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2 Kings 4:8–37

9th Message

John Hanneman

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# A WOMAN'S FAITH

*SERIES: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS*

This last week we have all been saddened and unsettled by the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. We are overwhelmed with the devastation and loss of life. Last week we lost a young Romanian friend who finally succumbed to cancer at the tender age of 27. Many of you knew Calin. Perhaps you have been following the story of a 16-year-old boy in a small town in Michigan who dropped dead just after scoring the winning basket in the last game of an undefeated season. This young man was the star of the football and basketball team and known for his faith and his character. In the blink of an eye, life can forever change.

Death is a troubling issue for most of us. It creates fear and robs us of our freedom. It is one thing when a person has had a long and full life. But when life is cut short due to illness or sudden tragedy we can be undone with anger, grief, and sadness. We wonder if God cares or if he is cruel. How can God grace us one minute and devastate us the next? How are we to live with tragedy, loss, and death? These are the questions we want to take up this morning as we continue in the stories of Elisha in the book of 2 Kings. For the next three Sundays we will be in the heart of the Elisha narrative. Our story today is a beautiful story of faith and restoration.

## A Great Lady

**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 came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. 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." (2 Kings 4:8–10 TNIV)**

We are introduced to a woman that lived in Shunem. Shunem is a town about fifteen miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee, on the eastern end of the valley of Jezreel. It is situated on the southwest side of the hill of Moreh not far from Mt. Tabor.

We are told that this woman was well-to-do, literally a "great woman." This means she was prominent and influential, perhaps a woman with some wealth. We might see in her the character of the woman described in Proverbs 31. Evidently, Elisha would pass by her house occasionally as he traveled through Israel ministering to the sons of the prophets. This woman recognized Elisha to be a holy man of God, an indication that Elisha was special. He was the real deal. One day she invited Elisha to stay for a meal, which in turn led to future meals. Eventually this great woman asked her husband to build an enclosed room on top of the house, complete with furniture. The word "chair" is used elsewhere in the Old Testament as a seat of honor. We get the sense that this couple went out of their way and spared no expense. This room became a place of rest and spiritual refreshment for Elisha. Literally, the word for this room is an "upper chamber." We are immediately reminded of the story in 1 Kings 17 of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. Elijah stayed

in an upper room at her house that eventually became the site of a dramatic miracle. The reader's anticipation is heightened. Will Elisha do what Elijah did? Our story today is parallel to that story, but also different. The widow at Zarephath was destitute and a Gentile unbeliever. The woman in our story today is well off and is Jewish, i.e. part of God's people. The widow comes to faith, the great woman demonstrates faith.

In the introduction to our story, we see the power of hospitality, the importance of using your home as a base for ministry. In the ancient Near East hospitality was a top priority for any village, just as it continues to be in many parts of the world. Not to care appropriately for strangers and visitors would bring great shame to a village or to an individual.

In the New Testament, the word "hospitality" means, "to love strangers." This is the context for much of Jesus' ministry. Peter tells us to not only love one another, but also to love outsiders (1 Peter 4:8–9). Paul encourages the Roman Christians to contribute to the needs of the saints and pursue hospitality (Rom. 12.13). The author of Hebrews indicates that in being hospitable, one might be entertaining an angel (Heb. 13.2). Hospitality appears in the list of elder qualifications in both 1 Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 3.2; Titus 1.8).

What we are to understand is that hospitality is right up there with prayer and love. For believers, hospitality is not an option. If we are not showing hospitality in our homes we are not listening to God's word. Ministry begins in our homes and around our tables, not just with people we know and love, but also with those that we do not know. Some of my most significant relationships started by simply inviting someone over for dinner. This is how I got started ministering to young singles. Liz and I would go to church on Sunday and start inviting people over for dinner. We never knew who would show up. If you want a ministry, start with hospitality. Everyday in the Bay Area we come in contact with people from all over the world. We need to make it work at home before we take it on the road.

## The Gift of a Son

**One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite."**

**So he called her, and she stood before him.**

**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." (2 Kings 4:11–13)**

Elisha was very grateful for the woman's hospitality. The word "trouble" implies that she extended great effort. Since the woman has outdone herself Elisha wanted to bless her in some way. We are introduced to the fact that Elisha has a servant by the name of

Gehazi. This is the first time we hear this name but it will not be the last.

Elisha tells Gehazi to call the woman and ask her if he can do anything for her, such as speak to the king or the commander of the army for a special favor. The king of Israel at this time was Jehoram, Ahab's other son and Ahaziah's brother. Jehoram was better than his father and brother, and Elisha helps him on several occasions. We are to understand that the woman stood before Gehazi and received Elisha's message. Gehazi is an intermediary, and he stands between people and the man of God, somewhat like a priest. Her response to Gehazi is, "I have a home among my own people," meaning that she is content in her present situation. She does not need anything in return for her hospitality, i.e. she offered grace free of charge or repayment. Gehazi returned to give his report to Elisha.

**"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.**

**Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old."**

**Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway.**

**"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!"**

**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." (2 Kings 4:14-17)**

When Gehazi reports back, Elisha asks what then can be done for her. Gehazi makes a suggestion – the woman has no son and now her husband is old. We are not told if this couple has any daughters, but a son was crucial to maintain the family line and property. When Gehazi mentions that the husband is old, we are reminded of Abraham and Sarah. If the couple is barren then the Shunammite woman joins a significant list of barren women in the Bible – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Hannah, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist.

The woman is called a second time and now she stands in the doorway; she has gained a personal audience before Elisha. The "doorway" is the place where significant conversation happens in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Elisha tells her that at the same time next year she will embrace a son. The only other time the phrase "next year" is used in the Old Testament is in Gen. 18, referring to Abraham and Sarah's miracle baby (Gen. 18:10, 14).

The woman is stunned with Elisha's promise and wonders if Elisha is teasing her or deceiving her in some way. If the woman were childless, it would have been a cause of deep sorrow. But this woman had settled it in her heart and she was content or at least has accepted the situation. However, when Elisha gives this promise, all her emotion is once again brought to the surface. Perhaps she was saying, "Do not kid about such a serious issue in my life." The woman does not want to get her hopes up again only to be disappointed. Most of us know the agony of being promised something special and then being disappointed. It would have been better if no promise had been given. In this case we are told that it happened just as Elisha had spoken. The following year the woman gave birth to a son.

## The Death of the Son

Now we fast-forward a few years:

**The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, "My head! My head!" His father told a servant, "Carry him to his mother." 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. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out. (2 Kings 4:18-21)**

The boy grew up, but he was still young enough for the woman to carry. One day he went out to the fields to work with his father. While he was working something happened. Some scholars think that the boy suffered sunstroke. A servant took the boy to his mother. He lay in her lap until he died. The woman carried the boy up to Elisha's room and laid him on his bed. This might be an indication that this is all due to Elisha and thus it is his responsibility.

The Shunammite woman experienced a mother's greatest fear – the loss of a child. The source of grace and blessing now became a source of deep sorrow. This raises for us a great dilemma. Why does God give only to take away? Does God give us blessings only to increase the pain? Does God lift us up so we simply fall farther and harder? This is a deep issue in many of our hearts.

Perhaps you have been out of work for quite a while. You finally land the job of your dreams. You are so excited. But when you start the new position, your boss is fired or the company goes through reorganization and your job becomes unbearable. Perhaps you have been single for many years, but then God apparently gives you the person of your dreams. You are filled with joy. But just before you marry you find out that your fiancé is a cheat and a fraud. Maybe you find out after you get married. Perhaps you have had trouble having children. But at last you get pregnant and your heart is filled with joy. But then something happens and you miscarry. You think it might have been better if you had never become pregnant at all. This is an issue that I know many women are facing right now in our body.

A significant loss is a very troubling thing, but something we all experience. These occasions test our faith and expose our hearts. Many people blame God or turn their back on him. Some stop going to church and say, "I can't believe in a God that would allow this to happen." I do not know all the answers to "why." But I do know that it is a significant part of our journey with God.

God accomplishes his most profound work in the lives of his children not in times of tranquility but in seasons of hardships. According to spiritual writer Jean Pierre de Caussade, "God instructs the heart, not through ideas but through suffering and adversity."

The question at this point is, How will the woman respond? That is the question all of us have to answer.

## The Faith of the Woman

**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."**

**"Why go to him today?" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." "That's all right," she said. (2 Kings 4:22-23)**

The woman doesn't tell her husband what has happened, but quickly prepares to go to the man of God. Her husband wonders why she would go see Elisha since it is not a new moon or Sabbath, i.e. it is not a religious day. According to the Law, offerings were to be made on

the first day of each month as well as the Sabbath (Num. 28.10-14). On these days the faithful would meet in the prophet's home for worship.

**She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, "Lead on; don't slow down for me unless I tell you." So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. (2 Kings 4:24-25)**

Mount Carmel would have been a distance of some 15-20 miles depending on the location of Elisha's home.

When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, "Look! There's the Shunammite! 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. (2 Kings 4:25-26)

Gehazi asked the woman if she, her husband, and her child were all right, literally "shalom." She replied that all was well. She was anxious to get past Gehazi and see Elisha.

**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."**

**"Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes?'" (2 Kings 4:27-28)**

Imagine this dramatic scene of the woman running up to Elisha, getting down on her knees, and grabbing Elisha by the feet, a sign of humility and a plea for mercy. In doing this she is crossing every social and gender boundary. This is why Gehazi tried to get her away from Elisha. This is what angered the Pharisees when they saw Jesus and his interaction with women and sinners. Elisha is unaware of what has happened, but he detects her deep distress and bitterness. (This is how Naomi sees herself in the book of Ruth.) The woman repeats to him what she said earlier when he promised her a son.

Coming to the man of God is the same thing as coming to God. The Shunammite woman is taking her troubles to him. She is bitter and troubled, but she has nowhere else to go, no other person to turn to, as is often the case with us. In her distress the woman has faith that God can do something, he can help her in her time of great need.

## The Restoration of the Son

**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." (2 Kings 4:29)**

Gehazi is instructed to make haste to Shunem by girding up his loins, i.e. tucking his robe in his belt so that he can travel quickly without encumbrances. He is to stop for no one. He is to lay Elisha's staff on the boy's face. The staff is a sign of Elisha's authority and we are reminded of Moses and his staff in Egypt (Ex. 14:15, 17:8).

**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.**

**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." (2 Kings 4:30-31)**

Gehazi will get to her son first, but the woman doesn't go with Gehazi. Rather she clings to the man of God in the same way Elisha clung to Elijah before he was taken up in a whirlwind. The man of

God puzzles her, but she still clings to him, another sign of her faith. When Gehazi lays the staff on the boy's face there is no sound or response. This was the same result for the prophets of Baal on top of Carmel in 1 Kings 18:29 when they entreated Baal to light the sacrifice. In this situation only the man of God can make alive.

**When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. 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. (2 Kings 4:32-34)**

Elisha enters his room, the upper chamber, and shuts the door and he prays. He stretches himself out on the boy with his mouth to the boy's mouth, his eyes to the boy's eyes, and his hands to the boy's hands, as if trying to transfer life from his body into the boy's body. The lad's body begins to warm up.

**Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.**

**Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out. (2 Kings 4:35-37)**

Elisha gets up off the bed, paces a bit around the room, and then stretches himself out again on the boy. The lad sneezes seven times and opens his eyes, a rather strange way of being restored to life. Pronouncing the Hebrew word for "sneeze" actually sounds like a sneeze. The Shunammite woman is called by Gehazi, goes into the room, bows down in worship, lifts up her son, and goes out. The promise of a son came in two stages and likewise the healing. Both Elijah and Elisha restore a dead boy and give him back to his mother.

The story is a story about a woman's faith and God's miracle. God is a God who brings life to the dead, heals what no man can heal, and calls into being what is not. God does heal in dramatic ways, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. However, when we pray for physical healing, more often than not we do not get the answer we want. The dead do not come back to us; rather we will have to go to them. There are some things we must carry with us throughout our lives. So how do we respond to tragedy and loss?

One thing we can do is to continue to cling to God by faith. We can go into our inner room, shut the door and pray to the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. We need to understand that he does care for us and knows what it means to lose a son. Even though we are bitter and angry we are still to run to God.

Another thing we can do is to live with love and compassion for others, especially our own children. We comfort others with the comfort we have received from God. We all share in the pain of loss. "Every man's death diminishes me because I am involved with mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." If nothing happens at first, we don't give up. We continue to stretch ourselves out again and again, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, and hands to hands. This is a picture of what Jesus does with us, an encouragement for us to do the same with others.

But what we really need to understand is the purpose for the miracle, the reality to which it points. We are reminded of the story in Luke's gospel when Jesus healed the son of a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-17). Nain was a town only a couple of miles away on the

north side of the hill of Moreh. When Jesus performed that miracle the people could not have helped but remember what Elisha did in a nearby town. Jesus in fact raised several from the dead in his ministry, including Lazarus and Jairus' daughter. Elisha gives an advanced look at the ministry of Jesus.

Certainly these miracles convey the truth that Jesus has power over this creation. But more importantly, they mean that Jesus has the power to inaugurate a new creation. We are dead in trespasses and sins. But when we come to Christ, we are made alive. At the moment when faith is enacted Paul tells us that we die with Christ, we are buried with Christ, and we are raised to new life. This means that our earthly life has ended and our heavenly life has begun, our life in the new creation. And this life will continue throughout eternity. Death will simply mean the end of our earthly body, but not our life. The essence of our life in Christ means that we will never die. Therefore, death no longer has power over us and no longer creates fear. When Elijah and Elisha and Jesus raise the dead, this is not just a nice story about something that happened once upon a time or happened to just a few people. This is a miracle available for each and every one of us. This is our story – raised to new life. Being a Christian is not about just going to church, doing good things, and not doing bad things. Being a Christian is about living a resurrected life right now.

These past three weeks we have had two remarkable memorial services – Ethel Smith and Carrol Bingham. Both of these services were absolutely incredible as we celebrated what God had done in the lives of these two saints. And we had complete assurance that even though their bodies were gone, their lives in Christ still continue.

When tragedy happens it is right for us to experience sadness and sorrow. We are not to be callous and hard-hearted. But we don't live as if we are trying to eke out every last minute on planet earth. We don't live trying to acquire our kingdom for five or ten or even fifty years. This does not make sense. We live with the assurance that there is no earthly sorrow that heaven cannot heal. We live seeking the things of heaven, not the earth. This is the encouragement of Paul to the Colossians:

**Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)**

*Now may the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not, give us hope, faith, and assurance to walk in newness of life, setting our hearts on the things above.*

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