

“The Widow and the Oil”  
2 Kings 4:1-7  
(Preached at Trinity, December 26, 2021)

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. Introducing this passage invokes memories of 1 Timothy 5 where we were reminded of the plight often faced by ancient widows. Unlike modern times, life-insurance, social security, and other forms of financial aid were unknown. They were usually cared for by extended family, but in the absence of family these ladies might be left destitute. In addition, they were sometimes prey to unscrupulous people seeking to gain from their misfortune.
2. God gives particular care to widows and orphans are often addressing them particularly.  
**Exodus 22:21-23 NAU** - "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. <sup>22</sup> "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. <sup>23</sup> "If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry;"  
**Deuteronomy 24:17 NAU** - "You shall not pervert the justice due an alien *or* an orphan, nor take a widow's garment in pledge."  
Jesus laid this charge upon the Pharisees:  
**Matthew 23:14 NAU** - "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you will receive greater condemnation.*"
3. In 1 Kings we saw Elijah caring for a widow and her child at Zerephath during the drought and famine.  
**1 Kings 17:9 NAU** - "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you."  
**1 Kings 17:12 NAU** - "But she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die."  
**1 Kings 17:14-15 NAU** - "For thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain on the face of the earth.'" <sup>15</sup> So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for *many* days."
4. Now we find Elisha caring for a widow. It is a brief account that is short on details. We are told that she was a prophet's wife. We saw this group of prophets in **Chapter 2** where they were referred to as the "sons of the prophets." It is implied Elisha personally knew this prophet.
  - A. This widow brings her husband's virtues before Elisha. He was a God-fearing man, meaning he held God in holy reverence. It implies his faithfulness to God during a time when there were few remaining who were faithful to God. He had also faithfully served Elisha in humility.

- B. Her husband died and left his family with few resources. She is in a difficult situation. While her husband was alive the family had incurred some form of debt.
- a. It wasn't likely due to frivolous spending or living above their means. Being a prophet during this time was difficult. Persecution was common especially while Jezebel was alive, and the prophet may have fallen into debt just to feed his family. It is likely he had every intention of satisfying the debt but he fell ill and died. His death was most likely unexpected.
  - b. We are not given details of the debt but with the prophet dead the creditor has come demanding payment. Since she didn't have the means to pay, the creditor is demanding that her sons become his slaves to work out the debt. The word implies they were but children.
5. It was not unusual for people to fall into servitude in order to pay off a debt. Jesus used this as part of parable that His hearers would have understood well. **Matthew 18:23-27 NAU** - "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> "When he had begun to settle *them*, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> "But since he did not have *the means* to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. <sup>26</sup> "So the slave fell *to the ground* and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> "And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt."
6. Since this widow did not have the means to pay, the creditor was demanding that the widow's children work off the debt. He had the right to do so, and the widow had little recourse.
7. We don't need to over-spiritualize the passage. Oil in the Bible sometimes refers to the Holy Spirit. But this doesn't fit well here. Did Elisha tell her to go out and sell the Holy Spirit? This doesn't mean the passage is void of application for us. It has several points of application for us.
- I. God's people are not shielded from the adversities of life
- A. This was a God-fearing family
    1. Her husband was in the ministry – he was a prophet of God. He was among the 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal—one of God's faithful remnant.
    2. We have to assume this home was virtuous – she was a godly wife and they were training their children to honor God.
    3. But now her husband has suddenly died, she is left in poverty, and her two sons are about to be sold into slavery.
    4. Being God's prophet did not protect him from financial needs. He was so poor he had fallen into debt. Nor did his faithfulness to God guarantee his expectation of living long enough to pay off the debt. Nor did it protect his family from suffering hardship after his death.
  - B. Do Christians suffer the trials of this world?
    1. Do Christians get cancer? Do they suffer the death of loved ones? Do they suffer with a wayward child in spite of proper training? Do they experience financial hardship? Are they impacted by natural disasters?

2. Are we tempted to pray like this widow. My husband was faithful, I've been faithful, and now this is happening. Or perhaps you've heard these words before: "It isn't fair." Or perhaps you've been tempted to use them.
3. Notice the simplicity of her faith. She simply goes to God's servant and describes her situation – "Your servant is dead and we are in trouble." She doesn't offer any solutions or suggestions or speculations for how she might be delivered. Too often we labor to solve our problem and then ask God for His blessings upon *our* plan rather than humbly going before God seeking His plan.
4. May God grant us the faith of Jehoshaphat as he faced an insurmountable force:  
**2 Chronicles 20:12 NAU** - "O our God, will You not judge them? For we are powerless before this great multitude who are coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are on You."

## II. God is rich to provide for the needs of His people

- A. God is not unmindful of our needs
  1. God is sovereign over all things. This widow's plight was ordered from the hand of God. But her adversity would turn out to be her blessing for in it she was reminded of the great power and provision of God.
  2. God hears our prayers.  
 He is able to do above what we are able to conceive.  
 This doesn't mean we'll have our wealth restored like with Job.  
 It doesn't mean we will be healed and granted 15 more years of life like Hezekiah.  
 It doesn't mean our loved one will be raised back to life as Mary and Martha witnessed with their brother.
  3. But God is able to work beyond what we expect. And every experience of God's provision prepares us for future times of need.
  4. Notice Elisha's answer to her petition:  
 "What shall I do for you?"  
 But he immediately unfolds the means of her deliverance.
- B. God most often works through the use of means.
  1. God could have brought the widow a sudden windfall of wealth.  
 He could have moved upon the creditor to forgive the debt.
  2. God worked through the miraculous filling of jars with oil and then the marketing of the oil.
    - a. Elisha's question was filled with practicality  
 "What do you have in the house?"
    - b. Her answer was simple and plain: "Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil."  
 The widow expressed just how destitute she was. She had a single jar of oil. She even had to borrow empty jars from her neighbors.  
 God is able to bless us in our weakness.  
 It's like Jesus asking the disciples standing before 5000 hungry people, "How much food do you have?"  
 Their answer: "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

- c. In the midst of the miracle, it had the feel of normalcy. She and her sons acquired jars, filled them with oil and brought the oil to market.
- 3. Notice the expectation of their involvement, the expenditure of their energy.
  - a. It reminds us of how God provided for Naomi and Ruth. Ruth went and gleaned the field. Through this God provided for Naomi and Ruth's physical needs as well as bringing about the union of Ruth and Boaz – which led to the birth of Obed, Jesse, and David.
  - b. They had to go gather jars, fill the jars, and then sell the oil.
- 4. God works in His way and His way is always perfect but He often stirs us to action. Our prayer should be, "Oh Lord, what would you have me to do?"

### III. We shouldn't underestimate God's goodness and grace

#### A. Elisha charges the widow, "Go borrow vessels – do not get a few"

- 1. The implication is she should gather in abundance
- 2. She may not have understood the full extent of what was about to happen. Did she understand the fullness of the charge, "do not get a few?"
  - a. "Do not get a few" implies the meaning, "Gather many." She was to borrow and abundance of jars.
  - b. We find she was faithful to the command of Elisha. She gathered the jars and closed the door – this was not an occasion for public view. Sometimes we should share the wondrous work of God. Sometimes we need to keep silent. We don't need to post everything in our life on Facebook.
  - c. She then began to pour. The oil kept coming until the last jar was filled and then the oil stopped.
- 3. Why did she stop gathering the vessels? Should she have gathered more. Did she stop too soon? She wasn't told how many to gather but she was told to borrow in abundance.
- 4. There is a similar example in **Chapter 13** (See 2 Kings 13:14-19). Here we read King Joash definitely stopped too soon.  
**2 Kings 13:19 NAU** - "So the man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed *it*. But now you shall strike Aram *only* three times."

#### B. The implication for us is we should labor much and expect much.

- 1. Our unbelief leads to low expectations.
- 2. The disciples of Christ could not imagine providing food for over 5000 people.  
**Matthew 14:16-21 NAU** - "Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away; you give them *something* to eat!" <sup>17</sup> They said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." <sup>18</sup> And He said, "Bring them here to Me." <sup>19</sup> Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed *the food*, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples *gave them* to the crowds, <sup>20</sup> and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets. <sup>21</sup> There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children."

3. William Carey famously said, "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."
  4. Too often our unbelief causes us to fall short in our expectations  
Dale Ralph Davis: "And then one sometimes meets this attitude in a small church of forty or fifty members, most of whom are age sixty and above: we can't expect God to do anything in us or among us; we are growing older, we've no younger couples or children; we can't muster up any revival starter-kit like larger churches can do. We can't expect God to stir us."<sup>1</sup>
  5. God works abundantly in ways we cannot imagine.  
**Ephesians 3:20-21 NAU** - "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, <sup>21</sup> to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."
- C. We must not overlook that the oil was enough. It provided all that she needed.
1. Could she have gathered more jars? Perhaps. But God blessed abundantly and it was enough. She paid off her debt and had enough remaining to provide for her and her sons.
  2. God's provision for us is always sufficient.

#### Conclusion:

1. These are simple lessons for us to remember
  - A. God's people are not shielded from the adversities of this life. We will often face many trials.
  - B. God is rich to provide for us, often in ways we least expect. His mercies endure forever.
  - C. We should live with great expectation of God's provision and labor much in this faith and confidence.
2. And we must never forget the over-arching picture of God's overwhelming love for this widow. He loved her and provided abundantly for her.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Kings: The Wisdom and the Folly*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 287.