

2 Kings 4 | Amazing Grace

Grace pays the debt. (2 Kings 4:1–7).

From the great international conflict, Elisha returned to the concerns of the schools of the prophets. A true spiritual leader has a concern for individuals. He followed the example of his mentor, Elijah, who had ministered to families (1 Kings 17:8–24). The fact the woman was a widow and the mother of two sons shows the sons of the prophets weren't a celibate monastic group. Elisha knew this particular man and that he had a reputation for godliness. His death would have ended whatever income he earned, and for a widow to raise two sons unaided would have been a difficult thing at that time. Even dedicated people training for ministry have their trials and difficulties.

According to Hebrew law, a creditor could take the debtor and his children as servants, but he was not to treat them like slaves (Ex. 21:1–11; Lev. 25:29–31; Deut. 15:1–11). It would be heartbreaking for this woman to lose her husband to death and her two sons to servitude, but God is the "judge of the widows" (Deut. 10:18; Pss. 68:5; 146:9) and He sent Elisha to help her.

God often begins with what we already have. Moses had a rod, and God used that to accomplish great things (Ex. 4:2). Peter and his partners had fishing nets (Luke 5), and the boy had a few loaves and fishes (John 6). All the poor widow had was a little oil in a vessel, but "little is much when God is in it." Most of her neighbors would have unused empty vessels sitting around, so she wasn't robbing anybody by borrowing them, and once she had sold the oil, she could return the vessels. Elisha instructed her to shut the door so nobody would see a miracle was occurring in her house, and no doubt she warned her sons to keep quiet. The amount of oil she received was limited by the number of vessels she had, and that was controlled by her faith. (See also 13:10–19.) "According to your faith let it be to you" (Matt. 9:29). When she sold the oil, she had enough money to pay off the debt and maintain herself and her two sons.

The Lord doesn't always perform miracles like this to help us pay our debts, but He does meet our needs if we trust and obey. If we give everything to Him, He can make a little go a long way. This miracle also reminds us of the greatest miracle of all, the gracious forgiveness of our debts to the Lord through faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 7:36–50; Eph. 1:7; Col. 2:13). It didn't cost Elisha anything for God to provide the needed money to pay the debt, but it cost Jesus Christ His life to be able forgive us our sins.

Grace imparts the life. (2 Kings 4:8–37)

Shunem was about twenty miles northwest of Abel-meholah, Elisha's hometown, and twenty-five miles or so beyond Shunem was Mount Carmel (see v. 25). The average traveler on foot could cover fifteen to twenty miles per day, so Shunem was the perfect halfway point for Elisha whenever he went to Mount Carmel to pray, meditate, and seek the Lord in a new way. Since Mount Carmel was a very special place because of Elijah's ministry, perhaps there was also a school of the prophets there.

A great woman (vv. 8–10). The unnamed woman was great in social standing and in wealth. But she was also great in perception, for she noticed Elijah often passed that way on his ministry trips. She also discerned he was a man of God, and she wanted to serve the Lord by serving His prophet. We get the impression her husband lacked his wife's spiritual insight, but at least he didn't oppose her hospitality to the itinerant preacher. He permitted her to have a permanent "prophet's chamber" built on the roof of the house and to

outfit it with a lamp, a table and chair, and a bed. It was large enough to walk around in (v. 35) and apparently offered room enough for Gehazi, Elisha's servant (v. 13). The woman also saw to it that the two men were fed.

In this day of motels and hotels, hospitality to God's people, and especially God's servants, is becoming a neglected ministry and a lost blessing. Yet, one of the qualifications for an elder is "given to hospitality" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8), and Hebrews 13:2 exhorts all believers to practice this virtue (see Gen. 18). We should open our hearts and homes to others and not complain about it (1 Peter 4:9).

A great gift (vv. 11–17). The prophet and his servant were resting in the room when Elisha expressed a desire to do something special for the woman because of her kindness to them, and he asked Gehazi to call her so he could discuss the matter with her. Elisha addressed his words to Gehazi, possibly because the woman held Elisha in such high regard that she didn't feel worthy to speak with him. But her reply was humble and brief: "I am content among my own people." She didn't want Elisha to intercede with the great God because she had no desire to be treated like a great person. She ministered to them because she wanted to serve the Lord.

After she left the prophet's chamber, Gehazi suggested she might want a son. Her husband was older than she, so perhaps conception was impossible; but if God could do it for Abraham and Sarah, He could do it for them. It was likely her husband would precede her in death, and without a family, she would be left alone. Gehazi called her a second time, and this time Elijah spoke to her personally. He gave her a promise that sounded very much like God's words to Abraham and Sarah (v. 16; Gen. 17:21; 18:14). How many blessings husbands with nominal faith have received because of the dedication of their godly wives! The promise was fulfilled and the woman gave birth to a son. Grace brought life where once there had been no life.

A great sorrow (vv. 18–28). The boy was still a child when these events occurred, for his mother was able to hold him on her lap and carry his limp body up to Elijah's chamber on the roof (vv. 20–21). The cause of the boy's illness isn't specified, but perhaps the heat of the harvest season affected him. The mother called to the father in the field and asked him to provide her with a servant and a donkey, but she didn't inform him the boy had died. The fact she was leaving suggested the boy was safe, probably taking a nap. No doubt she feared her husband would order instant burial; nobody wants a corpse in the house during the hot harvest season. Her husband wondered why she wanted to see Elisha when it wasn't a special holy day, but her only reply was, "Peace—shalom." She would also say this to Gehazi (v. 26).

Gehazi's attitude toward the woman's coming reveals a dark streak in his character that shows up even more in the next chapter (v. 27; see Matt. 15:23; 19:13–15). Perhaps the woman and her servant intruded on their afternoon siesta. But Elisha discerned something was wrong the Lord hadn't revealed to him. Even Jesus occasionally asked for information (Mark 5:9; 9:21; John 11:34). Of course the woman was bitter and heartbroken, and it sounds like she was blaming Elisha for the tragedy. She hadn't asked for a son, and if Elisha and Gehazi hadn't interfered, her joy wouldn't have been snatched from her.

A great miracle (vv. 29–37). The woman and the servant must have ridden very fast to get to Mount Carmel in time for Elisha and Gehazi to return home with her the same day; and the animal must have been exhausted from such a strenuous trip in the harvest sun. Why did Elisha send Gehazi ahead? He was probably the younger of the two men and could run faster and get to the house much more quickly. It was important somebody get back to guard the corpse so the father wouldn't discover it and have it buried. Gehazi laid his staff on the boy's body, but nothing happened. (Was this because of what was hidden in his heart?) The

woman rode the donkey and Elisha followed after her, but we aren't told he received special power as Elijah did when he ran before Ahab's chariot (1 Kings 18:46).

Once again the door was shut on a miracle (4:4; and see Luke 8:51). First, the prophet prayed, and then, following the example of Elijah (1 Kings 17:17–24), he stretched himself out over the corpse. He got up and walked in the room, no doubt praying and seeking God's power, and then he lay on the boy a second time. This time the boy came back to life, sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. The text doesn't explain the significance of the sneezes, unless it was God's way of expelling something toxic from his lungs. You would think Elisha would have been overjoyed to take the boy downstairs to his mother, but instead, he called Gehazi, who in turn called the mother. See Hebrews 11:35.

The story doesn't end there (see 8:1–6). Later, when Elisha announced the coming of a seven-year famine, he also advised the woman to relocate, so she went to dwell with the Philistines. When she returned to claim her property, Gehazi was speaking with the king and telling him about the resurrection of the boy, and his mother showed up in the palace! The king authorized the officials to return her property to her along with whatever income she had lost because of her absence. The death of the boy turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Only God's grace can impart life, whether to a barren womb or to a dead boy, and only God's grace can impart spiritual life to the dead sinner (John 5:24; 17:1–3; Eph. 2:1–10). It was God who gave the boy life, but He used Elisha as the means to do it. So it is with raising sinners from the dead: God needs witnesses, prayer warriors, and concerned saints to bring that life to them. "The Holy Ghost works by those who feel they would lay down their own lives for the good of others, and would impart to them not only their goods and their instructions, but themselves also, if by any means they might save some. O for more Elishas, for then we should see more sinners raised from their death in sin." —Charles Spurgeon

Grace removes the curse. (2 Kings 4:38–41)

Elisha visited the sons of the prophets at Gilgal during the time of the famine (8:1), and he commanded Gehazi his servant to make a stew for the men. Vegetables were scarce so some of the men went looking in the fields for herbs they could add to the stew. The student who came with a cloak filled with gourds didn't know about such matters but just brought whatever looked edible. Nobody knew what the gourds were!

What were the evidences there was poison in the pot? The bitter taste of the stew was perhaps the first clue, and the men probably suffered stomach pains and nausea. There had been death in the water at Jericho (2:19–22), and now there was death in the pot at Gilgal. It had been introduced innocently by a well-meaning student, but it had to be removed. But it was a time of famine and food was scarce. Elisha dropped some flour into the pot, and the Lord removed the poison from the stew.

As far as we know, there were no poisonous plants growing in the Garden of Eden. They showed up with the thorns and thistles after Adam sinned (Gen. 3:17–19). Today, there is a great deal of "death in the pot." We live under the curse of the law of sin and death, and sin and death are reigning in this world (Rom. 5:14–21). But when Jesus died on the cross, He bore the curse of the law for us (Gal. 3:13), and for those who have trusted Christ, grace is reigning (Rom. 5:21) and they are "reigning in life" (Rom. 5:17). The sting of death has been removed (1 Cor. 15:50–57)!

Grace satisfies the hungry. (2 Kings 4:42–44)

In the northern kingdom of Israel, there was no official temple dedicated to Jehovah, and many of the faithful priests and Levites had left apostate Israel and moved to Judah (1 Kings 12:26–33; 2 Chron. 11:13–17). Since

there was no sanctuary for the people to bring their tithes and offerings (Lev. 2:14; 6:14–23; 23:9–17; Deut. 18:3–5), they brought them to the nearest school of the prophets where they would be shared by people true to the Mosaic Law. The firstfruit offerings of grain could be roasted heads of grain, fine flour baked into cakes, or even loaves of bread. All of this would be welcome by the sons of the prophets, and certainly the Lord honored the people who refused to bow down to the golden calves at Dan and Bethel.

There were one hundred hungry men in the group, and though the gifts the man brought were honored by the Lord, they couldn't feed all of the men adequately. The situation parallels that of Christ and the disciples (Matt. 14:13–21; 15:29–33, and parallels in the Gospels). Gehazi's question "How can I set this before a hundred men?" (v. 43) sounds like Andrew's question about the five loaves and two fish, "How far will they go among so many?" (John 6:9).

But Elisha knew the Lord had this difficult situation well under His control. He commanded his servant to set out the bread and grain, and when Gehazi obeyed, there was not only plenty of food for everybody, but there was food left over. The Word of the Lord had announced and accomplished the impossible.

When our Lord fed the five thousand, He used the miracle as a backdrop for preaching a strong salvation message about the Bread of Life (John 6:25ff). Elisha didn't preach a sermon, but the miracle assures us God knows our needs and meets them as we trust Him. Today we have freezers and supermarkets to supply us with food, and there are food banks to help those who are poor. But in Elisha's time, people prepared and consumed their food a day at a time. That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). During his years in the wilderness as an exile, David depended on God's provision, and he was able to say, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread" (Ps. 37:25). Out of the riches of His grace, the Lord meets our every need.

2 Kings 4 | Study Questions:

1. When did the widow's oil stop flowing?
2. What are three things Elisha did to bring the Shunammite's son back to life?
3. What happened when the man from Baal Shalishah obeyed Elisha and gave the 100 men the little bit of food to eat that he had intended to give to Elisha?

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the most important thing, the Big Idea?
2. What is a central truth I need to know?
3. Why do I need to know it?
4. What do I need to do?
5. Why do I need to do it?
6. How can I remember it?