

2 Kings 4:1-44 – Grace that Saves the Day

Introduction: Once upon a time if you studied history, you studied great people, great movements, great events:

- you studied Henry VIII, Louis XIV, Stalin, Crusades, Renaissance, Enlightenment

But around time I was studying history major shift taking place:

- increasingly the focus was turning to people who weren't great and events and situations that were very ordinary
- could study WWII or history of NZ cricket
- could study the great leaders of Reformation Europe but could also study the life of peasants during the Reformation
- people started to produce the history of swimwear, meat pies, vacuum cleaners

Now if God were writing a history book, would he go for great people/events, or popular history of everyday life?

- Yes!

Elisha is, of course, one of the great people:

- but one of the things I love about this chapter is he's interacting with very ordinary people in everyday life

If you have any sense of being not particularly special...

- not having achieved anything very note-worthy, not a celebratory pastor, or Australian of the year, haven't recently appeared on cover of any mags... then this chapter is for you...

Encounter four situations of need, four cries of desperation, and four provisions of God's grace.

1. The four situations of need

The first situation is that of a destitute widow:

- had been the wife of one of the company/sons of prophets
- a godly, committed follower of Yahweh
- take her to be a faithful, godly woman in days of apostasy
- Ahab; Baal worship; but 7000 who had not bowed knee

But when husband died, left her two children and not much more

- so she is in debt and the creditors are chasing her
- laws allowed creditors to take her or her sons into slavery if she couldn't pay up
- in her culture, her sons were her social security; if they were taken she had nothing

Hard to imagine a more crushing situation: grief, compounded by poverty, ramped up by fear:

- despite faithfulness, she now falls on hardest of times
- which happens, doesn't it? You've seen it in min; experienced it?

Next, though, we meet a very different woman:

- she has a husband, and she has money
- enough money to set up a B&B for Elisha

She seems to lead a content, measured, faithful life

- she's good-hearted and well-adjusted
- only one blip on horizon – but a serious one; has no children

In the course of this story, the longest in the chapter, she rides the roller coaster of life:

- from contentment to high hopes, as Elisha promises a child
- from high hopes to fulfillment
- but from there we follow her to the gut-wrenching death of her son
- we see her desperation and single-mindedness
- finally, we see her walking away with her son alive
- falls in humble gratitude before the man of God

This is the roller coast of life; maybe you know that too?

- wonderful joys; life couldn't be better
- overwhelming heart-breaks; don't know how to cope

The third situation is completely different again:

- quite simply, the stew has gone badly wrong!
- some half-witted prophet who should have stuck to preaching tried to help with dinner
- in go the poisonous gourds, followed by the groans and stomach cramps of hungry preachers

Food poisoning. Bad cooking. Dodgy stew.

Here is one of the Bible's stories:

- so ordinary, but so true to real life

And then the fourth situation is about food too:

- three of these four stories are about food

Significant because these are stories from days of famine

- famine because of God's judgement on the nation, and the faithful are caught up in the consequences

The fourth story is your classic catering disaster:

- too many people for dinner, not enough food to go around
- some kind benefactor had brought his tithes

So we have 20 loaves but there are a 100 men to feed

- these loaves won't cut it, no matter how thinly you slice it
- simply a case of inadequate supplies; of not enough food for the pastor's lunch!

Well there you are: four situations of need:

- really, they are so ordinary, so homely, so real

And that's the point: this is life for the faithful people of God:

- these are ordinary, faithful, believing folks in days of apostasy
- they are not spared suffering; things go wrong, stuff happens
- there's grief, and financial need, and desperation, and heart-break, and cooking disasters

This is the life of those we preach to:

- and to be honest, ours as well
- we won't be spared this kind of thing cos we're preachers
- the life of faith and active Christian ministry doesn't exempt us from heartbreak, struggle, crises, mishaps
- this is life in a broken world

But what are we to do with the ordinary pains of life?

2. The four cries of desperation

In each situation these people interact with Elisha:

- the man of God, bearer of God's word; God's representative

The widow lays her situation before him, with no petition:

- she just sets out the reality; she cries out to him; she tells him her woe – v1

The woman whose son died makes haste to Elisha:

- she is utterly determined; she must get to him
- no one else will do; no distractions en route
- when she gets to him, she falls before him, pours out her lament: v28
- basically complaining: "Sir, you duped me; you promised me a blessing and it has become a curse"

The guys with stomach cramps also cry out to Elisha:

- man, there's death in the pot - v40

The overwhelmed caterer in the last story doesn't go to Elisha but has to answer Elisha's challenge:

- Elisha says, feed the 100 men with the 20 small loaves
- he simply asks in dismay, 'How can I possibly do that?' – v43

Two really important things to note about these reactions...

First, they are so real:

- family photo in our hallway; look amazing
- but here, no airbrushing of their situations
- they state their woes, they name their problems
- they cry, they're distressed, they complain, they throw up their hands and say, "what?"
- and the Bible urges us to do the same

Too easily we find our very Christian ways of not doing that:

- may live in denial, refusing to admit anything is really wrong
- may live triumphantly, as if all is fantastic when it's not
- may live in fierce independentism, holding our worries tightly to ourselves, determined to find a way through them
- ministers can be the worst! All is going wonderfully!

But life is hard. It's right to cry, to lament, complain:

- 1/3 of psalter is psalter is lament; why sing only praise?

The other thing to note is the cries are taken to Elisha:

- they each go to the go to the man of God, the one who speaks God's words, bears God's power
- the one who's name means, "My God Saves"

Of course we can't go to Elisha. But we can go to one greater:

- Jesus intends we turn to him with our cries and complaints
- he is the man of God, the Word of God, the saviour
- in every grief, pain, struggle, should lay it all before him

Don't know what your prayer life sounds like; mine is very plain:

- Lord, I can't cope; don't know what to do; please help
- Lord, I'm really scared, intimidated, at Ridley
- O God, sort her out because I don't know how to...
- there's a reason we sing, 'What a friend we have in Jesus...'

Well, that leads us to the last thing we must look at:

3. The four provisions of grace

We know the outcome of each situation:

- in short, the widow gets food for a lifetime; the pots are filled, the oil sold; provisions made to sustain her
- the woman gets her son back from the dead; lays on bed, life returns, sneezes, mother hugs him
- the stew comes good; flour thrown in; transformed
- and the bread goes around; just keep distributing till all full

They are the outcomes. It's another good day at the prophetic office.

But let's hover here and notice a few things...

One thing to notice is how left field these miracles are:

- should really come with a warning: 'don't try this at home'
- if running out of food, don't collect containers from neighbours
- if son dead, don't stretch self on boy, just call 000
- if stew gone wrong, don't throw bucket of flour in it
- if not enough food, just go to Coles and buy some more

This is not a set of instructions for how to fix life's problems.

These are miracles – miracles of grace:

- and biblical miracles function as signs that point to something
- these signs pointed apostate Israel to God
- remember Elisha's name: my God Saves; he really does!
- and his grace saves the day

These are signs pointed OT believers back to the God who hears, cares, saves, provides, heals, restores.

But the signs pointed forward as well: to Jesus Christ

- something so Christ-like about these miracles, isn't there?
- Jesus came doing exactly the same things
- he had mercy on widows, raised the dead, fed 5000 from a few loaves and fishes
- one greater than Elisha has come

But Jesus' miracles were signs too:

- he didn't raise every dead boy, or feed every hungry crowd
- his signs pointed to coming kingdom
- signs that the kingdom is a place of new life, of grace, of good news for the poor

When Jesus comes again and his kingdom comes in fullness...

- all poverty and grief removed; wipe every tear
- all the dead will be raised
- and all our mishaps and mistakes will be resolved
- instead of famine there will be eternal feasting
- then our faithfulness, even in days of apostasy, will be rewarded with grace beyond imagination

Friends, preach that! That's the gospel.

And don't just preach it; believe it!

- look yourself to where these signs point us
- look to God's grace in Jesus Christ; run to him in every trial
- God's grace in Christ is what we need in the struggles of everyday life