

Week 10: *The Widow and the Shunammite Woman: 2 Kings 4:1–37*

Hook



Main Point: God brings life, provision and hope to those who love Him.

Q: When you were young, what did you think your future would look like?

What job did you think you would have?

Where did you think you would live?

What car were you going to drive?

Who was your best friend going to be?

Did you imagine being married?

How many kids did you picture?

What kind of life did you assume you would build?

How many of those plans came to fruition? For many of us, life didn't turn out exactly as we had planned – the future we plan is never as secure as we might think. In 2 Kings 4, we meet two women whose futures were not just uncertain – they were collapsing. Today we will discover that, even when things fall apart and life doesn't look as we imagined it would, God provides us with life, provision and hope of a future.

RECAP: In the first lesson, we talked about the role of the Old Testament prophets as God's messengers calling His people to repent. In week 2, we saw God's provision for both Elijah and the widow of Zarephath during the drought, which was a consequence for Israel's idolatry. In lesson 3, God raised the widow's son from the dead, which not only showed His sovereign power, but also His care for the vulnerable and His heart for all the nations. In lesson 4, we saw God's superiority over other "gods" as Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. In lesson 5, Elijah ran for his life from the wrath of Jezebel and found refuge in the Lord. God spoke to Him not in the thunder and lightning but in the still, small voice.

In lesson 6, Elijah called Elisha to succeed him, and he left his old life behind. Then Elijah prophesied the deaths of Jezebel and Ahab but delayed the end of his dynasty because

Ahab repented. Ahab's first son died because he worshipped false gods, and his second son became king. In lesson 7, Elijah was taken up to heaven in the whirlwind, and Elisha took over his ministry with the same Holy Spirit upon him. In lesson 8, we explored exactly what it meant when Elisha asked Elijah for a "double portion" of his spirit. In lesson 9, God brought judgment on those who rejected His prophets and His message but gave life, healing and blessing to those who came to Him.

In lesson 10, we'll see Elisha's ministry moving forward with miracle after miracle, similar to Elijah's but expanded, showing the transition from Elijah's ministry to Elisha's. Elijah's message was one of judgment for idolatry, calling the people to repent. Elisha's ministry showed the people the restoration and healing that come when we repent.

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Book

Main Point: God brings life, provision and hope to those who love Him.

2 Kings 4:1–7 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The Lord always provides for His people.

Q: What was the personal connection between Elisha and this widow?

Q: What need did this miracle meet? What does this tell us about God?

The second and third chapters of 2 Kings are action packed with Elijah's being taken up in the whirlwind, and Elisha's succeeding him in his ministry. In the next several chapters, the action of Elisha's ministry does not slow down one bit. It's miracle after miracle after miracle. The first miracle in this section parallels Elijah's first miracle after announcing the drought at the beginning of his ministry, creating a pretty stark contrast. Elijah announced a drought, then helped a widow survive. Elisha brought water to the desert, then helped a widow survive. This shows us a shift in the ministry between Elijah and Elisha. Elijah's ministry emphasized judgment on the idolatry of Ahab, but mercy to those who loved Him. Elisha's ministry emphasized restoration and healing, though it also didn't shy away from judgment for idolatry.

Together, these ministries show the heart of God for all people and that the purpose of God's judgment is always restoration, not condemnation. Even with Ahab, the most evil king Israel ever had, God showed forgiveness when he humbled himself. God's goal in executing the curses of the covenant was not to punish people, but to make them see the error of their ways and bring them back into right relationship with Him. This doesn't mean their ministries were disconnected; Elisha's ministry was a continuation of Elijah's. Elijah broke the ground, and Elisha cultivated and restored it. Elijah exposed Israel's sin and showed that other "gods" cannot give life. Elisha showed that God is the one who gives life, healing and provision to those who turn to Him. The message moves from warning to restoration, showing that God's goal is not curse but new life.

Many of Elisha's miracles, including the three in this lesson, paralleled Elijah's, reflecting the "double portion," that Elisha was the successor who was carrying on his ministry and expanding it like a firstborn son. Elijah helped a widow and her son, who were on the brink of starvation, by not letting her oil and flour run out until the drought was over. In this miracle, Elisha also helped a widow with her oil, but instead of just keeping enough for her to live on day by day, he multiplied it enough that she could sell the oil to pay off her debts and still have enough to live on – a similar miracle but expanded.

This widow was also similar but not the same. Elijah's widow had only one son; this widow had two, which also emphasizes the "double portion." But even more significant

is Elijah's widow was a Gentile he met when he fled from Israel, which pointed to the lack of faith in Israel (N). Elisha's widow was the wife of a prophet from Judah.¹ This emphasized that there was faith among God's people, but more in Judah (S) than Israel (N).² This same truth was reflected in the last lesson when the kings of Judah and Israel banded together for battle. When they came to Elisha, he only agreed to help because of the faith of the king of Judah, not Israel. The king of Judah was the one who had inquired of the Lord (2 Kings 3:11, 14). Judah wasn't perfectly faithful; they often intermingled worship of other gods with their worship of Yahweh. But at this point in their history, Judah was more faithful than Israel.

The miracle Elisha provided for this widow was "bigger" than the miracle of Elijah for his widow. Instead of just enough food to sustain them, Elisha provided oil to fill every jar they could find. It was enough to meet not only their immediate need, but also to ensure their future survival.³ Elijah's miracle showed us that God can provide for our daily needs; we don't need to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:25–34). But Elisha's miracle of the widow's oil showed that God can provide an abundance, even more than we could ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Q: How has God provided for you?

Q: Do you know and truly believe that God is not irritated by your need, but moved by compassion wants to help solve it?

Q: How can knowing that God will provide affect the way you pray? How can it affect our worry, stress and anxiety? How can it affect our planning for the future?

2 Kings 4:8–17 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God brings life, future and hope to those in need.

Q: What did this woman do for Elisha? What does this tell us about her?

Q: Why did this woman need a son? What would having one accomplish for her?

Q: What keeps us from believing God cares about our smaller needs?

This story is the beginning of a decades-long friendship between Elisha and the Shunammite woman, who was not one of the traditionally economically vulnerable people in their culture we have talked about so far. She was not a widow, nor was she poor. Yet because she did not have children, there was the chance she would become economically vulnerable if anything happened to her husband. The story of this woman and the poor widow are placed back to back, creating a powerful contrast between two different women helped by Elisha.

The poor widow was from Judah (S) and was deep in debt when her husband died. The Shunammite woman was from Israel (N) and was very wealthy. Both women were

faithful to Yahweh and Elisha. The poor widow's husband had been one of the prophets disciplined under Elijah/Elisha. She asked for help based on her husband's relationship with Elisha and his faithfulness to the Lord. The Shunammite woman showed support of Elisha when she offered repeated hospitality to him, not just food but even a place to stay when he was traveling through the area. In previous incidents, there was more faithfulness in Judah (S) than Israel (N), but this shows us great faith and support of Yahweh's prophet from a woman in Israel (N).

This story shows us another contrast between Elijah and Elisha's ministry. The picture we get from Scripture is that Elijah spent much of his ministry in hiding or out in the wilderness, with brief moments of very public appearances such as the one at Mount Carmel. But the stories of Elisha's ministry in Scripture show him out-and-about among the people. The reason the Shunammite woman offered him hospitality was because he was traveling around Israel and went through her city often. Again, this reflects the transition between Elijah's ministry, which was primarily warning about judgment because of idolatry, and Elisha's ministry, which showed the restoration and healing that comes from the Lord when we do repent.

The ancient practice of hospitality was an obligation. If you did not practice hospitality for someone who came to your home, you brought shame on your family; if you did offer hospitality, you brought honor. But this woman went a step further. She came to Elisha to offer him food – she initiated it. She wasn't obligated (because he didn't come to her); it was all voluntary. Then she built a whole extra room onto her house for him to stay. She didn't just give him space in her guest room, which any home would have because they practiced hospitality so often. She built an entire space just for him. This woman went above and beyond because of her faith that he was a holy man of God. This showed surprising faith for someone living in Israel (N), not Judah (S) at the time, when so many were worshipping idols.

Elisha wanted to repay her for her kindness and suggested putting in a good word for her with the king, but she said she didn't need that. She was content with her life, she lived peaceably among the people in her area, meaning she didn't have any disputes she would need a king or judge to resolve for her. This is another contrast with the destitute widow who could have used a favor from someone in authority to keep her sons out of debt slavery. But Elisha didn't offer that to her; he just fixed her problem with God's power. This woman had what she needed materially. The only thing she didn't have wasn't something a human king could provide, but God could.

God had given a son to many barren women in Scripture before her – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, and Hannah – and He also gave the Shunammite woman a son. The sons of these other women were significant in the history of Scripture. Sarah and Rebekah's sons were the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob. Rachel's son, Joseph, saved the family of Abraham and the whole world from dying in the famine. Samson rescued God's people from the Philistines. Hannah's son, Samuel, was the last judge of Israel. He established the monarchy with Saul and played a crucial role in David's rise as king.

Compared to these men, the Shunammite woman's son was obscure; he didn't do anything significant in the biblical story. Giving her a son wasn't about carrying on the line of Israel; it was about providing for her family. God doesn't only care about the big picture and the "important" people; He cares about every one of us. He knows the number of hairs on our head and cares about every one of our needs, the big and the small (Matthew 6:25–34; 10:30–31).

Q: How has God shown you that He cares about all your needs, big and small?

Q: How can this story give people in your life hope for their future?

Q: How do we combat a mindset that says God doesn't care about our problems?

2 Kings 4:18–37 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Faithfulness to God is possible even in a culture of idolatry.

Q: What seems unusual about this woman's behavior? What does this tell us about her?

Q: How was this miracle like Elijah's? What does this tell us?

This next account brings up the same question we asked about the widow of Zarephath's son: Why would God supernaturally keep the widow and her son alive only to let him die later of an illness?⁴ Why would God give this woman a son only to have him die a few years later? This story clearly shows us who has the power over life and death – only Yahweh – and that ultimately His goal is to bring life, not death.

The word used of her son, "youth," is the same word used of the young men who taunted Elisha. He was grown up enough to go out to the fields with his father to oversee their servants, but still young enough that he wasn't doing this job alone. He was just learning how to run their family business, which reminds us that part of the purpose of his birth was to provide future financial security for the Shunammite woman who had been so kind to Elisha. When he fell ill in the fields, his father sent him back home with a servant to rest. The father didn't realize the boy had died; his wife told him, "All is well."

The woman laid her son on Elisha's bed, saddled a donkey, took her servant, and hurried off at full speed to find Elisha. This woman was the driving force all through this account. She was the first to offer food to Elisha. She decided to build a room for him. She went to find him when her son died. She didn't even tell her husband what was going on. She wasn't being disrespectful; she was laser focused on what she knew would help. She also told Elisha's servant, Gehazi, "All is well." She didn't want either of them to get in the way of her getting to Elisha.⁵ This was a woman of faith on a mission.

When Elisha saw her coming, he sent Gehazi to ask her if “all is well” with her husband and son, the same language she used with her husband and Gehazi. But when she got to Elisha himself, the truth came out. She grabbed Elisha’s feet, an ancient gesture of both submission to authority and pleading with that authority for help.⁶ Gehazi tried to push her away, which means she had been right to tell him, “All is well”; had she told him the truth, he may have kept her from going to him. But Elisha told him to let her be. He also said the Lord had hidden the situation from him. This reminds us that prophets are not omniscient; they only know what the Lord tells them. They are also not omnipotent; they can only do the miracles God commands them to do. They are servants and mouthpieces of God; they do God’s will, not their own.

The woman reminded Elisha that she didn’t ask him for a son; he volunteered that. Why would God give her a son only to take him away? Elisha sent Gehazi ahead of him to the boy quickly, without delay. “Tie up your garment” in Hebrew is the phrase “gird up your loins.” It refers to how men wrapped the bottom of their robe up around their thighs and tied it into their belt when they went into battle, did manual labor, or had to run. Elisha told him not to stop even to say hello to anyone, just to run as fast as he could with Elisha’s staff.

The woman refused to leave Elisha’s side, and they went together back to the boy. She used the exact same words to Elisha that he had said to Elijah on his last journey before he went up in the whirlwind – “as the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” This placed her in the position of a faithful disciple of Elisha as Elisha was of Elijah. Both this phrase and her actions thus far were unusual for a woman in the ancient world, but Scripture consistently shows God’s choosing and using women in His mission as well as men. Her persistence pushed Elisha not only to send Gehazi but to go himself, “so he arose and followed her.”

Elisha’s staff was a symbol of his authority as God’s prophet but placing the staff on the boy didn’t work. When Elisha arrived, his actions were much like Elijah’s when he raised the widow of Zarephath’s son, even though Elisha wasn’t there to see that. Both prophets prayed first, recognizing that the power came from God alone and God would only do the miracle if He willed. Both prophets stretched themselves over the child, but not because they had any power in themselves. It wasn’t a magic trick or an attempt to give warmth to the child. Their actions weren’t medical or magical but symbolic. Laying down was a posture of total dependence on God. He was identifying himself with the child, pleading to God on his behalf.⁷ The raising wasn’t immediate; it took two times. When Jesus raised a woman’s son from the dead, all He had to do was speak to the young man and he rose. This is a clear contrast and reminds us of a major theological point – Jesus was far superior to Elijah and Elisha. They were merely prophets of God, but Jesus was God Himself.

When Elisha called for the woman, she fell at his feet again, bowing to the ground. This was a sign of total submission, thanksgiving and worship. She was not worshipping Elisha but the God who gave him the power. In a land where most of God’s people were

worshipping other gods and would soon be destroyed as a result (the Northern Kingdom, Israel), here was a woman who put all her faith in Yahweh. Even when things seem darkest in the culture around us, God always preserves for Himself a remnant of faithful followers.

Q: In what ways is our culture filled with idolatry and people's chasing after other things besides God? How can we remain faithful in the midst of that?

Q: How can we emulate this woman's perseverance in our spiritual lives?

Q: What does God want from us in times of need?

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Took

Main Point: God brings life, provision and hope to those who love Him.

The Shunammite woman used the phrase “all is well” for expediency’s sake. She had just lost her precious son and she was running to the only One who could bring her hope – she turned her eyes to God.

Thousands of years later, a man who lost his children would use a very similar phrase – not as a way to bypass conversation, but as a reflection of a heart that found rest in God amidst incomprehensible sorrow.

The hymn “It Is Well with My Soul” was written by Horatio G. Spafford in 1873 after losing his four daughters in a shipwreck. Later, as his ship passed over the place where they had drowned, he wrote:

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
"It is well, it is well with my soul."

It’s easier to have that kind of attitude when a miracle takes place. But whether we receive a miracle this side of Heaven or not, we praise God that one day, all will be made right. Jesus provides us with life and provision and hope that will endure forever – because we know that our King will return and restore everything one day . Spafford’s hymn concludes with a declaration of victory in Christ’s return.

O Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend;
even so, it is well with my soul.⁸

Teacher, close your LifeGroup time with a special prayer for those who may be praying for a miracle. Pray that the Lord would intervene mightily in their situation. Also pray for those who have experienced loss recently, that the Lord would provide them a hope and peace that surpasses understanding, knowing that in Christ, we have hope.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Think about what it looks like to remain faithful to God in the midst of a culture that has turned away from Him. How can we keep ourselves focused on Him? How can we grow in faith and spiritual maturity? How can we encourage one another to remain faithful when there is so much darkness, temptation and idolatry in the world around us? How can we be a light to the world around us?

PRAY: Pray for all of those who need restoration and healing. Those who are living in darkness far from God and those who love Him but are struggling with hard times such as financial struggle, infertility or health concerns. Ask the Lord to bring comfort, healing and provision to those who love Him.

ACT: Pray for miracles. Both Elijah and Elisha's miracles began with prayer. This week think about those you know who need a miracle and spend some time in focused prayer, asking God to bring a miracle into their lives.

¹ This prophet was one of the prophets of the school in Jericho. His wife said he was Elisha's servant, but that doesn't mean his personal servant; that was Gehazi. This just meant he was one of Elisha's disciples in these prophetic schools where Elisha mentored the prophets.

² There was faith in Israel, Elijah just didn't know it at the time. There were 100 prophets in hiding and 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal, but Elijah didn't know that, and he felt very alone during the early part of his ministry before Elisha joined him.

³ Iain Provan, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings* (Paternoster Press, 1996).

⁴ See Lesson 3

⁵ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

⁶ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, & Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Intervarsity Press, 2000).

⁷ Paul R. House, *1 and 2 Kings, The New American Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸ https://hymnary.org/text/when_peace_like_a_river_attendeth_my_way#google_vignette