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 & 6:1–7
 8th Message
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RESOURCES FOR RESTORATION

SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Most of you are familiar with the popular nursery rhyme Humpty Dumpty:

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
 Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
 All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Couldn't put Humpty together again.*

Originally, this short poem was a riddle and one was supposed to guess that Humpty Dumpty was an egg. I remember as a child feeling very sorry for Humpty Dumpty, and sad that Humpty Dumpty could not be restored. Perhaps you have felt like Humpty Dumpty. You have taken a great fall and have broken into pieces. The question you face is whether or not you could ever be put back together again. This is the question we want to talk about today. How can you be restored when you have taken a fall and all of your human efforts have failed to put you back together?

Our previous studies in 2 Kings have focused on Elijah. We now move to the Elisha narrative, another man for all seasons. The miracles that Elisha performs are similar to Elijah's, but the two men had different ministries. Elijah's name means "Yahweh is God." His ministry was to demonstrate the supremacy of Yahweh over and against Baal, the god of fertility and rain, and thus prove that Yahweh is indeed God. Elijah was a lone prophet confronting Ahab, the king of the northern kingdom. Only one of Elijah's escapades occurs in public—the battle on Mt. Carmel between himself and the prophets of Baal. There is a great deal of correspondence between Elijah and Moses and John the Baptist.

Elisha's ministry was one of restoration, redemption, salvation and healing. This is reflected in his name, which means "Yahweh is salvation." While Elijah was a solitary figure often out of the land, Elisha was more public and was more involved with the community of the faithful, the sons of the prophets. There is a great deal of correspondence between Elisha and Joshua and Jesus. While both Elijah and Elisha prefigure a pattern of ministry we see in Jesus, Elisha more so. Elijah is referred to six times as the "man of God" while Elisha is referred to by that title 29 times. Elisha and Jesus both point people to the one true God through their miracles and healings.

Some of the stories about Elisha are lengthy and detailed. But these are interwoven with much shorter stories with less detail, brief snapshots that are nonetheless very significant in meaning. Today, I want us to look at three of these shorter stories. Hopefully, it will become clear as to why I have lumped these three together. The first story takes place in 2 Kings 2, right after the ascension of Elijah.

Elisha Heals the Waters of Jericho

The people of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."

"Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him.

Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the LORD says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'"

And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken. (2 Kings 2:19–22 TNIV)

This story relates Elisha's first miracle. Elijah and Elisha had crossed over the Jordan where Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind and Elisha was given a double portion of Elijah's spirit. The mantle of spiritual leadership had been passed, but it was difficult for the sons of the prophets to let go of Elijah. They had searched for Elijah for three days and finally conceded to Elisha that he had vanished. Elisha is retracing his steps back into the land, beginning with Jericho. This first miracle helps to authenticate Elisha as the preeminent prophet in Israel.

The men of Jericho, not the sons of the prophets who are prominent in chapter 2, approach Elisha and tell him that the city is well situated, or "good." And indeed it was. Jericho was an oasis in the midst of a desert, with rich soil and palm and fig trees. But there is a serious problem in Jericho. The men tell Elisha that the water is bad or literally "evil" and the land is "unproductive." The word "unproductive" means to be bereaved or to miscarry. In other words the bad water causes the land to be infertile, to not bear fruit.

When we wonder why this was the case, we remember that Joshua had told Israel that they were never to rebuild Jericho (Joshua 6.26). Through Joshua, God pronounced a curse on the man who would do this – he would lay the foundation with the loss of his first-born and set up its gates with the loss of his youngest son. That is exactly what happened to Hiel as we read in 1 Kings 16:

"In Ahab's time, Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of his firstborn son Abiram, and he set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub, in accordance with the word of the LORD spoken by Joshua son of Nun." (1 Kings 16:34)

The act of rebuilding Jericho is linked with the beginning of Ahab's reign. We also remember that the worship of Baal had become the state religion when Jezebel married Ahab. Baal was the god of fertility and also of all waters, such as rain and rivers. God is continuing to demonstrate that Baal was impotent through the ministry of Elisha, just as he had done through Elijah.

Elisha requests a new bowl or jar, indicating that this is a new thing, a new conquest. He puts some ordinary salt into the jar, goes to the source of the water, i.e. the head of the spring, and throws the salt into the water. He pronounces that the waters are purified or "healed" and therefore will not cause death or bereavement any longer. Pure waters continued until the time that this book was writ-

ten and this continues to be the case today. The curse is replaced with blessing.

The problem that Elisha encountered in Jericho can be a metaphor for our life. The idols we worship bring death and decay to our land. Our disobedience to God results in an unfruitful life. There are parts of our lives that have become wasted and unusable. All of our own efforts to produce life and bear fruit have been aborted. We feel like we are under a curse. Most of us can probably relate to these things. This has been your experience in the past or perhaps it is your experience in the present.

But this does not need to continue. The solution that Elisha provided is available for us today. We come to the man of God, to Jesus, and ask him to heal our unfruitful and death-producing lives. In response to our invitation, Jesus goes to the source of our water, to our hearts, and salts us with the Holy Spirit. The result is a healed heart and life-giving water. Our life can bear the fruit of love, peace, and joy. We are reminded of Jesus' words in John 7:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. (John 7:37–39)

The problems we have are deeply rooted. They manifest from deep within us, at the source of our will and emotions. They cannot be dealt with on the surface. There is no quick fix. A new paint job might make the surface look good, but it only hides the cracks in our foundation. We have to go to the heart of the matter.

Elisha Heals the Stew at Gilgal

Our second story is in chapter 4:

Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. 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 this company.”

One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild vine. He gathered some of its gourds and filled the fold of his cloak.

When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were. 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. 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. (2 Kings 4:38–41)

In this story, Elisha had come to Gilgal, perhaps from Shunem, the location of the previous story. Shunem is farther to the north, near Jezreel. This Gilgal was probably the one north of Bethel in the hill country. Elisha was now the spiritual father for the sons of the prophets located here and there throughout Israel. He traveled around ministering to those who were faithful to Yahweh and had not bowed the knee to Baal.

We read that there was a famine in the land. This is consistent with what God had promised if his people failed to worship him and keep his commandments. Food was scarce and the sons of the prophets were not exempt from suffering. This is always true – God's judgments fall on the just and the unjust. Elisha tells his servant to put on a pot and cook stew for the sons of the prophets. Perhaps what they had was not sufficient and so one of the men went out and

gathered some gourds from a wild vine. When he returned he cut up these gourds and threw them in the pot. The servant was quite unaware of the effect these gourds would have on the stew.

When the stew was ready and the men began to eat, they discovered that the stew was toxic or poisoned. They became aware that there was death in the pot. I do not know how they discovered this. The text doesn't mention that anyone died. Perhaps the men tasted something deadly or awful in the stew, a taste that they knew to be poisonous. Some scholars think these gourds were a laxative that became poisonous when taken in large quantities.

At any rate, they complain to Elisha, the man of God. Food is at a premium and they don't want to waste what they have just cooked. This time he asks for some flour or meal. He added the flour to the pot and instructed the servant to give it to the people. The fact that the sons of the prophets actually ate the stew shows that they had tremendous faith in Elisha. The result of Elisha's miracle is that, literally, “there was no evil word in the pot.” This phrase is key to understanding the story.

Our second story presents to us another metaphor. Like the man who went out to collect herbs, so we go into the world and gather all sorts of things – ideas, philosophies, ways of living, and attitudes. We gather these from co-workers, friends, relatives, books, music, and television. Sometimes we are completely unaware of the influence they have on our life, but in reality they can be toxic and poisonous. Good and evil “words” are mixed together in our world. Our lives can become contaminated and as a result we experience death.

Elisha knew what to add to the pot. The flour or meal is a corrective agent, an agent of change, and an antidote for evil. The result is food that is purified, without an evil word. This is the work of God's word in our life. The word of God is what corrects our thinking and our actions and purifies our life. When we sit under the teaching of God's truth, the things we pick up from the world are neutralized. Paul tells us of this purpose in 2 Timothy:

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Our second story highlights the importance and necessity of being in God's word as a steady and consistent diet. We don't read God's word as a duty to be performed by Christians. We read God's word and sit under its teaching so that our lives can be brought into harmony with God's design for life.

I remember being a young Christian and struggling against the ways of the world in which I lived all week long. I would come to church on Sunday morning feeling absolutely depleted and hungry. But as I sat under the teaching of the word I would find myself being refreshed. I would leave church full and ready to move into another week. The word was food for my soul, just like a great steak dinner is food for my body. “People do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3 TNIV).

Elisha Recovers an Ax Head at the Jordan

The company of the prophets said to Elisha, “Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to meet.” And he said, “Go.”

Then one of them said, “Won’t you please come with your servants?”

“I will,” Elisha replied.

And he went with them. They went to the Jordan and began to cut down trees.

As one of them was cutting down a tree, the iron axe head fell into the water. “Oh no, my lord!” he cried out. “It was borrowed!”

The man of God asked, “Where did it fall?” When he showed him the place, Elisha cut a stick and threw it there, and made the iron float. “Lift it out,” he said. Then the man reached out his hand and took it. (2 Kings 6:1-7)

Here is another story that takes place between Elisha and one of the local communities of the sons of the prophets. We are not sure which group this might be. Perhaps it was the Gilgal group, since that seems to be sort of home base for Elisha. However, this Gilgal might have been the Gilgal that was close to the Jordan.

Obviously, Elisha’s ministry is bearing fruit because this community is running out of room. They are bursting at the seams due to the growing numbers. Their solution is to go to the Jordan, cut down some trees, float them down the river, and build a larger place to live. Perhaps this group was willing to relocate, but this isn’t exactly clear. Elisha gives his permission for this, but they want him to come with them.

When the group was hard at work felling beams, one of the men took a mighty swing with his axe and the axe head flew off the handle, landed in the water, and sunk to the bottom. The distraught man cried out in dismay to Elisha because the axe was borrowed. I am reminded how I cried out when the earthquake hit the bay area in 1989. Without thinking I said, “Oh, no. I don’t have earthquake insurance!” What we have to understand is that the iron axe head was a rare commodity and its loss would result in a significant debt. According to the Law restoration of damaged or lost property was required (Ex. 22:14-15). The distraught man was sunk. How would he repay the debt?

Again, Elisha knew what to do. He asked the man for the exact location where the axe head had landed. When the man pointed out the place, Elisha cut a branch off a tree and threw it in the water, “there.” The Hebrew word for “there” occurs in the story five times. Elisha is like a doctor asking the specific location of the pain. Elisha’s action caused the iron to float on the surface and the man could retrieve it from the river. We are reminded of the piece of wood that Moses threw into the water of Marah in Exodus 15, turning bitter waters to sweet.

This story seems trivial, insignificant, and pointless, but again it contains some deep insights. There are a couple of ways we can look at this miracle. On one level we see that God cares about the small things in life, the ordinary and mundane as well as the bigger issues. If something is important to us, then it is important to God. We can bring every care and worry to him without reservation because the man of God is “there,” right where he is supposed to be. As Peter writes we can “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7 TNIV).

So often in our life, small things become big things. We think we can handle them on our own. But they can tend to unsettle and consume us. We think God wouldn’t want us to talk to him about such silly things. Well, we are wrong. We can cry out to God over

the smallest annoyances and nuisances in our life. This is what God wants; he wants us to depend on him in everything, to bring everything to him in prayer.

Consider how children get upset at the smallest little thing. How do you react as a parent or a grandparent? You usually don’t turn your back and say, “toughen up kid.” No, you stop what you are doing and try to help. You have compassion and you seek to comfort and aid the child. You care because you love your child. That is the way it is with God.

On another level, the iron axe head was precious. As it sunk in the river, it became lost and irretrievable. But our God is a God who can find what is lost and give life to what is dead. This is what he does with us. We become lost due to sin. We fall into pits and sink in deep water like Jonah. But all is not lost with God. We are precious in God’s sight and when we cry out to him he has the power to raise us up to new life. Some think that the stick of wood might point to the wooden cross that makes possible the reversal of death and destruction. However, I think that is a bit of a stretch. God is a God of resurrection. As we so often sing “I once was lost but now am found/Was blind but now I see.”

Do you see the theme that is running through all three stories? There is a problem. People cry out to the man of God, Elisha. And Elisha knows the right ingredient or resource to add or throw into the situation to bring healing and restoration. Elisha throws salt into a spring, flour into a pot, and stick of wood into the river. In each of these situations, the solution lies outside of human effort.

This is a picture of our need for God. Our efforts at gaining life fail. We are impotent to bring about that for which we so desperately desire and yearn. We are unfruitful, filled with death, and lost. But we can cry out to the man of God, to Jesus. Jesus can transform us and make us new. Even though we feel cursed, Jesus can heal us at the source of our life by giving us a new heart. Even though we are full of death and death-giving, he can give us life and make us life-giving. Even though our life is lost, we can be found. The solutions to our sin and disobedience, our pride and arrogance lie outside of us. When we acknowledge that and humble ourselves before God, then he gives the resources for restoration.

During my college years I was on a desperate search for the meaning of life. I knew there had to be something more than what I was seeing in the world and experiencing in my life. Even though I looked perfectly normal on the outside and was successful in school, I knew I was going downhill on the inside and I knew I didn’t have it in me to change what I was becoming. I was very conscious of the fact that in order to alter the trajectory of my life I needed to change on the inside and I knew that the agent of change had to come from outside of me. And that is what led to me to start reading the Bible and eventually led me to Christ. The Spirit of the Lord anointed Jesus to:

...proclaim good news to the poor,

...bind up the brokenhearted,

...proclaim freedom for the captives,

...release from darkness for the prisoners,

...comfort all who mourn, provide for those who grieve

...bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:1-3)

The ministry of Jesus happens to us when we are converted, but it also continues throughout our lives. Whenever we get off track, locked in selfishness, consumed with pride, entangled in sin, we can humble ourselves before God in order to be healed and restored.

And now the same Spirit that anointed Elisha and Jesus anoints the people of God for the same work. The pattern of ministry of Elisha became the pattern of ministry of Jesus becomes the pattern of ministry for us. We become an agent of change because we know what people need to be transformed, healed, and restored. This is our ministry – to be sent out into the world telling the gospel, offering hope, pointing people to our Lord. We carry salt, flour, and sticks of wood.

Are you in need of restoration this morning? Have you become lost, despairing, lifeless, or unfruitful? Jesus knows what you need. He has the resources for restoration. He can provide for you.

“May our God and Father instruct us with the word of truth, inform us with the Gospel of salvation, and enrich us with his love, Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.” (Gelasian Sacramentary)

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