

II Kings 4:38-44 God cares about the little things

Introduction

On Sunday 17 November 1996, instead of the usual tea and biscuits after the service, a special meal was put on for 80 pensioners in the congregation of Wishaw Old Parish Church. The menu was fairly simple, steak pie followed by a Peach Melba desert. It was a simple meal, but the fallout from it changed public catering events in Scotland for ever. The Church purchased food from John Barr - the Butcher of the Year in Scotland in a previous year - but to them the local butcher's shop that regularly supplied food for church meals. A later enquiry found that failure to separate raw and cooked meats in his storage areas had allowed the fatal E Coli 0157 bacteria to infect the meat and half of these people were taken seriously ill with eight fatalities in the congregation out of the twenty –one individuals whose deaths were associated with this particular outbreak of infection, and out of the 500 individuals who were taken ill in the wider community. Professor Hugh Pennington's report provided recommendations for catering for public functions that were accepted by the Government and became standard practice throughout Scotland by the following year [*The Daily Record*, 1 Dec. 1996]. That local congregation felt devastated by this tragic meal for some years to come. It was one of two sad events that took place in Scotland in the 1990s that almost everyone alive at the time will be able to recall- the other of course being the awful events at Dunblane Primary School that led to the first steps of checks on those working with children and young people.

The meal recorded in II Kings 4:38-41 could have had a similar tragic outcome. Both events were valued social occasions and no-one intended anything to go wrong. The shock of recognising that something was seriously wrong would have been remembered by those present for years to come. It is no surprise that it was one of the stories recalled and written down with respect to the life and work of the prophet Elisha. Many of us will have memories of unexpected difficult circumstances that crossed our pathway with consequences of varying severity. On occasions we recognise that we are extremely fortunate to avoid something other people have had to face; but equally there are times when we are the ones who have had to face the awful reality that this difficult problem is dropped 'into our lap' and somehow with God's help we must seek to handle the situation before us. Let us have a brief look at these two stories and see what principles can be learned from what took place for our own lives. It is always important to grasp that stories in the Bible have been included to teach future generations something about how they should live their lives, even if we live in a very different social context. In the majority of situations there are principles we can learn to apply rather than specific conduct to follow or to avoid. We can evade the challenge of stories like these if we simply think of them as things that just happened roughly 2,800 years ago. Instead to ask ourselves –what might God want to teach me from this passage- allows us to create a space for personal reflection on events in the life of individuals from another era.

1. God over-rules our failures (II Kings 4:38-41)

(a)**The serious problem that they faced** (II Kings 4:38a) *Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region.* We must put ourselves in this social setting as we look at this story. The key statement was this: *and there was a famine in that region.* It is not a case of one supermarket has run out of bread so I must go elsewhere to get my favourite loaf. It was a painful acknowledgement that there was no food obtainable from market stalls, in the local fields or any other place where it might normally be purchased or grown. For us who have

never known this awful experience of the pangs of hunger but no means of addressing them, we can but imagine scenes like those we have seen on our televisions of malnourished children in Yemen or in a range of other countries in the world. This was a time of food scarcity. And in bad times people died of hunger –something experienced in our own country as late as the nineteenth century. As we come to reflect on the actions of various individuals in this story we must visualise a community of hungry people desperately wanting to find food but uncertain where to go to meet this need. The growth of foodbanks in our country has shown that in difficult economic times there are people struggling to pay for an adequate food supply for a variety of different reasons. We thank God for the good witness it has been for Christian Churches to step in and address this issue in many places around the country. You may not have struggled to find food, but maybe it is something else that seems to be out of reach for you, no matter how hard you try to sort out your situation. It can be people looking for work, especially younger people after school or university; or it might be relationships that always seem to fall short of our hopes and dreams – whatever it might be we need to accept that being followers of Jesus does not mean we escape any of the struggles of life other people face. The difference is that we can seek the Lord’s help in the midst of our trials. He can sustain us at those times when we cannot see a way out. When we read this story we tend to focus on the mistakes made by the principal person preparing dinner that day, but it is likely that their serious mistake only occurred because of the critical food shortages and the absence of the ingredients they would ordinarily have used in providing meals.

(b) **The ‘easiest’ solution** (II Kings 4:38b-39) ...*while the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, ‘Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these prophets.’*³⁹ *One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild gourd plant and picked as many of its gourds as his garment could hold. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were.* There is a conference and a good number of individuals are meeting with Elisha. His personal servant was asked to go out and find food to eat –not just for himself and Elisha, but for that relatively large number of individuals and their families. In subsistence economy that was normal then it would have been a challenge in good times to cover all the necessary catering requirements. There were no places where food could readily be bought as most people rarely had much more than was necessary to cover their own essential needs. Exactly the same situation was the norm for people in Jesus’ day. It must have been absolutely daunting for Jesus’ disciples when He asked them to provide lunch for a crowd of about 5,000 men and their families – in total, possibly up to twenty thousand people. In John 6:5-9 we read this exchange between Jesus and two of His disciples Andrew and Philip. *When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards Him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’*⁶ *He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*⁷ ***Philip answered him, ‘It would take more than half a year’s wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!’***⁸ *Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, spoke up,*⁹ ***‘Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?’*** This was no time of famine or unusual shortages, simply a statement about the difficulties of obtaining large amounts of food by ordinary people in the ancient world. Was Elisha testing his servant to see how he would respond under pressure? Or was it a genuine request in hope that there might be food available somewhere to feed people later that day? We know from John 6 that Jesus had used this unexpected situation to see how some of His followers would respond to the predicament they faced? We tend to look more favourably upon Andrew’s response than Philips! Unlike his colleague who was focussed on doing the maths of what it would cost to purchase lunch for so many people, Andrew went to look for people, with food. It is a simple practical approach to life based on a trust that Jesus would not ask him to do something that

could not be done. – even if he could not figure out how to find so much food. It was better to try and fall short than not attempt to address this need. What is crucial here is that Jesus took what Andrew had found and it became sufficient for the needs of those present. It required what someone else had willingly given to serve as the basis for this miracle, but it was Andrew who had the faith to believe that Jesus could do something with what he had obtained for Him. When we think of what we cannot do we can so easily give up and think what is the point! However, it is the opposite mind-set Jesus wants us to adopt and to trust Him to work in our situation taking what we can offer to Him as a part of the solution of addressing the need before us. How often might a Christian miss out on potential blessings because we shrank back from a faith challenge of some kind, because we focussed on fearing potential failure rather than on what might be accomplished for God in a particularly challenging situation.

Instead of focussing on this man's mistake we ought to view this passage differently. II Kings 4:39a: **One of them** went out into the fields to gather herbs... There were a lot of people there that day. I am sure there was more than one person deputed to be on duty in the kitchen. One might expect that several of the people on duty all agreed to go out and see if they could obtain any food for the meal. After all in a time of scarcity it might take a long time to be successful in such an appeal, so that would suggest that the more people going out looking for food, the better the chances of finding some –if any was out there to be obtained for the meal. Yet then and now there were others who passed up the opportunity to trust God to work in a special way in their midst. Thank God for this unidentified person who stepped out in faith to seek to be the answer to their prayers for food. Don't let the fear of failure hinder you from living for God or earnestly seeking for genuine needs to be met in your prayers. In what situation today might this be applicable to your life or mine? It is a matter of perspective that is the issue here.

We do recognise that all did not go well in this search for ingredients to put into the pot to produce some form of vegetable stew. II Kings 4:39 states: ³⁹*One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild gourd plant and picked as many of its gourds as his garment could hold. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were.* His enthusiasm cannot be faulted. Almost certainly I think this man would have asked the Lord to prosper his search for food and relatively quickly he finds this wild gourd plant that is full-to-overflowing with its fruit. He then staggers back with as much of it as he can carry and joyfully chopped it up to produce a far greater quantity of food than anyone had been expecting. There must have been scenes of joy when the others came out of their meeting with Elisha to see such large quantities of 'food'. On the surface it looked so good. But that was as far as it got. One commentator Ronald Wallace suggests that the man in question may have come from one of the places in the north of Israel where wild melons grow that are edible, but the plant he did find, *Citrullus Colocytis*, translated here as *a wild gourd plant* was something very different (Wallace, *Readings in 2 Kings*, p. 55). This wild cucumber plant that looks like small yellow melons was far from edible. In small quantities it served as an effective laxative for a person with severe constipation, but in larger doses it was poisonous and could be a cause of serious harm to a person's health, even fatal (M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*, p. 58). What might we learn from this episode here? When we pray for something take care not to assume too quickly that the most obvious 'answer to our prayers' is in fact what God has in store for us. We must still exercise our judgement and take care to be open to other possible resolutions of our difficulties. How often must the scientist in the laboratory try all manner of tests before confirming the best solution to the problem with which they began? One promising early good result might not produce, for example, a suitable new treatment for a particular medical need. All kinds of other factors might need to

be checked before conclusions could be reached. This man started so well, but did not stop to think why no-one else living nearby had helped themselves to this readily accessible plant as a contributing ingredient for their own meals. Sometimes there is a good reason to think carefully before we undertake a particular course of action. God sometimes gets the blame for the wrong choices of His people when we have acted impulsively without carefully considering how we should proceed in a particular situation. We must be assured by Jesus' words in Matthew 6:31-33: ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* ³³ *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* Wisdom compels us in all kinds of situations to ask ourselves: Is there anything I can do to resolve the difficulty I am facing? If there is, then we must get on and seize the opportunity while it is there. On other occasions there is no further door of opportunity unexplored so our calling may be to 'Be still and trust God' and patiently wait for Him to address our need, but all the time earnestly praying while the situation is still unresolved. In my current situation do I need to do something I have neglected to do up till now or do I need to keep on praying, but exercise more patience to wait for a resolution?

(c) **The devastating consequences** (II Kings 4:40) ⁴⁰ *The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, 'Man of God, there is death in the pot!' And they could not eat it.* The people in panic after recognising their food was not only not to their taste, but also a serious risk to their health and continued existence suddenly scheduled a time for a holy panic! The vast majority of them had made no mistakes but found themselves in this situation. It is always good to engage in self-examination to ask ourselves – have I made a mistake or mistakes that contributed to my being in this difficulty? Paul commended that to the Church at Corinth. In II Corinthians 13:5-8, he wrote: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?* ⁶ *And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.* ⁷ *Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong – not so that people will see that we have stood the test but so that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.* ⁸ *For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.* The apostle was commending humility that encouraged them to acknowledge their own shortcomings not to always assume that someone else has made a mistake- something easier to say than to do at times! Thankfully, there is no evidence in the story that they blamed the cook. It seems to have been accepted as a genuine mistake, for which the person in question would have felt awful at the time. Praise God for Elisha's calm but efficient response to this situation.

(d) **God's restoring grace** (II kings 4:41) ⁴¹ *Elisha said, 'Get some flour.' He put it into the pot and said, 'Serve it to the people to eat.' And there was nothing harmful in the pot.* As in some previous stories the action of Elisha was symbolic in pointing to God's visible intervention in their circumstances, in this case through the use of some flour. It was a miracle in response to the prayer of Elisha by which God resolved this difficult situation. Questions about 'self-raising' or 'Plain' are irrelevant! Symbols point beyond themselves to something greater. Each Sunday when we gather round the Lord's Table we see the visible symbols of bread and wine. They are ordinary elements that point to the body and blood of Jesus given for us on the cross, 2,000 years ago and are a reminder of God's amazing investment in our lives. When we grasp the significance of the sacrifice of Jesus it gives us confidence to trust God for our future, even though things at times can be extremely difficult. Remember what Paul had to say in Romans 8:31-32: *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?* What are the *all things*? They are the things that God knows we need each day of our lives. Will we trust Him to bring us through our trials and times of testing?

2. God rewards our generosity (II Kings 4:42-43)

(a) The discipline of financial giving (II Kings 4:42)⁴² *A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe corn, along with some ears of new corn. 'Give it to the people to eat,' Elisha said. ⁴³ 'How can I set this before a hundred men?' his servant asked.* We need to ask what is the significance of the actions of this man from Baal Shalishah? There has been a famine in the land, but praise God, at least in some parts of the country food is again being produced and there is a sign of hope for the future. God's promise in Genesis 8:22 to Noah is still being fulfilled, and we acknowledge it again each time we celebrate the harvest each autumn: *As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.* This society traded with goods and offerings to the Lord's work were in kind not cash! Exodus 23:19: *Bring the best of the first-fruits of your soil to the house of the Lord your God.* In the main place of Israelite worship in the Tabernacle in the desert or later the Temple in Jerusalem, Leviticus 23:20 states: *The priest is to wave the two lambs before the Lord as a wave offering, together with the bread of the first-fruits. They are a sacred offering to the Lord for the priest.* In a section of instruction concerning offerings to give to the priests, Deuteronomy 18:4-5 states: *You are to give them the first-fruits of your corn, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep, ⁵for the Lord your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the Lord's name always.* We are unclear about this location, but possibly it was a place now known as Khirbet Marjame, sixteen miles north-east of Jerusalem (Dale Ralph Davis, II Kings, p. 80). If this is correct, then it is a significant distance this man has walked with his offering. However, this man took his faith seriously and wanted to honour the Lord first when his harvest came. He is unknown to us, but what is clear is that God truly has first place in his life. His obedience to God was a blessing to other believers as well. Does the Lord have first place in our lives with respect to our giving to His work?

The equivalent gift in our cultural context is the giving of our tithes and offerings, whether by direct debits or standing orders from the bank or literal offerings in the plate in church services each Sunday. Paul advised the Corinthians to have this practice. In I Corinthians 16:1-2 he wrote: *Now about the collection for the Lord's people: do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ²On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.* The principle for our giving was explained in his second letter to the Church at Corinth. *Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written: 'They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures for ever.'* ¹⁰*Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God* (II Corinthians 9:6-11). Notice the characteristics here that are recommended. This passage describes someone who is willingly giving to God's work, and also doing so in a generous manner. Does this describe your financial giving and mine? Do we make a point of putting it aside when we get our income or for many of us who are paid directly into our bank accounts each month it is easiest of all to set up a direct method of payment as we do for many of our bills so that the amount we have chosen goes out directly without further action on our part. This un-named man's devotion to God was not only a blessing to him, but what an encouragement it was to this large gathering of people struggling to get enough food to eat. All our actions for good or ill have consequences. As we honour the Lord be in no doubt

that we will encourage other brothers and sisters by our actions. Am I, are you honouring the Lord in our gifts for His work?

(b) **The reward that comes from giving** (II Kings 4:43-44) ⁴³ *'How can I set this before a hundred men?' his servant asked. But Elisha answered, 'Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: "They will eat and have some left over."'* ⁴⁴ *Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.* Here is another similarity between the miracle Jesus performed which we have mentioned earlier –the 'Feeding of the Five Thousand'. Remember what happened then: *Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.'* *There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there).* ¹¹ *Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.* ¹² ***When they had all had enough to eat, He said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.'*** ¹³ ***So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten*** (John 6:10-13). What happened here? After all Elisha's servant had expressed similar doubts to Simon Peter in Jesus' day. *How can I set this before a hundred men?' his servant asked.* What was the outcome? *Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.* What is the lesson for us to remember here? It is the generosity of God in providing for our needs. The principle here is stated by Paul in Philippians 4:19: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.* What a wonderful encouragement to us! If God is so generous with us then we too should reflect His generosity in the way we bless other people as well. How might you bless someone else this week in your generosity? These two short stories are powerful reminders of both God's generosity and our calling to trust Him with our lives and serve Him with what He has gifted to us and in so doing to encourage others of His people to do likewise. May we do that, for Jesus' sake, Amen.