

II Kings 4:1-7 Faith and Vision

Introduction

Am I / are you living by faith? After all II Corinthians 5:7 declares: *For we live by faith, not by sight.* These are words that are easy to state, but sometimes extremely hard to live in daily life when things are a real struggle. In Western countries our material circumstances may not always be ideal but the vast majority of people are guaranteed a roof over our heads, clothes on our backs and food on the table. There is usually little risk of our absolute essential needs of these basic things being provided. We will have many stresses and difficulties, problems to overcome and concerns to manage, but these are a normal part of human existence for us all. However, it can be a real struggle to get beyond the comfort zone of our regular routine, both as individuals and in our families, and sometimes also as church families. I thank God for the ‘risks’ / steps of faith we as a church have taken in recent years. We may say there was no other credible option to take sometimes but still we had to take decisions and pay the costs of such a commitment. I could list quite a few of these steps –familiar to most of us, but it is no accident that, for example, the decision within a few months both to take full responsibility for the then joint-youth worker post with St James’ and employ a children and families’ worker and the financial implications of such a step, has opened up the door to the new opportunities that have developed in the years that followed. Rightly we highlight the necessity of taking the responsibilities for these initiatives with younger people –together with the developing links with some of the residential homes for the elderly, but it doesn’t happen by chance. Our faith in Jesus Christ has to be rooted and grounded in a vision to extend Christ’s kingdom in the community He has placed us, for our good and for His glory. The challenge to us personally is always where is my place of ministry or service? What can I do? At the different stages of life our input will vary, but there is never a scenario of unemployment for followers of Jesus! Each of us has a calling to be His representatives amongst the people with whom we interact each day. The only issue to be decided concerns the nature of our calling and how it is to be worked out in practice. Do you and I have a sense of expectancy at the start of another church year of good things that might happen as we pray and engage in outreach activities; as we study God’s Word together? D.L. Moody had many memorable sayings but one that has stuck in my head was this: ‘The world has yet to see a Christian wholly dedicated to God’. I am not sure if that is true, but what I do know is that if every professing Christian on planet earth gave 100% commitment to living for Jesus it would be revolutionary and transformative to a degree not yet seen in this world. What we must never do is to think what I have to offer is too small to count; the gifts I bring to contribute are too ordinary to make a difference. This short story in II Kings 4 is easy to read and understand, but it is incredibly powerful in what it has to teach us concerning our expectations of the potential for God to work in us and through us today.

1. An Urgent Need (II Kings 4:1)

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, ‘Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.’

(a) **When life could not be worse** ...*But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.’* I suspect many of us have had ‘red letters’ from a utility company or some similar body threatening to cut off a service we are receiving or in the worst cases threatening some kind of legal action if some payment is not made in the immediate future. What we have certainly not received is the kind of threat that this woman received which is as bad as it gets

at the very worst time possible in her life. In the twenty-first century there are some sad individuals who send out sickening or threatening messages on social media. Things they would never dream of saying in the workplace or social setting –thankfully- but yet in the privacy of their own home they feel they can get away with the dreadful comments to not only people they know but also total strangers. Such activities can have a serious impact on someone’s mental wellbeing, especially if they receive such messages over an extended period of time. Thankfully some of the worse cases of these crimes are being prosecuted by the police and hopefully this action will act as a deterrent on others thinking of behaving in this way. Although, on occasions a one-off action can have a serious impact upon us; some years ago on a journey down to England I was driving on the motorway through Dumfriesshire and at a relatively quiet time a young man with a high performance sports car appeared behind me. He decided that driving too close, then pulling out and overtaking before coming in again and slamming on the brakes was a fun thing to do. I couldn’t outpace him so I had no escape but those two to three minutes left me quite shaken. Clearly this was a game he had played many times before but I felt extremely vulnerable. Thankfully, I haven’t seen that foolish behaviour since while traveling on the roads but I am sure it does happen to other drivers as well. However, this woman’s ordeal might potentially turn into a nightmare for the rest of her days –if there was no resolution to her troubles. Where do we turn when things are outside our control? There is only one place to turn and that is to the Lord. We cry out to God for help knowing that He hears our prayers, even if the response is not always providing the answer we wanted or the resolution we sought. This lady was a woman of faith who kept seeking the Lord through all her troubles and did not give up. The lovely older hymn ‘What a friend we have in Jesus’ contains these lines: What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear, What a privilege to carry, Everything to God in prayer Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer. Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer, Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to the Lord in prayer. I sincerely hope we all do that and not just when we have nowhere else to turn.

(b)**When life is so unfair** *Your servant my husband is dead...* It is a strongly patriarchal society and a woman without a husband or father alive, or some other male relative who was legally responsible for her was in an extremely vulnerable position. It is so different to that today in our society but up to 150 years ago it was no different here. This factor alone would be a big enough cause of anguish to this honourable believer. Life is not fair. At the merely human level some people seem to get lots of breaks in their favour and others the opposite. It is not necessarily intentional in many situations, but the combination of circumstances we face can on occasions be extremely difficult to bear. For some people it is life-changing health problems, or for others difficult work circumstances or some major family issues, but it is far from a level playing-field. Here in the Western world materially we have vastly more home comforts than many fellow human beings around the globe. The range of foods we can eat has never been better, yet other subsist on an endless diet of rice or some other basic foodstuff and still others struggle to eat anything at all. Do you struggle to get a perspective on life sometimes? I certainly do! When our emotions are running high it can be especially difficult to view things correctly. We need God to help us get things right. Is there something today you need to pray through to enable you to see things in a better way? ... *and you know that he revered the Lord...* The double blow hinted at here is that this man and his family had been faithful to God through the reign of terror of Ahab and Jezebel (I Kings 16:29-33). They were among the small number of people who had remained true to the Lord when all appeared to be lost and the devotees of the Baals were triumphant throughout the land. In I Kings 18 Obadiah one of the senior government officials who was secretly a believer gives us a glimpse of what had been going on at that time in his short conversation with Elijah.

*Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord.*⁴ *While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water (I Kings 18:3-4).* This woman's husband may have been on the list of those sought for execution. A similar scenario occurred in Scotland in the Seventeenth Century when the Stuart regime was coming to an end of its brutal reign, far from the romantic image presented by the Tourist Board today! In 1685 the government made it legal and began a campaign allowing soldiers loyal to the regime to shoot civilians without any form of trial. In their sights in particular were a number of Presbyterian Ministers known as the Covenanters (see David Ross, *The Killing Time* (2010)). Seventy-eight individuals were hunted down and executed. The arrival of William, Prince of Orange in the Netherlands, and his English wife Mary to take the crown in London brought a new era of religious liberty and the legal establishment of representative democracy in the Westminster Parliament and a constitutional monarchy. The 'killing times' were over in Scotland. A similar situation –with respect to random slaughter of religious leaders in Israel- had come to a close with the deaths of Ahab and Jezebel in Israel. It must have been a relief that this family could live safely in their own home. However, after only a few short years of liberty she was faced with another awful time *Your servant my husband is dead...* Sometimes life seems too difficult and we can struggle to have the motivation to carry on –at least for a time. This was undoubtedly where this woman was at, at the beginning of II Kings 4. Thankfully she did not stay in that place and I trust neither do we when life is at its hardest.

2. **An Earnest Appeal** (II Kings 4:1)

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.'

(a) **A necessary appeal** The enslavement of debtors was common and a normal sight in the ancient world. It was what happened when you got into that position and sadly this situation is unchanged in parts of India and Pakistan and North Africa today. It is called 'Bonded Labour' in more recent years, but in practical terms it is no different to traditional slavery. In practice, it is virtually impossible to obtain your freedom once you are trapped in the system because all you earn is taken as compensation for the debt and the children of slaves are expected to serve as slaves as well when they are old enough to put to work. If this woman lost her sons to this creditor she would never be able to get them back. Under the Old Testament law such brutality was not permitted, but under Canaanite law it was the survival of the strongest and if as wealthy and secure a man as Naboth could lose both his life and his property in Jezreel (see I Kings 21), then no-one was truly safe from such predators. What did the Old Testament have to say to Israelites who fell on hard times? In Leviticus 25:35-43 it stated:³⁵ *"If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so that they can continue to live among you.*³⁶ *Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you.*³⁷ *You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit.*³⁸ *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.*³⁹ *"If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves.*⁴⁰ *They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee.*⁴¹ *Then they and their children are to be released, and they will go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors.*⁴² *Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves.*⁴³ *Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.* It was clear God intended that a person's family and the wider community to help those who were passing through difficult times. Such civility and kindness

would be unknown in the vast majority of the surrounding nations. We thank God for our welfare state based historically on Christian values and concern for the poor and marginalised. I thank the Lord that in our city we are supportive as a church of the work of agencies like Christians Against Poverty (CAP) assisting people who have fallen into serious debt problems; or Eagles Wings, working with the homeless and other agencies supporting those in need.

(b) **A privileged appeal** *The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband...'* I have chosen this sub-heading because this woman knew the person on earth most able to help them. She had no other options, but as a follower of the God of Israel she knew that Elisha would do something to assist her—even if she did not know how he might be able to support her through her time of great trials. By contrast in II Kings 3 there is a story of regional politics and violence and a lot of people would die. In the midst of that story the alliance of the Kings of Israel Judah and Edom get themselves into some serious trouble with a drastic water shortage. In the Middle East such a problem unless it was quickly resolved could easily mean death for all concerned. One of the kings, Jehoshaphat of Judah, finally speaks up and asks if they had sought divine assistance through a 'man of God'. In fact he enquired if there was such a person in the region who could be invited to assist them. Elisha was mentioned and then summoned to assist them. In front of the three kings the prophet made this comment: *Elisha said, 'As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not pay any attention to you (II Kings 3:14).* These other rulers had lived their lives without reference to God and could not presume that He would assist them. Yet, by contrast, this widow and those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord can come right into His presence with our petitions for assistance in our time of need. As Christians we can come in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray and seek God in our prayers. Jehoshaphat had got it and in a time of national crisis in wartime, praying in this way to God in II Chronicles 20:12: *Our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on You.'* In the New Testament in John 11:3 Martha and Mary sent an urgent message to Jesus: *So the sisters sent word to Jesus, 'Lord, the one You love is ill.'* The pattern before us is of a humble appeal for divine assistance to One who can meet our needs, but in each case it is not proscriptive, telling God exactly how He ought to respond. This is so hard some times when we are desperate to see a very serious situation resolved and there appears to our minds only one way this can come about. However, although we may cry out earnestly and passionately in our needs to God, there is a recognition that how He may answer our prayers may be different to what we had been hoping for or expecting. It is an inner confidence that somehow God will work in a situation and provide for our needs. Paul put it this way in Philippians 4:19: *And my God will meet **all your needs** according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus.* And Paul wrote this from a prison cell, not the comfort of his own or a friend's home!

3. **An Unexpected Enquiry** (II Kings 4:2)

(a) **Elisha's Question** (II Kings 4:2a) *Elisha replied to her, 'How can I help you? Tell me, **what do you have in your house?**'* It was a most unexpected question and the woman for a few moments might even have felt angry at it being asked. After all the life and liberty of her sons was on the line and there was no time to waste in resolving the predicament she was facing. Yet God prompted His servant on this occasion to ask this question to someone who was convinced they were entirely destitute and unable to do anything to attend to their needs. Now a divine miraculous intervention was still required for the situation to be sorted out, but at this early

stage of the process God wanted her to realise that she was not entirely helpful but could contribute to resolving this crisis. I am sure she would have tried all kinds of ways to improve her situation, but absolutely nothing appeared to be practical. In these days of subsistence living families had very little in the way of possessions that might be sold so there were no luxury items to sell on ‘ebay’ or its ancient equivalent! Sometimes God wants to ask you and me a similar question in response to our prayers. He invites us to join Him in addressing our circumstances by faith. Are you facing a situation to which there appears no way out? Maybe God wants you to view the situation before you at a different angle? Maybe there will come up an option and a way out you had not even seen, let alone considered before. In Alabama in 1910 the boll weevil arrived and wreaked havoc on the cotton crop that was the main income generator in the economy. It gradually spread across the state and from 1914 when the harvest yielded 38,000 cotton bales it was reduced to as little as 7,000 bales in 1917. There was nothing the farmers could do to destroy this pest that was destroying their businesses. In desperation to simply survive farmers turned to a variety of different crops, peanuts, corn, hay or animal farming. Suddenly the economy turned around and prosperity returned to Alabama to such an extent that as early as 1919 a merchant called for a monument to be erected to recognise the change in their fortunes. In Enterprise, Alabama, there stands the statue of a woman in flowing robes holding aloft an American football sized seventeen and a half pound iron likeness of the boll weevil. This small creature had both caused their crisis and pressed them into making essential changes to guarantee their future! (Dale Ralph Davis, *II Kings*, pp. 56-57). No-one would have predicted that a decade earlier!

(b) **The woman’s response** (II Kings 4:2b) *‘Your servant has nothing there at all,’ she said, ‘except a small jar of olive oil.’* This was not a large vessel like some of the larger options available for purchase in a supermarket today. It was a small anointing flask that contained no more oil than a small vinegar jar that you might have on your dining table at home during a meal. It was not insignificant for the purpose for which it was designed but surely inadequate for the requirements of this family in the midst of a crisis? God delights to use what is available in His service whether of people or things that can make a difference. However, you may have remembered that this situation has some similarities to the need of Elijah soe years earlier when he went to the home of a destitute widow in Zaraphath, in the region of Sidon. Elijah met the woman and asked her to take care of his need for water and food. Her reply to his question and the response from the man of God is given in I Kings 17:12-16: ¹² *‘As surely as the Lord your God lives,’ she replied, ‘I don’t have any bread – only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it – and die.’* ¹³ *Elijah said to her, ‘Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son.’* ¹⁴ *For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: “The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.”* ¹⁵ *She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family.* ¹⁶ *For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.* In John 6 a multitude needed to be fed and His disciples were panicking but a little boy offered his lunch of bread and fish and Andrew brought them to Jesus, but even he declared in John 6:9: *Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?* Likewise in Revelation 3:8, concerning the small and struggling church at Philadelphia, Jesus noted that: *I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name.* God wants to use ordinary people like you and me and the resources we have at our disposal to accomplish His goals. We must never forget that.

4. **An Active Faith** (II Kings 4:3-5)

³ Elisha said, 'Go round and ask all your neighbours for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. ⁴ Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.' ⁵ She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring.

The *empty jars* is a general term for any kind of container that could hold liquid. Now two things are happening here. Firstly all of her neighbours know that she has a serious problem. Secondly, they could not be other than curious about what she was going to do with all these containers that her little boys had come round to borrow. We have no idea how many they asked for and received, but I have this feeling that it was a sufficiently large number to arouse the curiosity of the neighbourhood. People must have asked what the need was and undoubtedly there would have been some who walked round to the house to see what was going on. Anyone who did so would have been rewarded with a sight that would never have been forgotten. There the mother was pouring out olive oil from her small jar into much larger ones and the oil kept coming. Maybe there was a failure of the olive harvest that year? If so it was more than this household benefitting from the blessing. Because the house door was shut no-one could see this miracle by accident there had to be an intentionality about viewing it. Effort was required on the part of all concerned. The size of this blessing was linked to the faith of these boys and their mother. Now sometimes as with the boy's lunch in John 6 many people present did not have faith to believe it could make a difference. What mattered there was that the boy did and especially Jesus did! As they kept seeking vessels the oil kept coming. As we keep seeking God and working as best we can in His service, the blessing will surely follow in His time, but if there is no earnest praying and no hard endeavours in service there will be no blessing – are we demonstrating by our commitment to prayer and service that we are expecting God's blessing to come on our work for the Lord today? Or not? Don't forget to involve the 'neighbours' in what we are doing either!

5. **A Vindicated Faith** (II Kings 4:6-7)

⁶ When all the jars were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another one.' But he replied, 'There is not a jar left.' Then the oil stopped flowing. ⁷ She went and told the man of God, and he said, 'Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.'

In Romans 8:31-32 it states: ***What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?*** God will provide for our needs as He did for this widow and her two sons. Do you need to hear that today? In James 5:16b-18 declares with reference to Elijah: ***The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*** ¹⁷ *Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years.* ¹⁸ *Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.* May God help us to trust Him with both our present needs and our future ones, for the glory of His name's sake, Amen.