

Elisha: Seeing the Hand of God at Work

Session 2

May 4, 2025

God's Hand in Meeting Our Needs

The Point: God provides for our needs.

Session Passage: 2 Kings 4:1-7

2 Kings 4:1-2

Connection to the Point. A woman made her need known to God's prophet.

The sons of the prophets (v. 1). *Sons* does not indicate a biological relationship to the prophets, but rather membership in a class or group. *The sons of the prophets* indicates a community or guild of prophets. When Elijah was taken into heaven and Elisha performed miracles, the sons of the prophets bowed before Elisha recognizing that Elisha's power was the same power Elijah had possessed (2:15-18). Later events (4:38-41; 6:1-7) indicate Elisha's role as supervisor over the sons of the prophets. **The company of the prophets** (v. 1) indicates membership in a community or guild. When Elijah was taken into heaven and Elisha performed miracles, the company of the prophets bowed before Elisha recognizing that Elisha's power was the same power Elijah had possessed (2:15-18). Later events (4:38-41; 6:1-7) indicate Elisha's role as supervisor over the company of the prophets.

A widow's situation (v. 1). The woman who cried out to Elisha was a widow of one of the sons of the prophets. In biblical times, widows were in a very vulnerable position. They often lacked economic, legal, and physical means of support and could be easily taken advantage of. In this instance, the widow possessed only a jar of oil, and a creditor was approaching to take her children as slaves as payment for her debt. The prophet Elijah dealt with a similar situation involving a widow (1 Kings 17:8-24). The vulnerability of widows led to the early church designating certain men to oversee both Greek and Jewish widows so the daily needs of all the widows would be met (Acts 6:1-6; on the early church's emphasis on the care of widows and orphans see Jas. 1:27).

Your servant (v. 1). The term *servant* can refer to one who serves God, kings, rulers, as well as anyone who serves a superior. The word was also commonly used as a term for polite address among equals or in relation to one who was superior in rank. Most likely the woman was using the term as an expression of humility toward Elisha. The phrase would also have been appropriate since her husband had been one of the sons of the prophets; Elisha as leader of the group would have been her husband's superior. That the widow was

one of the wives of the sons of the prophets indicates that the sons of the prophets were permitted to marry.

Feared the Lord (v. 1). To *revere the Lord* is to fear Him in the sense of standing in awe of Him. Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” When confronted with God’s power, beauty, majesty, and glory the only appropriate response is one of awe that leads to love for and obedience to Him. By mentioning that her dead husband had feared the Lord, the widow was communicating to Elisha that he had been a man who loved and served God with his heart, soul, mind, and strength (see Deut. 6:4-6; Mark 12:28-30). Lord is a substitution for God’s covenant name Yahweh, which was viewed as being too holy to speak lest it be mispronounced. Yahweh emphasizes God’s eternal self-existence and His self-sufficiency. It is also the title by which God as Creator and Redeemer called the Israelites into relationship with Him (Ex. 3:13-15).

The creditor (v. 1). In the ancient Near East, the practice of enslaving a person’s wife and/or children as a form of debt payment was common. The person receiving the loan made a pledge in the form of property as collateral on the loan, sometimes pledging himself and/or members of his family against the loan. However, God gave the laws found in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and especially Deuteronomy 15:1-18 as instructions for the care of the poor and vulnerable among His people; especially those indebted and enslaved. While in Israelite society everyone was responsible for looking out for the poor and vulnerable, it was particularly the role of a family member (known as the kinsman redeemer) to deliver his relatives from indebtedness and slavery (Lev. 25:47-55). The Hebrew prophets condemned the rich for their abuse of the poor and helpless of society and called on God’s people to care for them (Isa. 3:14-15; 58:6-10; Ezek. 22:29; Jer. 5:28; 22:3; Amos 2:6-7; 4:1; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). That this widow had fallen into such a desperate situation indicates that God’s instructions and provisions for the poor had been either forgotten or ignored. However, through God’s power, Elisha would take on the role of this widow’s redeemer.

A jar of oil (v. 2). The term for *jar* is used only here in the Hebrew Old Testament. It was most likely a small container. Some suggest in this instance that it was not the standard type of jar used for storing oil in a home, but rather a small bottle or flask used for anointing. This would have further emphasized the destitute state of the widow and her two children.

Oil (v. 2) was a major component of life in ancient Israel. The most common oil was made from olives, due to the abundance of olive trees in Israel. The oil was extracted from olives

using an olive press. Olive oil was used in food preparation and was an essential part of people's diets. It was also used as fuel for lamps (Ex. 25:6; Matt. 25:3), as medicine in treating wounds (Isa. 1:6; Luke 10:34), as a cosmetic for perfume and skin care (Ruth 3:3), and in religious ceremonies such as anointing kings (1 Sam. 10:1), priests (Lev. 8:30), objects such as altars (Lev. 8:11), markers/pillars (Gen. 35:14), and the tabernacle and its furnishings (Ex. 40:9-11; Lev. 8:10). Because of the many uses of oil in daily life, it was also an important commodity of trade. As such, it was a resource the widow could sell both to pay her families' debt and have money on which to live (2 Kings 4:7).

2 Kings 4:3-4

Connection to the Point. Elisha directed the woman to collect jars to be prepared for how God would provide.

Borrow (v. 3). The Hebrew term for *borrow* in this context means to ask as a favor for temporary use. The term is also used later in the Elisha account of the axe head used by one of the sons of the prophets that fell into the water while he was chopping down a tree. The man cried out, "Oh, my master, it *was borrowed!*" Oh no, my lord! . . . It *was borrowed!*" Alas, master! for it *was borrowed*" (2 Kings 6:5, emphasis added). The term is also used in the sense of to consult or inquire of either God ("seeking," Josh. 9:14) or of a person such as a child asking a question of his or her father ("ask," 4:21). The word could also be used to inquire if someone was well (Gen. 43:27; Jer. 15:5), much as the modern-day question, "How are you doing?"

Empty Containers (v. 3). Storage containers were typically tall oval or pear-shaped jars about twenty-five inches in height and sixteen-inches in diameter, having two or four handles. The bases were usually rounded, coming to a point. They were placed in stands, in the holes of wood planks, or pressed into the ground. The Hebrew term for *containers* has a wide range of meaning. It was the general term for a vessel, object, or utensil. More specifically, it could refer to bags, vessels, or containers (1 Sam. 17:49; 1 Kings 17:10), weapons and armor (1 Sam. 14:13; 2 Kings 11:11), musical instruments (1 Chron. 15:16; 16:42), tools for working (1 King 6:7), a yoke for animals such as oxen (2 Sam. 24:22), for furniture/furnishings (Ex. 31:7; 39:33), for jewelry (Ex. 3:22), and even for boats made out of papyrus reeds. In this instance, identifying the borrowed vessels as empty containers emphasizes that they were commonplace every-day vessels that God would use to perform a miracle. The focus is on God, not the vessels themselves. The apostle Paul wrote, "Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us" (2 Cor. 4:7). While he did not indicate what this treasure is,

most likely it refers to the gospel. Clay jars were both ordinary and fragile. As believers, we are the conduits God uses to proclaim the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. We should be humbled when we are compared to ordinary jars; there is nothing about us that deserves to be used by God. However, we should be encouraged and emboldened to action because God accomplishes His purposes through ordinary, everyday people like us.

Do not get just a few (v. 3). Elisha was expecting God to do great things, so he instructed the widow to get more than just a few containers. The miracle God would perform for the widow was greater than the small container of oil she possessed (v. 2). The prophet wanted the widow to see that God could do great things in her life. God's miracle was going to be extravagant. All our efforts for the kingdom will only be effective inasmuch as we are dependent and expectant that God can and will do great things. We can and should trust that God "is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph 3:20). This is the very nature of faith itself—which has God as its object. We trust what God has already done through Jesus Christ to redeem us, and we step out in faith trusting and having an expectant hope for what God has promised to do for us and through us in the future.

Oil (v. 4) was a major component of life in ancient Israel. The most common oil was made from olives, due to the abundance of olive trees in Israel. The oil was extracted from olives using an olive press. Olive oil was used in food preparation and was an essential part of people's diets. It was also used as fuel for lamps (Ex. 25:6; Matt. 25:3), as medicine in treating wounds (Isa. 1:6; Luke 10:34), as a cosmetic for perfume and skin care (Ruth 3:3), and in religious ceremonies such as anointing kings (1 Sam. 10:1), priests (Lev. 8:30), objects such as altars (Lev. 8:11), markers/pillars (Gen. 35:14), and the tabernacle and its furnishings (Ex. 40:9-11; Lev. 8:10). Because of the many uses of oil in daily life, it was also an important commodity of trade. As such, it was a resource the widow could sell both to pay her families' debt and have money on which to live (2 Kings 4:7).

2 Kings 4:5-7

Connection to the Point. God miraculously filled every jar with oil.

Parallels to Elijah's miracle. The mention of the jar of oil should cause readers to remember how God had provided for the widow in Elijah's ministry (1 Kings 17:8-16) and create an expectation that God was going to perform a similar miracle in this situation. In both cases, the Lord provided for a person whom society had cast aside. The Lord used

ordinary, everyday products that were essential to life and their containers to perform the miracles. The miracles of Elijah and Elisha have both similarities and differences. Whereas Elijah performed the miracle at Zarephath near Sidon or Zidon (north of Israel in Phoenicia, 1 Kings 17:9), the miracle of Elisha apparently took place in Israel. Both widows were in a state of desperate need. Elijah's widow was facing starvation (1 Kings 17:10-12), whereas Elisha's widow was facing both poverty and the loss of her children to a creditor (2 Kings 4:1-2). Elijah's miracle focused on a flour jar and an oil jug which remained full until the drought the land was experiencing was over (1 Kings 17:14-16), whereas Elisha's miracle used a hands-on approach. The prophet commanded the widow and her sons to gather many empty containers and pour oil from her jar into the empty containers. Oil flowed out of the single jar into the containers until no empty containers remained (2 Kings 4:3-6). Both miracles supplied food for the widows and their families. However, whereas the widow in Elijah's case was provided with flour and oil to make food, in Elisha's miracle he commanded the widow to sell the oil to pay off her creditor and provide for her family (1 Kings 17:16; 2 Kings 4:7).

Shut the door (v. 5). This entire event in which God miraculously provided a massive amount of oil for the widow took place in secret—behind a closed door. The widow's neighbors had provided the containers, but they did not see what happened as her little vessel of oil continued to fill container after container. That the miracle took place in secret at the hands of the widow and not in the presence of the prophet Elisha emphasizes that it was God and His power that were the source of the miracle as well as demonstrating His care and mercy toward the widow and her sons.

Scripture often encourages us to share publicly how God has provided for us, and there are times we should declare that the Lord has done great things for us. Psalm 126 and other passages like it testify that the nations will be drawn to God because of the great things that He does for and through His people. Jesus commanded His disciples, "You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16). However, this session passage indicates that there are also times when God's blessings on our lives can and should remain a private matter—just between us and God. Regarding both giving to the poor and prayer (6:1-6), Jesus commanded that these actions be done in secret and "your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (vv. 3-4,6).

Pay (v. 7). The Hebrew term has the meaning of to complete or finish. It can mean to make good (in the sense of paying one's debts) as well as to make whole or good (in the sense of restoration). The Hebrew word contains the same consonants as and is related to the term *shalom*. Shalom is often translated "peace"; however, it carries a wider range of meaning than simply the absence of conflict. The Hebrew concept of shalom is a picture of wholeness and completeness. The widow was not only able to pay her existing debt; she and her sons were able to live on the rest. God met the widow's immediate need and provided for the daily needs of her family as well. God's provision in the life of this widow foreshadows God's provision through the atoning work of Christ available to all who will repent and place their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. The initial moment of justification (when all the believer's sins are forgiven, he or she is reconciled to God, and permanently receives the perfect righteousness of Christ) is followed by the ongoing process of sanctification (the life-long process of being transformed into the image of Christ in one's character and behavior).