood occurred almost immediately upon completion of the trenches and there was more water for them than they could possibly use.

But this same water that saved Israel's army also proved to be a deadly trap for the Moabite army. The soil of Edom (where they were) was of a reddish hue; and so as the flood waters rumbled along from the distant mountains where the rain had fallen and the torrent was formed, the soil became mixed with the water. As the water gathered in the ditches, the Moab soldiers who were overlooking the Israelite encampment thought that what actually filled the trenches was blood. They assumed that the coalition army consisting of the leaders and men of 3 kingdoms had turned upon one another and a great slaughter had produced all of this blood. Such an assumption was by no means ignorant; although **Y'horam** and Jehoshaphat were relatives and fellow Hebrews, there was a well-known centuries-old animosity between Israel and Judah. Further the 3rd party to the alliance, Edom, wasn't a particularly willing partner as they were only there because they had been pressured by Judah and were only interested in collecting the spoils of war. The Moabite army rushed down to finish off those Israelites who had survived the supposed infighting only to find out the blood was merely a mirage and no such slaughter had taken place. Israel fought off their shocked attackers and pursued them until they cornered them in a fortified city inside of Moab.

But something so terrible happened at that fortress that it was long remembered in Hebrew lore; even the prophet Amos spoke of it. Mesha King of Moab tried to break out from the siege

upon his city in the direction of the Edomite troops hoping to kill the King of Edom and in the ensuing chaos, escape certain death. The Moabites failed; but they were able to capture the King's son and then return to the stronghold with him as a hostage. On the walls of that city, they offered the Edomite crown prince as a human sacrifice to their god Chemosh. It had the effect of emboldening the surviving remnant of Mesha's army, but also demoralizing the Edomite troops and striking fear into the Israelite army who broke off the battle and abruptly retreated back to their homes.

What makes this story so important is that it is not merely a record of a military defeat; rather it is that God had ordered the destruction of Moab, told Israel He would give them the victory, and thus ordained this expedition as a Holy War. But Israel was more fearful of the god of Moab than they were trusting in the God of Israel. Therefore the leaders of Israel snatched needless defeat from the jaws of certain victory, and Moab would now become a permanent foe and thorn for Israel rather than being eliminated as an enemy of God's Kingdom. It was more than sad, it was sin.

Let's read 2nd Kings Chapter 4 together.

READ 2ND KINGS CHAPTER 4 all

Chapter 4 moves us back to a focus upon the life and works of the great Prophet Elijah's replacement: Elisha. Up to now we have tended to see an Elisha that looked an awful lot like his former master, the stern, unyielding, and harsh *Eliyahu*. But in this chapter we have a series of vignettes that demonstrates Elisha's softer and more compassionate side. He aids the destitute, rewards kindness, resurrects the dead, and feeds the hungry. Sound familiar? Of course it does. It's as though for a moment we have jumped far ahead in our Bibles to the New Testament era Gospels and are reading stories taken from the life and works of Jesus the Messiah. In fact, especially here and in the next chapter we have records of what can be called nothing less than Gospel stories that prefigure the coming of Christ by at least 800 years.

These several stories about Elisha are not in strict chronological order and could have taken place pretty much anytime within the approximately 55 years that Elisha served as Israel's chief Prophet. We also need to notice that 2nd Kings Chapters 4 – 8 are without doubt taken from some other ancient and long lost document that chronicled the works of the prophets from this era. Why this was inserted at this point by the author or editor of the Book of Kings can only be understood in the context of divine inspiration. No other rationale works. Since these stories are divinely inspired there are of course some interesting principles that come from them, and we'll look closely at a few of them.

The first story is about a Hebrew widow who had become desperate. We're told in verse 1

that she had been the wife of one of the many Israelite prophets. The rabbis say that she was the widow of Obadiah, the god-fearing member of Ahab's royal court who acted to save as many as a hundred of the guild prophets from a massacre at the hands of the evil Queen Jezebel. And from this is told a rather elaborate story about how after he used the last of his money hiding these 100 prophets from arrest, he ran out of funds and died penniless and in debt leaving his wife and family in dire straits. I cannot say whether this is true or not; this is Jewish tradition. But being tradition does not automatically make the story false. There is far more NOT written in the Scriptures about the 1500 years or so that the Bible spans than IS written. So most of what we know today about the people, the society, and their everyday lives from the various Bible eras is taken from non-Biblical sources. On the other hand it cannot be denied that the rabbis were prone to exaggeration and hyperbole, if not outright fantasy, in order to fill in some historical gaps in ways that validated their particular doctrines and viewpoints. There doesn't seem to be any need of making up a story about this woman being Obadiah's widow to support some agenda, so I think it's more likely than not that it is true.

This Hebrew woman apparently had no son who was old enough, yet, to be seen as the man of the house and able to rescue the situation. So she turned to the chief prophet in Israel, Elisha, for help. Why turn to Elisha? Because he was the head of all the prophet guilds of which she was part. And she uses the typical colorful language of the prophets in telling Elisha that her husband feared Yehoveh; that was partly to help identify him as a prophet of the God of Israel and not one of the many prophets to the several other gods.

Let me pause to remind you that in all Torah Class lessons past, present and future, when I use the term Yehoveh in a Biblical passage, I use it because that Hebrew word that represents God's official name is actually and literally there in the original Hebrew texts. So I am not willy-nilly substituting the word Yehoveh for when our English translations typically say God or Lord, or the CJB says Adonai or HaShem. What I'm doing is reinserting what has always been there, but has sadly and wrongly been obliterated and obfuscated.

The widowed woman tells Elisha that creditors are coming to take away her 2 sons to be house slaves. The situation is this: it is not correct to view them as slaves that have been purchased. Rather they are being taken as bond-servants. That is, their labor is the surety for a debt their father made but cannot pay. This system was common and everyday and completely allowable by the Torah. Once the debt was paid off by means of their working it off through their labors, or they were released on the year of Jubilee, the bond-servants could return to their normal lives as free men. They were NOT slaves; they were not humans owned by another human, because God did not permit Hebrews to make slaves of other Hebrews. In fact, the bond-servants were to be treated like neighbors.

CJB Lev 25:39-43

39 "If a member of your people has become poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him do the work of a slave.

40 Rather, you are to treat him like an employee or a tenant; he will work for you until the year of yovel.

41 Then he will leave you, he and his children with him, and return to his own family and regain possession of his ancestral land.

42 For they are my slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; therefore they are not to be sold as slaves.

43 Do not treat him harshly, but fear your God.

So this widow's fear was not that her sons were going to be hauled off into a lifetime of slavery and degradation. Rather they wouldn't be there to help her support the family. So in verse 2 Elisha asks her what she has (meaning what she has of value) in her house and she responds that all she has is a jar of oil. In Hebrew this term is ***asuk shemem*** and it specifically means anointing oil, as opposed to oil for cooking or oil lamps. And naturally it would be so since her husband was a prophet and anointing oil was the main tool of his trade.

The great 15th century Hebrew scholar Abarbanel comments on this passage by explaining an important characteristic of Biblical Prophets. It is that they were either reluctant or unable to bring new things into existence from nothingness. In other words, the Prophets weren't God-authorized conjurers who created new things from thin air. Rather by Elisha asking the widow if she owned anything (of value), it was so that he could hold it up to God and ask to have it expand and grow. And the principle is that God created nature, and holds all power over nature, and so He wants miracles to occur using natural phenomena, even though He has the supernatural power to merely order the natural phenomena to occur upon His command.

Next Elisha tells her to go ask her neighbors for as many empty flasks and jars as they might have. Her neighbors were the other guild prophets because they invariably lived together in prophet colonies, and so they were more willing than regular society to share things. Upon receiving the many empty flasks she was to go inside her home, completely by herself, and to shut the door so she had privacy. She was to take the anointing oil that she owned and to start filling the many empty flasks her neighbors had given to her from her own flask. Let's be clear that she didn't have some large wholesale sized container of anointing oil that she was merely dividing into many smaller portions; she had a regular sized jar of oil comparable to what all the prophets possessed.

Verses 5 and 6 explain that she kept pouring the oil because miraculously it just kept multiplying! In fact, she could have kept pouring indefinitely but ran out of empty flasks. And

when she looked into her jar, there was no more oil. There is such great symbolism here that I simply must speak of it. First, in the Bible, oil is representative of the Holy Spirit, the ***Ruach Hakodesh***. When we anoint with oil for healing, we are symbolically applying the Holy Spirit to heal the anointed person. Second, what is being demonstrated here is that as long as there were empty vessels for the oil to be poured into, the oil continued to flow. But when there were no more vessels to accept it, the oil stopped. The God- principle being taught is that there is no limit of the Holy Spirit of God. He can give as much as we can hold. The only limiting factor is the number of willing vessels; the number of human beings who want to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Now that the widow had many flasks of valuable anointing oil, Elisha told her to go and sell them, then pay her creditors, and then she and her children would live on what was left. So however many oil flasks there were produced it was more than sufficient to pay off all of her debts and give her something to live off of. Notice the sequence: 1) Sell what she owned. 2) Pay off her debts. 3) Then whatever funds were left were for her own use. Particularly in our modern era, and especially in the West, where we are in a time of financial challenges, it has become vogue for those who are deeply indebted to blame the creditor! And even to feel that the creditors have no right to be paid back because if they're rich enough to loan money, they're rich enough to lose that money, so you (who are struggling) ought not to have to suffer to pay it back.

That attitude is far from Biblical principles and it in no way resembles what is being taught here. These passages show that if we are in debt and find ourselves with no means to repay, then we are to begin by selling what we have of value. Then the next order of business is to use the proceeds to pay off our debts. And IF there is anything left, then it is ours to use. Notice that there is NOTHING wrong with having some debt. Yes, if it can be avoided, avoid it because debt can indeed be enslaving in ways you never imagined. But sometimes it just can't be avoided if one is to reasonably survive and live. Next notice that our personal financial difficulties and discomfort are no excuse for not paying back what we borrowed. And finally notice that whether we choose to borrow, or circumstances almost force us to, we are obligated in God's eyes to repay it. If that means we have to sell what is dear and valuable to us because we have no other way, then that is what we do. The first part of what we have is supposed to belong to God. But when we're in debt it winds up belonging to those we owe. Only after they are satisfied are we entitled to keep some for ourselves. And that applies even if you are a poor widow, just like this unnamed Hebrew woman in our story. Nowhere does Elisha or the Hebrew widow imply that she ought not to have to repay.

Naturally, particularly as it applies to a creditor who is a God-fearer, mercy needs to always be considered as part of the equation. But such mercy is a matter between the creditor and God; it is not for society or for the debtor to force upon the creditor. Nor is bankruptcy necessarily wrong for a debtor because in fact most typical bankruptcy follows the pattern given here whereby a debtor's possessions are confiscated and sold, the creditors paid off with the proceeds, and if there is anything left the debtor receives it.

The next story begins in verse 8. It occurs in the town of Shunem, in the tribal territory of Issachar. The family that is the focus of this story (and probably the town in general) had maintained a sense of piety before the Lord even in the face of times in Israel when idolatry and darkness ruled the day and also characterized the lifestyles of the 10 northern Israelite tribes. This is why we find Elisha there, and why verse 8 says, "Whenever he passed by", which means he came on a regular basis.

The story set-up is that a prominent woman in Shunem offered Elisha hospitality (notice, by the way, that our first 2 stories' central characters are both pious women and Elisha deals respectfully and tenderly with them). So our first story was of a poor woman, and this one concerns a rich woman. In fact she offered Elisha this same hospitality anytime he was in her town. She went so far as to ask her husband to build a guest quarters atop the roof of their home, and to furnish it nicely.

On one trip to the town, after Elisha had settled into his little private apartment, he told his servant Geichazi to ask the woman to come to him. She came and he spoke to her through his servant. Now exactly why he communicated with her this way is not universally agreed upon. It may have been out of concern for her modesty, it may have been that while Elisha was inside his apartment she stood outside and Geichazi was at the door repeating what his master said so that she could hear it. Or it may have been something else altogether, it is not clear.

Elisha wishes to repay her sincere kindness and asks what he may do for her and specifically wonders if he can take a message to the king or the army commander on her behalf. This might sound a bit odd but it is not. Elisha could have the audience of the king or army commander anytime he wanted it, so exalted was he in the land. Despite King **Y'horam's** deep dislike of him, he also recognized that Elisha was God's prophet to him as the anointed King of Israel and so was stuck having to hear from Elisha from time to time. This woman was an aristocrat and Elisha assumed she and her husband must have occasional dealings with the kingdom's elite. She answered that she was happy to dwell among her own people. In other words, this was a polite way of saying that she had no dealings with the king or the government and preferred to keep it that way.

It was to her credit that she was content with what she had, and had no desire to rub elbows with the political class who were also great idolaters. Since she frustrated Elisha's effort to reward her, he turned to his servant and asked if he knew of something that she needed and he informed his master that she was barren, and that it was too late anyway because her husband was also too old for them to have children together. One can hear echoes of the Abraham and Sarah story in this narrative.

Either she had gone for a time as Elisha discussed the matter with Geichazi or she was asked

to move from the outside to the doorway of Elisha's apartment as the conversation continued, as implied by verse 15. This time Elisha spoke directly to her and told her that she would have a son by this time next year. In her shock she was in denial and asked Elisha not to tell her such a thing that could not possibly be true. We have to understand that that this was not a young barren woman; this was a woman probably beyond child bearing years with a husband that was also incapable. But that didn't change the fact that she lived every day in a state of shame because she wasn't able to give her husband a son for an heir, nor could she fulfill the order of the Abrahamic Covenant to be fruitful and multiply. Her first reaction seemed to be that this was almost a cruel promise from a trusted friend that had absolutely no rational way of coming about. It was terribly hurtful and a stressful moment for her.

But of course by a miracle of God she did conceive and did bear a son. The child grew and was old enough to work out in the field with his father when something dreadful happened. This child was probably of nearly bar mitzvah age because the Hebrew word used to identify him is that he was an **elem**. The Hebrew Scriptures use a number of terms to describe the growing up process of a child, and it begins with a **yeled**, an infant. The next stage of development is a **yonek**; a child who is fed from the breast but is no longer an infant. After that is an **olel** who, although not weaned, is regularly eating solid food. Next comes a **gamel**, a fully weaned child of about 5 years of age. After that is a **taph**, which is a wide range starting about age 6 and who is still under the supervision of his mother. Then we have the boy in our story who is an **elem**, meaning he is 11 or 12 and his supervision has been transferred to his father.

Thus we find this 11 or 12 year old out in the field, doing meaningful work with his father when suddenly he starts screaming that his head is in excruciating pain. His father probably assumed it was a bad headache due to the heat and had him immediately taken to his mother who cradled the boy in her arms until the boy suddenly died about noon. It is clear that Elisha was not there. So without explanation she takes her lifeless son and lays him on Elisha's bed. Why? I've never heard nor read of a good explanation other than perhaps for the simplest one; Elisha was a holy man and it just seemed as though laying her son's corpse on the bed of a holy man was the most she could do to retain any hope. It's not unlike having a tragic situation happen to us and we find ourselves drawn to go and pray, alone, at our synagogue or church building. There's no real rational explanation for doing that because God isn't any closer or further away from us no matter where we are, but somehow it is comforting.

She called to her husband to get her a donkey and a servant to go with her because she is going to ride to where she's sure Elisha must be and return with him. Since he was at Mt. Carmel it would have been a 15-20 mile donkey ride. Her husband is confused and says it is not Rosh Hodesh or Shabbat (the new moon or the Sabbath) so he didn't understand her purpose for going to Elisha at this moment of great tragedy. Had it been Shabbat or Rosh Hodesh he could perhaps see why she would go to him because those were the traditional times to seek great men for wisdom and guidance. And it is also probable that on those appointed times Elisha taught those few folks of Israel who still had a hunger for God's Word. So he doesn't associate the boy's death to her instinct to seek God's prophet.

Our CJB and most other English translations tell us that her response to her husband is, “It is well”, or “Peace to thee”. And frankly, while from a literal sense that is accurate; but from a dynamic meaning standpoint it is not. The Hebrew word is **shalom**, and no doubt in this case it is being used in the sense of “good-bye”. This was a distraught mother intent on getting help and would brook no delay, not even from her well meaning husband who wanted to discuss things a little further.

In verses 24 and 25 she tells her personal attendant essentially not to get in her way and that nothing was to slow her journey to find the great Prophet. As she approached Mt. Carmel, Elisha saw her coming and sends Geichazi to ask her if everything was OK. After all, it was unusual that such an aristocratic woman would come to such a remote place on her own to seek him out. She tells him, according to our English translations, “It is well”. Again we are translating the word **shalom** and without doubt the intent is not to tell Geichazi that everything is just fine back home; it’s just that **shalom** is a standard greeting that can also mean little more than “hello”. This woman was hurrying to get to Elisha, and had no interest in wasting her time talking to the assistant flunky. So she quickly disposed of him, ran to where Elisha was standing and fell at his feet literally grabbing his ankles in desperation. The servant moved to push her away and Elisha rebuked him saying that it is obvious that she is in terrible distress.

But Elisha is human and is not a sorcerer, so and he says that he has no idea what her problem is because Yehoveh has not revealed it to him. Since he hadn’t received a divine oracle that told him of her coming he also didn’t receive divine instruction on how (or if) to proceed to help her. The grieving mother, who had at one time dared not believe Elisha’s prediction that she would conceive this child, now stands before him livid that that she had never asked him for such a thing, and now after giving her heart to her only child, he is taken from her by the same God who gave him to her. She didn’t want to have a child from that dead womb that she could only love for a few years just to lose him at a young age to death; it was all just so painful and unfair.

Surprisingly, Elisha’s rather tepid response was to send his servant to the woman’s home. His servant was to take Elisha’s staff (a staff represents authority) and go as his substitute. But the woman had no trust in substitutes; she knew that whatever miracle was possible came from Yehoveh through Elisha, not through a servant of Elisha’s who carried a hunk of dead wood. So she told Elisha that she wasn’t about to leave his side. In fact, she vows in God’s holy name that she was sticking to Elisha like glue. Evidently Elisha believed her and so accompanied her back to Shunem.

This raises a good practical question for all Believers: what are we to do when immediate action is required, but we hear no clear instructions from God? Do we do nothing? Do we wait until we’re satisfied that we have a clear answer? Or do we act using the patterns and wisdom

we have learned from studying God's Word and using it within the gifting that we know we have been given by means of the Holy Spirit?

There is no indication that the boy's mother had been told anything from the Lord, but her experiences and her knowledge of the Torah made it absolutely clear to her that if her son could be helped it could ONLY come through the presence of the Man of God. And it is abundantly clear from the Scripture passage that Elisha had been given no direction whatsoever from God. So essentially his divine instruction came from the circumstance of this determined woman insisting that either vertically or horizontally Elisha WAS going with her!

I have personally found (and I think it lines up Biblically) that ways such as we see happening in this story; ways that are in accordance with God's general laws and commands, are usually how we discover God's will for most situations. It is rare that at such times we'll get a special message of divine instruction. And that is why it is so important not to just experience God but to carefully learn His written Word so that our instincts are trained to react properly.

Geichazi hurried ahead of the aged Elisha with Elisha's staff in hand and got there a few hours ahead of the elderly Elisha and the boy's mother. He placed the staff next to the boy's head, but alas it was obvious the boy was stone cold dead and naturally the presence of the wooden staff did nothing.

Next week we'll see what transpires as Elisha and the frantic mother arrive.