**The Provision**

***2 Kings 4:1-7***

The good hand of the LORD has been on Elisha! As Elisha begins his ministry to Israel, the LORD has already performed four miracles through him. He is not established as a man of God . . . a man through whom God speaks and acts.

You remember that Elisha began his work by raising Elijah’s mantle and slapping the waters in the Jordan River. The rushing current separated and Elisha walked across on dry ground to return to the Promised Land.

When the leaders of Jericho came to him about a problem of bitter water, Elisha threw a bowl of salt into the spring and the water became sweet!

When some young men met him with angry ridicule and defiance against the LORD, Elisha called a curse from God upon them and two she-bears came out of the woods and tore 42 of them apart.

When the armies Judah and Israel ran out of water as they confronted Moab, God used Elisha to make a dry streambed flood with pools of water. He did this without any rain falling from the sky.

On the heels of these miracles, the wife of one of the sons of the prophets comes to Elisha with a really big problem! Her husband dies and creditors bang on her door demanding payment on family debts. She has no money at all. And the creditors threaten to take her two sons away from her and make them slaves.

When she comes to Elisha she explains: *“Elisha, you knew my husband. He was a God-fearing man who served Yahweh faithfully all his life. We lived paycheck to paycheck because as a son of the prophets, my husband did not make much money. And what he did make, he would often give it away to help the poor. We got into debt, not because of foolish spending, but because a tragedy came upon our family.*

*Elisha, when my husband became ill, I cried to the LORD. I know He heard me. I know that He is my Shepherd and that He loves me.*

*But the LORD in his wisdom did not answer my prayers the way that I wanted Him to. The LORD took my husband from me. I trust the LORD. I know that He is the One who gave my husband to me in the first place.*

*But Elisha, my heart is breaking. Our bond was special and now I am without the one whom my soul loves. My cheeks remain wet with my constant tears.*

*Just yesterday right after the funeral, our creditors came angry to my home demanding repayment right now! I told them that I would pay if they just gave me some time.*

*I know that we owe them money and I know that it is right for me to repay. .*

*But the creditors told me that I needed* ***to pay right now****. They threatened to take my sons from my home this very week and to sell them as slaves. I know that the law gives them the right to take my sons for payment of my debt,* ***but Elisha, other than the LORD, my boys are my only treasure . . . they are all that I have*** *in my life. They give me courage to face each new day. Elisha, help me!!!”*

Elisha sees the faith in this widow’s heart as she looks to him . . . Yahweh’s servant to help her in her great distress. Elisha knows that Yahweh will have compassion upon her.

Elisha smiles and asks, *“What shall I do for you?”*

She looks at Elisha quizzically as if to say, *“I do not know what you shall do for me. That is why I came asking!!”*

Elisha calmly says, *“Tell me; what have you in the house?”*

*“I don’t have anything in my house! The cupboards are completely bare! Well . . . it is not even worth mentioning, but I do have one small thing. I have a little jar of oil.”*

Elisha knows that it is important for the widow to be active in faith as she seeks the LORD for His provision.

*“OK. Bring that jar. Also go out to your neighbors and borrow vessels from every one of them. I am not talking about vessels filled with oil or flour or anything. I am talking about empty vessels. Get as many as you can! When you think you have as many as your neighbors will give you, ask for more!”*

The widow reasons, *“What kind of request is this?* She remembers the story of Elijah helping the widow with oil and flour and Elisha’s directions light a match under her faith! She KNOWS that Yahweh is going to help her! With hope she does as Elisha commands.

Neighbor after neighbor ask her, *“Empty vessels? Sure I have a few. But what are you going to do with them?”*

Her answer was always the same, *“All I know is that the man of God told me to gather them! I believe the LORD will provide for me.”*

Then when they gave her several from their house, she would always ask, *“Is* *that really all the empty vessels that you have? Please look one more time.”* Inevitably, the neighbor would return with one or two more.

When the widow gathered all the vessels she could get, Elisha said, *“OK. Now put them all in an inner room of your house and go inside with them and with your two sons and shut the door.* ***The LORD is giving you a miracle not for a public show, but for your personal worship.***

*When you get inside, take your tiny jar of oil and begin pouring it into the empty vessels. When one of the empty jars gets full . . . set it aside and start pouring into the next vessel. Do this until all of them are full.”*

*“You are not going to go into the room with us?”*

*“No.* ***The LORD wants you to trust only Him and not in man****. Yes. I am the LORD’s servants and often I am present when He does His miracles, but He ALWAYS deserves ALL THE GLORY!”*

So the widow and her sons enter the room and close the door behind them. They were not sure how this was going to work.

She sits by one of the vessels and starts pouring. The oil keeps flowing and flowing and flowing!! All three shout with joy. The empty jar is about 10X bigger than their little jar, yet the big jar is now filled to the brim. In marvel they sing praises to the LORD! Psalm 126 came to their hearts:

“The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad . . .Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.”(Psalm 126:3, 5-6 [ESV](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Psa._126:5))

One son takes the full jar and lugs it to the corner. The other son brings over another vessel and she begins to pour again. Over and over and over and over this happens! Soon all the vessels in the room were full! Never had they seen such quantity of oil in their lives. When she finishes filling up the last one, she looks inside her original jar and it is now empty.

Truth be known, she wishes she had worked a little harder to get more vessels from neighbors!!

She and her sons go to Elisha. *“Man of God, look at what the LORD has done! We would not believe it if we had not experienced it!”*

Elisha replies, *“Go and sell all the oil. Turn it into cash. Pay the debts that you owe. It is right for those who lent you the money to get back what you borrowed. Then you will have enough money left from the oil to live on the rest!”*

She sells the oil for a great price. When she presents the oil to the merchant he exclaims, *“Of course I will buy it. This is the best olive oil I have ever tasted!!!”*

**Main Idea: The LORD shows generous compassion to every person who trusts in Him. The LORD delights when we trust Him in our most desperate days.**

**Question: What have been your most desperate days on earth?** For some of you, that question takes you back to your childhood. For others to college days. For others a few years ago. For others you reply, “I am living them right now.”

The LORD wants us to know that He does not abandon us in dark trials, but that He hears our cry.

This story tells us of a widow who trusts in the LORD during a desperate trial. From this widow we learn five key lessons about faith:

**Lesson #1: Our desperation activates our faith.**

*Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.” 2 Kings 4:1*

Here God does something that is hard to understand. In a day when there were so FEW good guys, God takes one of them in the prime of his life. This is a servant of God. He is a man who “feared the LORD”. Yet he is a man whom the LORD allows to become sick and die. He is a man with a wife and children. He is a man needed in his home and in his community. Yet the LORD takes him. And his wife and children suffer for it.

Do you think that this woman may have asked in the darkness of the night, *“Lord, why? Why did you take my husband from me?”*

**Truth: God’s people suffer in this broken world. God does not promise us an earthly life free from terrible pain.** God does promise us an eternity free from pain if we believe in Him. Suffering is not ultimate. God does promise us an earthly life filled with His loving provision when we trust in Him.

**Question: What is God doing when He ordains terrible trials for His people?**

On the one hand, I cannot answer that question. I know so little and God knows everything. God keeps some answers to some questions to Himself.

*““The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 29:29* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Deut._29:29)*)*

If I were God, there are many things that God allows that I would not. This is not a deficiency in God however. **This is a deficiency in me.** I am the one who lacks wisdom and goodness, not God.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Is._55:8)*)*

On the other hand, we CAN answer that question.

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Rom._8:28)*)*

**God is loving His people through the trials that He brings to us. He is working an eternal joy that is yet future for us.** Through our torments, the LORD is faithfully bringing a goodness to us that will never fade, never be stolen, never lose its joy. Through our suffering, He is giving us an eternal treasure that we would not receive without the suffering.

When we hear this answer, part of us is tempted to say, *“I would rather have this pain removed than to experience that eternal joy.”* We may FEEL that way right now, but that is not true. **There will be a future day when we rejoice that we did not trade temporal peace for the loss of eternal glory.** Paul tells us what faith in God sees:

*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:17-18* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#2Cor._4:17)*)*

**Lesson #1: Our desperation activates our faith.**

Desperation does not AUTOMATICALLY activate our faith. In fact, Satan loves to use our most painful moments to turn us away from the LORD.

Remember Job’s wife who in the loss of her children and the loss of her husband’s health encouraged him to ***“curse God and die”.*** Her trials opened her heart to angry unbelief.

And she is not alone!! Many have experienced anguish in this broken world and cried out in resentment against the LORD saying, ***“How can I believe in a God who would allow this kind of suffering?”***

Job did not respond to his wife’s unbelief with a shallow platitude, but he did tell his wife that he was going to trust the LORD in the anguish of his trials.

“Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”  (Job 2:10 [ESV](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Job_2:10)).

Here this woman is first made a widow, than made destitute, then threatened with the enslavement of her sons. In her desperation she seeks out God’s servant Elisha. In her need, God supplies Elisha to her.

The point: God uses her desperation to ignite the flame of faith in her soul.

**Truth: Our faith sleeps when all is well in our life. God often uses storms to shake us awake and to take shelter in the LORD.**

**Lesson #1: Our desperation activates our faith.**

**Once our faith is awakened . . .**

**Lesson #2: God’s character directs our faith.**

*And Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me; what have you in the house?” And she said, “Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.” 2 Kings 4:2*

**This woman went to the man of God for help because she believed certain things about God. She knows** that God is the LORD who is compassionate and merciful. **She knows** that God is the LORD who has made a way for her to approach Him with her needs. **She knows** that God is the LORD who loves and cares for His people. **She knows** that God is the LORD who will respond to her request. **She knows** that God is the LORD who has a tender heart toward widows in their distress. **It is WHAT SHE KNOWS ABOUT GOD THAT DIRECTS HER FAITH TO SEEK HIM.** Do you know what she knows?

**Truth: What we believe about God determines what we do when we face disasters in our life. Our knowledge of God directs our faith upward to the LORD in times of need. Without a true knowledge of God, disaster directs us to dark despair.**

Notice though that this widow takes the initiative to go to Elisha. She is not passive with her need. She does not say to herself, *“The LORD already knows my sorrows. If He wants to help me, He will.”*  No. She takes action.

She goes to Elisha because she sees Elisha as ordained by God to mediate God’s grace. She did not think, *“The Lord will tell him if the Lord wants him to know.”* She did not think, *“Elisha probably already knows my plight. He will come to me if he cares.”* Or “*Elisha for sure saw me post this on my Facebook page. Why is he not reaching out to me?”*

**She takes the initiative and goes to Elisha.** In this she follows in the path of so many who came to Jesus for help . . . I think of the woman who suffered with the issue of blood for 12 years who sought to touch the fringe of Jesus’ garment. Or the paralytic friends who cut a hole in the roof so that they could lower him down to meet Jesus.

**Friends, take the initiative and go directly to Jesus.** AND also go to people who KNOW Jesus and who can intercede on your behalf!

**Principle: The Lord often uses His servants to represent Him at the point of a person’s need.**

Elisha is eager to help. He has a tender heart for her. He responds to her request.

**Principle: God’s human instruments need to hear the requests of God’s people so that they can help through prayer and other means. True servants of the LORD are moved to compassion when others personally share their burdens.**

**Application: Let us not be passive in our discouraging moments. Let us go to God. Let us ask those who know God to pray for us and to help us!**

The church cannot be the church if we close our lives to one another. How can the church be a praying church if no one in the church is willing to share sufferings in their own lives that need God’s intervention.

Too many believers are so private with the needs of their lives that God’s church is not able to pray, to support and to love in times of distress. I understand that some things need to be kept within a small circle. But I would urge you to greater willingness to share your needs with church leaders and church family.

**The story of the widow reminds us of God’s loving heart.**

**Friend, do you know that God cares personally for you? He invites you to go to Him with the details of your life.** No one is too small or too unimportant to slip past the loving eye of God. No detail of your life is too insignificant to bring to Him. He is not limited by time or energy or location. He is always present . . . always available . . . always able . . . always willing to give us grace to help us in our desperate moments.

**Lesson #3: God’s word instructs our faith.**

*3 Then he said, “Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not too few. 4 Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside.” 2 Kings 4:3-4*

**How do we know what God wants us to do in our times of need? We look to the one and only source of truth . . . God’s Word.** Here God’s messenger gives very specific direction to the widow. **The prophets word is the word that the LORD gave him to give to her.**  Today, we have a more sure word from the LORD. We have Jesus and the complete Book that God wrote for us to know His will.

**Question: How do we KNOW what actions our faith is to take?**

**Our feelings must not instruct our faith.** Our feelings will often lead us astray.

**Our religious experiences must not instruct our faith.** Our experiences will often lead us astray.

**Only God’s Word instructs our faith.**

This means that it is VERY important to pay attention to the details that ARE given to us in God’s Word AND it is VERY important to pay a attention to the details that are NOT given to us in God’s Word.

If we treat the details that are given to us in God’s Word as though they are insignificant, we will sin against the LORD and miss His blessing.

If we treat the details that are NOT given to us in God’s Word as though they are necessary, we will sin against the LORD and miss His blessing.

Notice the detail that the LORD gives to this woman. “Go outside and borrow vessels from all your neighbors.” “Then go in to a room with your sons and shut the door.” “Then start pouring from your one little jar into the other jars.” **Every part of the detail is important for this woman’s blessing. She obeys to a T.**

**Truth: We often miss God’s blessing because we neglect the details of the Word.**

“Make your requests known to God **with thanksgiving.”**

“God loves **cheerful** givers.”

“Forgive us our sins **as we forgive those who sin against us.”**

““only (speak words) such as is **good for building up**, . . . that **it may give grace to those who hear.”** (Ephesians 4:29 [ESV](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Eph._4:29))

“Husbands, love your wives **like Jesus loves the church and gave Himself up for her.”**

“Wives, submit to your husbands **as to the Lord.”**

“Walk in love **AS CHRIST LOVED US.”**

**Truth: We often miss God’s blessing because we believe our preferences to be commands from the LORD.**

This is the practice of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day.

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Matt._23:23)*)*

**You know every so often a pastor has to confront very real errors in the church he shepherds. And I believe that this is one of them. (Safe because I am going on sabbatical in a week.)**

In the past couple of years, we have had unhealthy controversies over preferences. These preferences that lead to unhealthy controversy are many and varied.

Let me name a few:

whether we walk up or stay seated to receive the elements in communion OR

whether we print the full name “Bethany Baptist Church” or just “Bethany” on a church sign OR

whether we say the words “In Jesus’ Name” at the end of a prayer OR

whether we make voter guides available or not OR

whether we have SS classes in between services or during services OR

whether we sing hymns or modern songs OR

whether we have a choir or not OR

whether we follow Robert’s Rule of Order strictly or loosely OR

whether we have printed bulletins or digital bulletins OR

whether we stand or sit at the reading of scripture OR

whether we have a closed room for prayer instead of an open corner OR

whether we build a canopy or not OR

whether we wear masks or not wear masks OR . . .

**It is not wrong to have opinions about these matters. We all do!!** So I do not say this to correct those who have differences of opinion with the elders on these matters.

The reality is that sometimes our preferences will be chosen and sometimes our preferences will not be chosen. It is truly impossible to follow everyone’s preferences because the preferences are in contradiction to each other.

**Differences of opinion in a community is healthy and not destructive. Conversations about differences are welcomed in a healthy spiritual family.**

But it is wrong to treat these matters as if God is on our side and as if God is against those who disagree with us.

It is wrong to condemn others with opposing views.

It is wrong to break fellowship over opposing views.

It is wrong to become angry at one another over these differences.

Again, if we talk about these things as preferences, these are important conversations inside a family. **But if we place the authority of God’s Word behind our preferences, we will have strained the gnat and swallowed the camel. The gnat is our preference. The camel is the broken fellowship of Jesus’ precious church. Don’t swallow the camel. It will get stuck in our throat.**

Again I assert for our joy, **Only God’s Word instructs our faith.**

**Lesson #4: God’s promises strengthen our faith.**

*So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured they brought the vessels to her. 2 Kings 4:5*

**The promise of God is implicit in the story, but the promise is clear to this widow. “If you obey the instructions that God gives you, the LORD will care for your need.”**

It is on the strength of a promise that she gathers empty jars from her neighbors. It is on the strength of a promise that she goes into an empty room with her two sons.

It is on the strength of a promise that she begins to pour the oil into the jars.

**Friend, do you find your faith weak and wavering?** Look to God’s promises! God gives so many promises to us.

**Application: God’s promises are like manna falling from heaven. God calls us to gather them each morning and be nourished by them.**

Illustration: Promise cards on our dining room table. Impact on us.

If I were to ask you, what promise from God are you clinging to today? What would you say?

I think many would say, “Promise? I do not have one in mind.” I urge you for the sake of your walk of faith . . . take hold of a promise! Not just promises in general, but a promise in specific.

*“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and* ***that he rewards those who seek him.”*** *(Hebrews 11:6* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Heb._11:6)*)*

**Lesson #1: Our desperation activates our faith.**

**Lesson #2: God’s character directs our faith.**

**Lesson #3: God’s word instructs our faith.**

**Lesson #4: God’s promises strengthen our faith.**

**Lesson #5: God’s grace smiles upon our faith.**

*When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” And he said to her, “There is not another.” Then the oil stopped flowing.” 2 Kings 4:6*

God in His grace met this woman in her need. She borrowed the vessels by faith. She poured out her oil by faith. She employed her sons in the task by faith. She obeyed the Lord by faith. **And God smiled upon her.**

The woman’s faith had no merit in itself, but her faith connected her to the LORD and His provision. And what provision it is! When we believe, our LORD blesses more abundantly than we can ask or think.

**Truth: The LORD always smiles upon a person who comes to Him in faith.** **We will gain the blessing of the LORD when we trust Him in faith. Every time. Without exception.**

*She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.”” 2 Kings 4:7*

This woman’s trial drove her to trust in the LORD. Her heartache opened a door for her to discover the goodness and love of God for her. Do you think she would trade her trials for comfort now? No.

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Rom._8:18)*)*

What needs do you have this morning? What is the form of your desperation? Here is a promise:

*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Philippians 4:19-20* [*ESV*](https://accordance.bible/link/read/ESVS#Phil._4:19)*)*

Conclusion: Are you as desperate for salvation as this woman was for the salvation of her family? In the extremity of her poverty, she cried out to God’s servant, Elisha. Friends, we have one who is greater than Elisha. We have Jesus.

Faith connects us to God’s greatest blessing . . . our salvation . . . the forgiveness of sin. Jesus paid the purchase price for our sin. Jesus met the requirements of the Law for us. Jesus suffered the punishment our sins deserve as our substitute. Jesus is the way to eternal life. **Do you believe this?**

**Main Idea: The LORD is merciful and shows generous compassion to every person who trusts in Him.**

**Lesson #1: Our desperation activates our faith.**

**Lesson #2: God’s character directs our faith.**

**Lesson #3: God’s word instructs our faith.**

**Lesson #4: God’s promises strengthen our faith.**

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