

Theme Sentence

Elisha shows that Israel's Lord is their Redeemer

Launching Question

List 20 things that God has done in the last 24 hours that show his loving commitment to you.

Questions

READ 2 Kings 4:1-7

Why do bad things happen to God's people?

How does the woman model what the believer should do in a crisis?

Some commentators suggest that the woman's lack of faith limited the quantity of oil (as she could have insisted on more empties in v 6!): do you agree?

If not that (and it's not that!), then where does the story put the emphasis?

READ 2 Kings 4:8-37

What difference does it make to treat these as two stories or as one story?

What do know about the woman? what does v 10 tell us?

In what ways in the stories does she demonstrate that she is a believer?

What is Elisha's role?

Link together 27b, 31 and 33 ... what lessons are there for us from Elisha?

How does the curse of death reveal the power of God?

We've seen a theme of 'behind closed doors' in these stories: why?

READ 2 Kings 4:38-44

Look up Leviticus 26:20, 26; Deuteronomy 28:38-40, 53-57; Amos 4:6.

What is the significance of 'famine' (38)? and now of God feeding his people?

Lots of bits of these stories are reminiscent of other Bible stories ... make a list together of all the links that occur to you.

What, then, are we to think about these miracles in the light of those links?

What is God saying about himself? ... yes, he works miracles, but what more?
(eg how could this encourage the faithful believer starving in a present-day African famine ... do genuine Christians never starve to death?!)

How would this chapter have encouraged the first readers (ie those faithful to the Lord but now sitting far away from the Promised Land in exile)?

How should this chapter encourage us?

In what ways could this chapter help us to appreciate that our redemption is really, really wonderful?

Thinking it through

What is God doing in this chapter?

Why is God doing it?

How do we respond to God 'the overflowing fountain of all good'?

2 Kings 4:1-44



The bigger picture

Our approach to 2 Kings is to fit this 350-year history into the much bigger, **whole Bible story of God's salvation plan**. So the key to the books of 1 and 2 Kings are these two 'bookends':

- the promises God makes in 2 Samuel 7:4-17;
- Jesus, the King-for-ever, who fulfils those promises of 2 Samuel 7.

The stories of 2 Kings 4 come somewhere along this 'bookshelf'. We're not told about these miracles as proof that Elisha is a genuine prophet; Deut 18:21-22 has already given the test for that (which is why 4:17b, 44b is so significant). Instead, it's so that we know something about the Lord. Elisha's role, as 'covenant enforcement officer', is to bring God's word of direction, rebuke or encouragement, to call king and nation **back to the covenant Lord who saved them**. The message for the original exilic readers (and for us) is: the covenant Lord is the one who redeems, who provides everything for those who trust him, who brings new life, who can deliver his people even through death.

[NS]

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Application

Our 'Biblical theology' approach to 2 Kings means that, when it comes to application, we're not really looking to the kings or prophets for examples to follow. There may be times when they do the right or wrong thing, but this is not being told to us so that we copy them, or not. As in every bit of the Bible, we want to ask: what is God doing? why is he doing it? how do we respond?

- God is Israel's Lord: he knows everything, can do everything and is the one to whom we should turn (33) when in great distress (27). How often do I, like Israel, turn from him who is my One and Only Redeemer?
- Dale Ralph Davis (pp 53-84) suggests that the theme of these stories is God 'the overflowing fountain of all good' who pours blessing upon blessing on his people. Do we see miraculous feeding and new life/life-from-the-dead as tiny pictures of the more wonderful redemption we enjoy as Christians? What God has done for us really is wonderful ... astounding!
- As in all the stories of the prophets, God highlights the importance of listening to his powerful word. It's almost as if God binds himself to act according to whatever he speaks. Do I have that high regard for the Lord's word, and for the person who brings the Lord's word?

Structure of 2 Kings 4

Commentaries make the point that these stories are **not chronological**.

Rather, the chapter seems to be a **topical** compilation of miracle stories:

1-7 Elisha provides oil for the poor wife & sons of a son-of-the-prophets;

8-17 Elisha provides a son for a childless, wealthy God-fearer;

18-37 Elisha raises that same son back to life after his sudden death;

38-44 Elisha provides food for the sons-of-the-prophets

(maybe two stories 38-41; 42-44 [but who are the 'hundred men' 42?])

There are therefore two (or three) feeding miracles, surrounding a double-miracle about giving life/life-from-the-dead.

Other Bible links to 2 Kings 4

Even with the most modest Bible knowledge, the stories in this chapter are reminiscent of other stories in the Bible. For example ...

Elijah

We know that the Lord answered Elisha's request to have 'a double portion' of Elijah's spirit: now 'the Spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha' (2:9, 15). So perhaps it shouldn't surprise us to see Elisha doing miracles very like Elijah: he also provided oil and flour for a poor widow in need (1 Kings 17:8-16) and raised a widow's son (1 Kgs 17:17-24; in particular, compare 1 Kgs 17:19 and 2 Kgs 4:21, 33).

Jesus

The pair of feeding miracles in this chapter (1-7, 42-44) is reminiscent of the pair of feeding miracles in Jesus' ministry. But this connection is made stronger by some details in both stories: the presentation of the bread to the prophet, the prophet's order for the people to be fed, the reaction of the prophet's followers, the new order from the prophet, and the note about the leftovers (compare Luke 9:13-17 and 2 Kgs 4:42-44). There are also two specific verbal links to the John 6 version: the word translated 'boy' (Jn 6:9) is used only there in the NT and here (38, 41) of Elisha's servant, and secondly the mention of 'barley'.

Similarly, the raising of the dead by Elijah/Elisha is similar to the raising of the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7:11-17), a town which is only a few miles away, just around the hill from Shunem, and also of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43).

Jesus' apostles

Note the raising of Tabitha (Acts 9:32-43) and Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12).

This may seem unsurprising because we have an impression that such miracles are common in the Bible. But actually, they're not! In the OT, only three people are raised from the dead (and all 3 are raised by Elijah/Elisha): the widow's son (1 Kgs 17:17-24), the boy here (4:32-37) and the strange story of 2 Kgs 13:21.

Feeding with manna

There are links in 38-43 back to Israel's desert wanderings: in two consecutive stories, deadly water was healed (Exodus 15:22-27) and the Lord provided daily bread for his people (Exod 16:1-36). The provision of food was to give an ongoing reminder that the Lord had redeemed his people (Exod 16:32).

So let's now put the stories of this chapter into a bigger context of the **whole Bible story of God's salvation plan**.

About 2/3 of the OT mentions of 'signs and wonders' refer to what God did at the Exodus. Any subsequent miracle is therefore highly charged, suggesting that this is a moment when God is doing something as important in saving history as he did in redeeming his people from Egypt. So we shouldn't be surprised that miracles re-occur in clusters around Elijah/Elisha, Jesus and the apostles.

'Hang on' you may say '... Jesus and the apostles I understand, but why Elijah and Elisha?' Elijah (and Elisha his successor [as 2 Kgs 2 makes clear]) is the archetypal OT prophet (cf Mal 4:5-6, fulfilled in John the Baptist [Matt 3:1-17; Luke 16:16; Mark 9:11, 13]). The prophet's job is to call the covenant people back to the covenant Lord who redeemed them (2 Kings 17:13ff). The miracles are like a 'follow-spotlight' to say 'this man's ministry is all about redemption'.

Notes

- 4-5 The secrecy theme in these stories suggests that the miracles are not 'for public consumption' (cf 14-15, 21, 33, 38a). Similarly, in Mark 4:35-5:43, although others benefit, it's only (some of) the disciples who see all four miracles. It's as if miracles are to strengthen those who are already the Lord's, rather than to convince the sceptical (cf Matt 16:4; Luke 16:31)
- 7 This is the first time Elisha is called *man of God* (a phrase used of him 29 times, more than of anyone else in the OT) meaning something like 'someone through whom the Lord uniquely speaks and acts'. Elijah assumes that a *man of God* will be vindicated by miracles (1 Kgs 1:10, 12).
- 16 The only other OT occurrence of *next year* is Gen 18:10, 14 where another son, significant for the continuance of the covenant people, is promised to a barren woman (as were all the patriarch's mothers, right up to Luke 1:7).
- 27 Elisha recognises his limited knowledge, and his limited power (29-31) ... and so knows to turn to his Lord, in prayer (33). However great the Christian leader we admire, he's not the Lord!
- 28 Now the woman in her *bitter distress* has needs (cf 13b): all is not well.
- 8-37 There is an historical footnote when this woman reappears in 8:1-6: she clearly continued to follow the prophet's word, and was much blessed!
- 38 The significance of *famine* is that it is covenant 'curse' for the people (Lev 26:20, 26; Dt 28:38-40, 53-57; Amos 4:6). But the verb *to eat* comes eight times in 38-44, for this powerful Lord enables eating at the time of famine. What a foretaste (literally!) of Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25.
- 42 In the Law, *first-fruits* are given to priests (Num 18:13; Dt 18:4-5); giving them to Elisha is recognising that he is God's one true representative.
- 43 Don't miss *for thus says the Lord*. According to Dt 8:2-3, God feeds miraculously so that we know how much we need the Lord's word. Of course, the Lord's word is brought by the prophet: so Israel, will you listen?