

“Fellowship Meal Gone Bad”  
2 Kings 4:38-44  
(Preached at Trinity, January 9, 2022)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. The previous section found Elisha in Shunem where he often stayed at the home of a wealthy farmer and his wife. She graciously prepared a permanent upper room where he could stay when he passed by the farm. In time she gave birth to a child by the word of Elisha and then the child died. The woman sought Elisha and he restored the child to life. All of this was by the kind intervention of God. The passage teaches us about God's tender care of His people. We also see much about God's Providence, both in the gifts of His blessings as well as the grief of tragedy. God is sovereign over both and uses them to draw us near and depend upon Him in every circumstance.
2. Now, **Verses 38-41** we find a brief account of another miracle from the hand of Elisha and another example of God's grace in the lives of His people.  
The author tells us that Elisha has returned to Gilgal, the location of one of the schools of the prophets. Apparently, even during this time of apostasy throughout the land of Israel, there were several such schools where God maintained His faithful.  
When Elisha arrived in Gilgal the land was in the midst of famine.
  - A. As we read the Bible, we are aware of how frequent famines were. They are testimony to God's curse upon this fallen world.  
**Genesis 3:17 NAU** - "Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life."
  - B. Famines were also used of God for particular ends.
    1. It was a famine that brought Joseph to prominence in Egypt.
    2. It was a famine that led Naomi to move with her family to Moab and Ruth becoming a part of the lineage of David.
    3. Famine was very often used of God as a token of His judgement upon the unfaithfulness of Israel. In all likelihood, this is the case here.
3. We still see famines in modern times, often the result of political upheaval.  
The Chinese famine in 1959-61 resulted in an estimated 15-30 million deaths.  
The Ethiopian famine in 1984-1985 brought over a million deaths.  
The North Korean famine of 1995-99 killed over two million.  
The US has had times of regional hunger. The Southern devastation after the Civil War led to large scale hunger. The Dust Bowl of the drought-stricken Southern Plains in the 1930's led to many deaths.

4. Widespread hunger in the West is so rare that it is hard for us to identify with food scarcity. One writer puts it well:  
 “It is difficult for modern Western readers to understand what life in an agrarian society of basically subsistence levels meant for the average individual in ancient Israel. Starvation and hard times were never far away ... In modern Western countries, food is a far smaller part of a household budget than it has ever been; the time invested in gathering it is ordinarily limited to how long one spends in a supermarket. Life was very different in ancient Israel.”<sup>1</sup>
  5. During times of food scarcity people become very creative in bringing food to the table. Everything from rats to snakes to roaches have become sources of nourishment. In the account before us tonight food is scarce, but Elisha has arrived, and it provides opportunity to share a communal meal.  
**2 Kings 4:38 NAU** - "When Elisha returned to Gilgal, *there was a famine in the land. As the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and boil stew for the sons of the prophets."*
  6. We saw this group called “the sons of the prophets” back in Chapter 2 as they gathered for the departure of Elijah. It was a prophetic guild or school. Elisha had arrived to teach them as was his custom. They gathered to hear him teach.  
 On this occasion, Elisha ordered his servant to put on a large pot to prepare a meal. God’s people have always gathered around meals of fellowship. Our own fellowship meals carry on a long tradition.  
 Preparing this meal during a famine was challenging. Since the crops had failed they were forced to search the countryside for some wild vegetables and herbs.
  7. One man came across a particular gourd in the field. He was excited with this find and gathered as many as he could carry in the fold of his long robe. He cut them up and added them to the pot.  
 As soon as they tasted it they immediately knew there was something seriously wrong.  
**2 Kings 4:40 NAU** - "O man of God, there is death in the pot."  
 Whether this means it was actually lethal or just completely unpalatable, it was definitely a bad pot of stew. Some suggest that this word points to a particular gourd that had powerful laxative qualities and if consumed in large quantities could be fatal.
  8. As with the other narratives, there are some truths we can glean from this passage.
- I. God’s people are not exempt from suffering His judgments
    - A. Israel was under God’s judgment
      1. All famine is not the direct result of God’s judgment, but this famine probably was. It was consistent with God’s threat upon covenant unfaithfulness.  
**Leviticus 26:14-16 NAU** - "But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, <sup>15</sup> if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, *and so break My covenant,* <sup>16</sup> I, in turn, will do this to you:"

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis quoting Ray Dillard, *2 Kings: The Power and the Fury*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 73–74.

**Leviticus 26:20 NAU** - "Your strength will be spent uselessly, for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit."

**Leviticus 26:26 NAU** - "When I break your staff of bread, ten women will bake your bread in one oven, and they will bring back your bread in rationed amounts, so that you will eat and not be satisfied."

2. Israel had experienced a successive line of wicked kings, each worse than those before.

**1 Kings 16:25 NAU** - "Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD, and acted more wickedly than all who *were* before him."

**1 Kings 16:30 NAU** - "Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD more than all who were before him."

3. Finally, they would be defeated by the Assyrians and forever scattered.

**2 Kings 17:22-23 NAU** - "The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them <sup>23</sup> until the LORD removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day."

4. They would suffer drought and famine and afflictions from the hands of foreign adversaries.

But in all of this God maintained His faithful remnant.

**1 Kings 19:17-18 NAU** - "It shall come about, the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall put to death. <sup>18</sup> "Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him."

5. Were God's faithful spared from the suffering of His judgement upon the land? In some cases they were supernaturally spared. In most cases, however, the righteous suffered with the wicked. This doesn't mean that the righteous were suffering God's wrath. It does mean that the righteous experience God's temporal judgements upon the wicked.

6. These righteous prophets were reduced to scavenging wild herbs. Since they were not well-acquainted with all the plant life in the area, it presented a dangerous situation.

**B. God does not spare His people from affliction today**

1. Even when the affliction is God's righteous judgment upon the wicked the righteous often also suffer.
2. Are the righteous spared from wildfires, storms, floods?  
There were many Christians during Hurricane Laura and Hurricane Ida who lost their homes. There were also churches destroyed.
3. It should drive us to fervent prayer. It should lead us to warn of God's righteous judgment, now and into eternity. It should draw us near to God in faith, trusting His love and gracious provision.

- II. The normal turned abnormal, the natural to supernatural. Once again, we find a miracle at the hand of Elisha.
- A. It all had the feel of normalcy
1. It was a pot of stew being prepared for a group of God's people
  2. It was a communal effort – similar to our fellowship meals where everyone contributes so that all may enjoy.
  3. This one prophet was ill-equipped to know all of the various plants of the region. Do you know which plants in your backyard or the local woods are edible and which ones might kill you?
  4. Adding the poisonous gourd, the entire pot was ruined. The expected thing would be to toss out the entire pot. It was inedible. But they were in the midst of a famine. Food was scarce and valuable.  
We'll see food values during another famine in **Chapter 6**  
**2 Kings 6:25 NAU** - "There was a great famine in Samaria; and behold, they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for eighty *shekels* of silver, and a fourth of a kab of dove's dung for five *shekels* of silver."  
They were reduced to eating bird droppings and donkey heads.
  5. Elisha worked a miracle and spared the pot.  
God worked through the means of common flour. Common, but life-saving. This wasn't magical flour, yet God used it to restore health to the pot. There is a huge difference between the stew poured out in **Verse 40** and **Verse 41**.
  6. We see again in this passage the display of God's grace in the lives of His people. God works through the common use of means.
- B. We must consider the more important question here.
1. Was Elisha's primary focus the issue of the stew? Obviously, the stew is the major emphasis in this passage—Verses 38-41.
    - a. It speaks of a pot of stew, a wild gourd that turns out to be poisonous, and the cry of the prophets – "there's death in the pot."  
Every verse speaks of this meal.
    - b. Elisha's plan was for Gehazi to prepare the stew and for the prophets to share in this fellowship meal.
  2. But this isn't the primary focus. What is the setting? Why was Elisha there? Why did he order the stew?
    - a. Elisha had come to teach. This is what he did. Elisha was teaching and the prophets were intently listening. "As the sons of the prophets were sitting before him."
    - b. Elisha's chief concern was that these men might be fed at this communal meal so that the teaching would not be hindered.  
**2 Kings 4:38 NAU** - "As the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and boil stew for the sons of the prophets."

3. Elisha healed the pot – it is true he did not want to see this food go to waste in the midst of a famine. He did not want these brothers to go hungry. But his chief concern was to provide physical nourishment for them so that he could provide them spiritual nourishment—to feed them so that the teaching of God’s Word would not be interrupted.
4. What is our chief interest as a congregation?  
Our chief interest is worship. It is preaching and teaching. Fellowship meals are good, but what is our chief focus? Do we see these meals as an opportunity to edify one another? Do we see them as opportunities to invite people to the worship service that precedes the meal?
5. This must be the normal life of our church.  
And God takes the normal and works His glorious redeeming grace.

**Conclusion:**

1. Our chief interest must always be the spiritual health of our church.
2. Our spiritual health is maintained by a steady diet of the Word of God accompanied by prayer.