

## **II Kings 4:8-37 God provides for our needs**

### **Introduction**

In II Kings 4 the first two stories are focussed on two of the 7,000 believers in the land of Israel that had come through the times of great tribulation under the rule of Ahab and Jezebel. The record before us allows us a glimpse into their world of nearly 3,000 years ago. There is probably much that could be said about their social context, but that is not the point of the author inspired by God to record these incidents in the life and work of the prophet Elisha. The focus is on two women. There are of course other people in the stories and none of the names are given to us but it does appear that these two ladies are centre-stage in this chapter and the other people adults and children are in the background as secondary characters in the narrative. Yet this is normal to everyday life that all of us experience. Take, for example, a parent or grand-parent going to a school to watch, for example, a play or musical concert. The next day you might meet them in the street and ask how did it go? It is entirely possible that they might give an extremely objective comment about the main characters and the strength of their performances, but what is most likely above all is that comments will be made about the contributions made by the children or children known to those holding the conversation. This is entirely normal and natural as this was the reason why the parent or grandparent went to watch the performance in the first place.

The two women have this in common that they were devout believers who were dedicated to living for God. Through life's ups and down they were amongst the minority who could always be counted on to be available in the Lord's service. Praise God for people like that. In God's eyes these were special people on whom His favour rested. Their witness merited in some way inclusion in the Bible, as a declaration to later generations of people who would put their faith and trust in God. There were, though, differences between them. The first woman lived in very humble circumstances and most probably never had very much of this world's goods. It was not an issue as she recognised that God would provide for her needs. In that subsistence society her circumstances materially would have been the experience of the vast majority of the people who would often have limited food supplies and might even have days of hunger when supplies were short or a harvest was late. By contrast, the second lady who is the main character of the second incident recorded in II Kings 4 was materially prosperous and in human terms was living in comfortable circumstances. In comparison to us today with so many gadgets and things in our homes she would have been viewed as disadvantaged, but not at the time – in fact the very opposite. However, what matters here is that God noticed their circumstances and intervened in their lives in response to their appeals to Him. In the world's eyes we may be a nobody but in God's eyes we are special because we are His children through faith in Jesus Christ. It is ironic that the first woman has as many verses associated with her in II Kings 4:1-7 as the Israelite King who the wider Ancient East viewed as the great king of Israel Omri (I Kings 16:23-28); however, Omri was not viewed with favour by the Chronicler because he had no time for the God of Israel. It raises the question with whom do we seek honour and recognition? from the God who created and redeemed us or the secular society in which we live. We might on occasions receive honours we do not seek and tributes we were not expecting, but that is a different matter altogether. It is the issue of priorities. If we put the Lord first we may get other blessings and honour in this world too, but if our main focus is to please other people here and achieve goals entirely this-worldly then we may miss out on His favour. Our calling is to do all we do to honour Him, not just in the religious or spiritual areas of our lives.

Our faithfulness to God does not mean everything in life will be plain sailing. By contrast, life can often be far from it. The first woman had a crisis because her husband died, though her children were well. The second woman had a healthy husband but initially was childless and probably had to work through the heartache of what that meant for them in a society where large families were seen as a sign of divine favour. It is a reminder that we may live God-honouring lives, but we will experience some of the tribulations that other people around us also experience. The difference being is that we have the Lord standing with us in our time of trials to bring us through to the other side. He is the God who provides for us.

## 1. The dedication of God's servants (II Kings 4:8-17)

(a) **Faith in action** (II Kings 4:8-10) <sup>8</sup> *One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he passed by, he stopped there to eat.* <sup>9</sup> *She said to her husband, 'I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God.* <sup>10</sup> *Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.'* Shunem was an ideal location besides a major road or pathway just under twenty miles from Elisha's main base near Mount Carmel. His work was as an itinerant leader of the people of God with local prophets or teachers who served in the role of pastors or ministers to their particular congregations based in one particular community. In the days before affordable public transport and a credible road network travel for the vast majority of people was on foot and not undertaken lightly. Very few ventured far from the communities where they were born and grew up. Like Elijah before him, Elisha would have been on the move with a planned circuit of meetings to encourage this small faithful groups of believers. Unlike Elijah he was not travelling in fear of the Government soldiers trying to track him down. It was, therefore, very likely that this lady had seen Elisha pass by on many previous occasions. Maybe they had exchanged pleasantries in passing or even had time to talk about their faith on the God of Israel. But now, recognising Elisha and the work he is doing, she invites him to join her and her husband for a meal. This became a regular pattern of behaviour that Elisha joined them for a meal when he was passing by. Then, on reflection, it dawns on them that this man of God is sleeping outside whatever the weather while they have a comfortable though basic home in which to rest at night. They are a couple with a higher standard of living and more secure income than the majority of their fellow citizens, but they have no children. It becomes a sensible suggestion for her to make to request that her husband arranges for a small extension to their house to add an additional room that will serve as a designated space for Elisha to occupy on his visits. There is no doubt that he greatly appreciated their generosity.

The gift of hospitality is something that distinguished the early Christian communities. In the short letter of II John, the aged apostle warns against welcoming into your home for food or overnight accommodation people purporting to be itinerant Christian workers but who do not hold an orthodox view of the faith (II John v10); this assumes that it was normal practice to use our homes to give hospitality. In III John vs 5-8 it states: *Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you.* <sup>6</sup> *They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honours God.* <sup>7</sup> *It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.* <sup>8</sup> ***We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.*** It is one of the identifying marks of potential church leaders in I Timothy 3:2. I thank God for the people in this church who are willing to engage in hospitality ministries for the Lord. Not everyone is in the position of being able to offer overnight accommodation for a whole variety of reasons; others also can sometimes find it difficult to have people round for meals, but if this

is not possible are we willing to meet people for a coffee or light refreshments. Most of us are absolutely fine the majority of the time, but there are individuals particularly when going through hard times who may value a little of your time or interest in them. Now of course our care for others can involve a variety of practical acts of kindness such as lifts to church or to hospital appointments or visitation. There are so many different ways in which we can show God's love in action to one another and to other people. I thank God for this un-named couple who used their home as a place of blessing for Elisha. We enrich ourselves and others when we share our resources in Jesus' name. Most of the time it is a small act of kindness that is more than sufficient to bless others, never be hindered from doing what you can because you cannot do something else in God's service. He only expects us to do what we can for Him.

(b) **Faith in God rewarded** (II Kings 4:11-17) <sup>11</sup> *One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there.* <sup>12</sup> *He said to his servant Gehazi, 'Call the Shunammite.'* So he called her, and she stood before him. <sup>13</sup> *Elisha said to him, 'Tell her, "You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?"'* She replied, 'I have a home among my own people.' <sup>14</sup> *'What can be done for her?'* Elisha asked. Gehazi said, 'She has no son, and her husband is old.' <sup>15</sup> *Then Elisha said, 'Call her.'* So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. <sup>16</sup> *'About this time next year,' Elisha said, 'you will hold a son in your arms.'* 'No, my lord!' she objected. 'Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!'

<sup>17</sup> *But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.* What is crucially important here is that this couple offered this service to Elisha without any expectation of reward or personal gain. They did it for God and for His work to bless Elisha. This is the gospel spirit in which we offer our time, our finances and our abilities in God's work. However, this is what Jesus had to say regarding His followers who serve with this approach to practical ministry. ***Anyone who welcomes you welcomes Me, and anyone who welcomes Me welcomes the One who sent Me.*** <sup>41</sup> *Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.* <sup>42</sup> *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is My disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.'* (Matthew 10:40-42). Elisha was conscious that the number of visits by him and his servant had become quite frequent and he wondered if there was any way in which he could be of assistance to this couple. In simple terms the answer was 'no'. There were no particular needs that came to mind. Now go back some years, possibly quite a number of years, the problem of childlessness might have been an acute issue in this home. It is a recurring issue that pops up in the Bible with Sarah (Genesis 17), Rebekah (Genesis 25) and Rachel (Genesis 30), the wives of patriarchs in the book of Genesis waiting years before the blessing of a child. In the book of Judges (Judges 6) Samson's parents too waited years for this honour. In the New Testament Elizabeth and Zechariah experienced the same heartache over this issue (Luke 1). These examples remind us- if we needed it - that you can be 100% dedicated to the Lord and His work and yet face health issues, family problems, financial challenges and a host of other things, not because we have done anything wrong at all, but simply as part of the human experiences of life in its diversity of good things and bad. What this couple could testify to was that God's grace was sufficient in their time of need. Paul struggled with health issues, almost certainly significant eyesight issues for which he pleaded with God for healing but without the answer he sought. God's message for him, and for us in our times of need, were these words recorded in II Corinthians 12:8-10: *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.* <sup>9</sup> *But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.'* Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* No-one could have said this to Paul during his struggles. He had to cry out to the Lord and work

through his painful trial with God's help. We too will face different struggles, often ones we never thought we would face, but His grace will get you and me through those times, even those with which we will live for the rest of our days. In this case the totally unexpected blessing of a child in later life was a total shock but then a joy. So often the blessings God grants to us are as unexpected as the heartaches and problems we face. However, this couple who had honoured God many years later than expected received a blessing they had earlier sought. The principle is absolutely clear. In I Samuel 2:30 God declares: *Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise Me will be disdained.* This is the verse of Scripture on a handwritten note that was famously given to Eric Liddell at the 1924 Paris Olympics, but it can be equally true for you and me in our generation as well.

## 2. The darkness that overshadows God's people (II Kings 4:18-30)

(a) **Unexpected tragedy** (II Kings 4:18-21) *The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers.*<sup>19</sup> *He said to his father, 'My head! My head!' His father told a servant, 'Carry him to his mother.'*<sup>20</sup> *After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died.*<sup>21</sup> *She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.* It is an incredibly sad and poignant scene. This child was loved and wanted so much after years during which this couple had given up any hopes of having a child of their own. Scholars as expected have speculated on what might possibly have been the medical cause of his death, but only God knows what it really was. However, the devastation for this couple must have been beyond words. There is of course a link with the previous story in that the two women were facing unspeakable loss and had no means – as they understood it – of resolving their personal crisis. It does not appear that the father had grasped how serious was the child's plight because had he done so surely he would not have asked a servant to take him home while he remained in the field at work. The harvest was vitally important for their welfare over the coming months, but I am sure the child's welfare would have taken first place had he known how the symptoms of illness developed over the next hour or more. The picture of the mother cuddling the sick child in her arms until the body went limp and the breath appeared to leave his body is distressing. I have sat in a home with a young family years ago just hours after a much-loved young child had unexpectedly died. It was acutely painful – what can one say in such a context? How did the mother view the situation and how did she react to it? II Kings 4:21 tells us the answer to these questions. *She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.* Although I do believe that the mother was well aware of the expiration of life from his little body she did not accept death as the final word on his life. I suspect she would have been unable in her grief to articulate her thinking at that moment in time, but her action pointed to a trust in a God who raises the dead. A faith in God for whom death is not the last word; if she truly had that conviction then how much more do we as followers of Jesus hold that conviction dearly. Remember Jesus' words to Martha in response to her earnest plea in John 11:21-27: 'Lord,' *Martha said to Jesus, 'if You had been here, my brother would not have died.'*<sup>22</sup> **But I know that even now God will give You whatever you ask.**<sup>23</sup> *Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'*<sup>24</sup> *Martha answered, 'I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.'*<sup>25</sup> *Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die;*<sup>26</sup> *and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'*<sup>27</sup> 'Yes, Lord,' *she replied, 'I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.'* It is the words in John 11:22 that reveal the essence of Martha's faith, and I trust your faith and mine?

At each funeral service for a committed Christian the minister may say words like these at a committal service: *Seeing that the earthly life of our sister or brother [name] has come to an end, we commit his / her body to be buried; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain*

hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died, was buried, and was raised again for us. To Him be the glory, for ever and ever. This is not the end. In I Corinthians 15:51-55, Paul declares these wonderful truths: <sup>51</sup> Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – <sup>52</sup> in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' <sup>55</sup> 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' Jesus is Lord over death and the grave.

(b) **Remarkable faith in God** (II Kings 4:22-30) <sup>22</sup> She called her husband and said, 'Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return.' <sup>23</sup> 'Why go to him today?' he asked. 'It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath.' 'That's all right,' she said. <sup>24</sup> She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, 'Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you.' <sup>25</sup> So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, 'Look! There's the Shunammite! <sup>26</sup> Run to meet her and ask her, "Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?"' 'Everything is all right,' she said. <sup>27</sup> When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, 'Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why.' <sup>28</sup> 'Did I ask you for a son, my lord?' she said. 'Didn't I tell you, "Don't raise my hopes"?' <sup>29</sup> Elisha said to Gehazi, 'Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Don't greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy's face.' <sup>30</sup> But the child's mother said, 'As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.' So he got up and followed her. It appears a mystery why the mother withheld the seriousness of the situation from the father, but the exchange reveals the depth of their love and trust in one another that the request for a servant and a donkey at one of the busiest days of the year was readily granted. There is much of the detail omitted here, but we have what we need to know and grasp that she believed God's servant could transform the situation under the power of the Holy Spirit. Miracles are never guaranteed to God's people, but sometimes we have to ask in faith and plead for divine intervention, which sometimes is granted in extraordinary ways as would happen later in this story. There is a lesson to us never to miss out on the blessings of God by forgetting to ask for them by faith. We also see here the regular practice of this couple of attending the regular worship services led by Elisha or others at special festivals and on the Sabbath. There is very little said about the regular worship practices for Israelites outside Jerusalem for significant periods of the Old Testament era, but here is a glimpse of good practice by those who were not distracted by the majority of their fellow citizens bowing down to the Baals. Her faith in God was not diminished by her trials, even if she had plenty to say to God or to Elisha the man of God. Gehazi, Elisha's servant, seems a surprising man to serve in this role. He appears to have little spiritual insight and commitment and it appears on this basis that the woman refuses to share her troubles with him. But when she sees Elisha she opens a window in her remarks on the agony in her inner person. At first he is not sure quite what to do – as we may be on many occasions also-, but thankfully he is sensitive to her needs and agrees to set off to her home. I suspect he was praying hard. Lord, what on earth can I do? The answer to him and to us in many other situations from God is simply to trust Him with what lies before us. Crises force us to depend on God. Elisha needed to do that as much now as at any other time in his ministry. We, like him, will feel utterly helpless in various situations, but the lesson here is to come to the Lord with the problem before us and allow Him to work as He thinks is appropriate. The outcome may surprise us.

### 3. The demonstration of God's power (II Kings 4:31-37)

(a) **The actions of Gehazi** (II Kings 4:31) *Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, 'The boy has not awakened.'* The symbolic action did not appear to work. How God may work in one situation may vary greatly from another. It is a reminder to us that we cannot pigeonhole the Lord as to how He ought to work or answer our prayers. Too often we cannot resist telling the Lord what it would look like if He answered our prayers in the 'best way'. It is hard, genuinely, to be open when we are so convinced we know the answer. This passage, II Kings 4:8-37 actually shows genuine human vulnerability. Elisha had no supernatural knowledge of the problem, he only knew what the woman told him (verse 27); he was limited in power to transform the situation (verse 31); 'all' he can do is cry out in earnest intercessory prayer (verse 33); Gehazi, likewise, did as he was told and no improvement had occurred. We must not assume because these extraordinary figures in history saw some remarkable miracles that this was their 'normal' experience. These were exception situations –like us they depend in their weakness on the intervention of God to transform situations. We also thank God for the Christians who prayed for us and helped us in particular ways in times of great need, but even they could only do so much for us as we all are so dependent on God the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us in so many situations. Like Paul, though maybe like me you also say it to a lesser degree than him, the words he states in Philippians 4:12-13: *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...<sup>13</sup> I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* There are times when our weakness, vulnerability and inadequacy can frighten us as we cannot see a way through some situation, yet we trust that God will stand with us in those times and bring us through them. I suspect Elisha felt his deep inadequacy when Gehazi returned to report that this problem had not gone away.

(b) **The intercession of Elisha** (II Kings 4:32-27) <sup>32</sup> *When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch.* <sup>33</sup> *He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the Lord.* <sup>34</sup> *Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm.* <sup>35</sup> *Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got onto the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.* <sup>36</sup> *Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, 'Call the Shunammite.'* *And he did. When she came, he said, 'Take your son.'* <sup>37</sup> *She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.* Nothing could have prepared Elisha for the sight he saw on his bed in this home. In effect the woman showed him the lifeless rigid body of her son and in effect as good as said –'it is in your hands now'. I expect God to work through you to bring him back to life. Help! 800 years later on the other side of the Hill of Moreh in the Plains of Esdraelon to where Shunem was located was the village of Nain. A mother is in deep distress because her only son is dead and is in the midst of the funeral procession. Luke 7:13-16a records what Jesus did. *When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and He said, 'Don't cry.'* <sup>14</sup> *Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, 'Young man, I say to you, get up!'* <sup>15</sup> *The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.* <sup>16</sup> *They were all filled with awe and praised God.* This is our God! It reminds us no situation is beyond hope. Praise God for the miracle of the restoration of the Shunemite boy to life and for the deep trust of his mother in God, that somehow God would work for good in this awful situation. May God help us also to trust Him fully with our lives too, through both the good and the most difficult of times, for Jesus' sake, Amen.