

## **Elisha And The Shunammite Woman, Part I: Reviving God's Children**

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The Old Testament contains scores of historical events, mostly from the lives of Israelites, many of whom struggled to learn and live God's way amidst a contrary culture, much as people in the church must do today. God purposely includes these "stories" in His Word to give us object lessons, hope and instruction during our own struggles (Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11). We can look at a vignette in the life of Jacob or David or Ezra, and come away with important principles to guide us in analogous situations.

Some of these historical events, though real, have the "feel" of parables. Parables are fictitious stories designed to reveal (and paradoxically, to conceal; Matthew 13:10-17) a truth or principle through symbols and actions. For instance, Jesus often speaks in parables to help His disciples understand important spiritual points, as in the Parable of the Sower, where He illustrates the various ways that people react to His Word (verses 1-9, 18-23).

In some instances, God tells one of His servants to take certain actions that are prophetic in nature. For example, God instructs Jeremiah to take a sash, wear it for a while, then bury it in a hole in a rock by the Euphrates River (Jeremiah 13:1-11). As the text explains, the sash symbolizes Israel and Judah, and Jeremiah's actions with it parallel their deteriorating relationship with God. In the book bearing his name, Ezekiel also endures many of these prophetic exercises.

Others of God's prophets are never instructed to do such things, but some of the situations they experience leave this impression. This is certainly true of the events of the Exodus, as Paul brings out in I Corinthians 10:1-10. Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac (Hebrews 11:17-19), the births of Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:10-13), Elijah's complaint at Mount Sinai (Romans 11:1-5) and many other Old Testament events also have spiritual significance beyond their immediate historical value. The apostle points out these events as having personal meaning to us and our salvation.

Besides those scenes that Paul specifically mentions, we can draw parallels from many other biblical events to our circumstances today. Some of them are obvious, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego's refusal to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's idol (Daniel 3). Others, however, are more subtle, requiring knowledge and understanding of both the ancient and modern situations for complete comprehension. One of these more subtle events is found in II Kings 4:8-37, the story of Elisha and the Shunammite Woman.

### **The Cast of Characters**

Integral to understanding this event in Elisha's life are the various characters involved, as well as the scene of the action. The story takes place in the territory of Issachar in northern Israel. Shunem overlooks the fertile Plain of Esdraelon (Jezreel) toward Mount Carmel more than 15 miles distant where the prophet has a home. It is just a few miles from the towns of Jezreel to the south, En-Dor to the east and Megiddo to the west.

This episode occurs during the reign of Jehoram (or Joram), second son of Ahab and Jezebel, roughly 850 BC. From all indications, Jehoram gave lip service to God, allowing Elisha freedom to preach and travel, while granting similar freedom to pagan religions. As the writer of II Kings explains, "And he did evil in the sight of the LORD, but not like his father and mother. . . . Nevertheless he persisted in the sins of Jeroboam" (II Kings 3:2-3).

The story unfolds among four principal characters: Elisha, God's prophet; Gehazi, his assistant; the Shunammite woman, a wealthy and pious woman; and her young son, miraculously born. The interaction of these four people, each with his or her modern-day counterparts, constructs an intriguing parable with pointed lessons for Christians today.

The prophet Elisha is God's servant, Elijah's successor, upon whom God's Spirit rests and by whom God does great miracles. He is a man of God, presented very positively in the biblical record; it is difficult to find a negative description of him or his actions. He represents all of God's true ministers.

Gehazi, on the other hand, stands for the hirelings (John 10:12-13; Zechariah 11:16-17), who set themselves up as ministers of God yet care only for themselves and their wellbeing. This man's greed rises to the surface in the next chapter, when he takes Naaman's money and gifts after Elisha refuses to take them as payment for the Syrian commander's healing (II Kings 5:20-27). For this, God struck Gehazi and his descendants with Naaman's leprosy.

The Shunammite woman is described as "notable" (II Kings 4:8), a Hebrew word that can connote wealth, piety, renown or elements of each. In the text, however, her piety predominates, as she sets aside a room for Elisha and cares for him whenever he comes to Shunem (verses 9-10). Evidently, she keeps the Sabbaths fastidiously, and her husband shrugs off her visiting Elisha on a normal day (verses 22-24). She is a type of the church as a whole (see Galatians 4:21-31; Revelation 12:1-2; 19:7-8).

Her offspring, a boy, is born as the result of an Abraham-and-Sarah-like miracle (II Kings 4:14-17). Other than that he seems to get along well with his father and mother—something read between the lines—the Bible tells us very little else about this child. To use a literary term, he is Everyman, and as the child of the type of the church, he represents the individual Christian.

Interestingly, the boy's father is an incidental character; he is involved but only in the background. Normally, we might think he represents God the Father, but this conclusion makes no sense in this case. The boy's father plays his bit part because he existed in the historical reality. Parables do not demand that each detail have an exact antitype, for as we all know, all analogies break down if taken too far.

### **Death by Exposure**

The main story begins in verse 18 with the child going out to the field to visit his father among the reapers. Suddenly, he cries out, "My head! My head!" (verse 19). His father, seeing the seriousness of the situation, instructs his servant to carry the child to his mother, but after a few hours sleeping on her lap, the little boy dies (verse 20; the Septuagint translates this as "he *slept* on her knees").

Though the details are scanty, most commentators suppose the child falls victim to sunstroke, a heatstroke caused by direct exposure to the sun. Out in a field of grain, the boy must not have had any protection from the intense rays of the Mediterranean sun. Being a child, he succumbs quickly, feeling the first symptom as a massive headache before fainting.

Spiritually, this diagnosis makes sense. Paul writes in Ephesians 6:16 that a Christian can stand firm in God's way if he is properly equipped, "above all, taking the shield of faith with which [he] will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one." Satan throws multiple distractions, trials and ideas at God's children, and without the strength of faith, these can quickly and easily engulf us and make our heads spin. Without protection, their intensity could take our eternal life!

The Bible frequently speaks of spiritual lethargy and apostasy in terms of disease. He says of Judah, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores" (Isaiah 1:5-6). David writes, "There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor is there any health in my bones because of my sin" (Psalm 38:3). Jesus uses this metaphor as well: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Mark 2:17). Most telling is Christ's instruction to the spiritually blind Laodicean church to "anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see" (Revelation 3:18).

Applying this biblical metaphor to the events of II Kings 4, the boy, representing the individual Christian, falls prey to prolonged exposure to Satan's world. Since the tender, inexperienced child is unprepared for the onslaught of such a powerful and intense foe, the Devil easily overcomes his resistance, and his mother can only watch her child die in her arms. How many of our former brethren have we helplessly watched "die" in the arms of the church in recent years?

### **Looking for Help**

Although she is aware that her child is dead, the Shunammite woman does a strange thing. Rather than weeping or grieving in any way, she quietly takes the boy's body up to Elisha's room, lays him on the bed, shuts the door behind her and goes out to her husband. She shouts to him from a distance, "Send me one of the servants and a donkey. I want to go see the man of God" (verses 21-22). Oddly, the father does not inquire about his only child's health. He simply asks her why she wants to do such a thing, since it is just an ordinary day. She replies, also rather curiously, "Peace" (verse 23).

Whatever her frame of mind, she obviously does not accept her child's death—in fact, she does not even tell anyone that he has died! She puts him in a room that would probably not be disturbed, for superstitious fear of the prophet, and closes the door. In effect, she hides his condition from everyone else, even from her husband—even from herself, to some extent!

She formulates a plan to confront Elisha about this matter, for he was the one who had miraculously given her child to her in the first place (see verse 28). God's servant had made her son possible and had given her a few good years of his life, but now he was to be taken away? It did not make sense, and who better to make some sense of it than Elisha the prophet? Maybe she even thought, "If he can miraculously help me give life to my son, maybe he can miraculously return his life to him." However, the biblical account does not indicate that she ever asked this of Elisha.

Her curious reply to her husband is more of an evasion than an answer. Hebrews often responded to an inquiry about their health with *shalom*, meaning "all is well," thus the rendering in most versions. However, the *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* on this verse suggests another understanding: "For this word . . . is apparently also used, as Clericus has correctly observed, when the object is to avoid giving a definite answer to any one, and yet at the same time to satisfy him" (vol. 3, p. 311). We can infer from her terse *shalom* that she either does not want to explain her actions or cannot reasonably explain them. In her suppressed grief, disbelief and confusion, she avoids even attempting to clarify matters.

Her only thought is, "I've got to get to Elisha. He'll know what to do." She mounts the donkey and commands the servant, "Drive, and go forward; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you" (verse 24). She wants answers and fast, thinking that God's minister will be able to give them to her. She drives the poor servant—most likely running beside the donkey and goading it with a stick—to keep up a brisk pace over the entire 15-plus-mile journey to Mount Carmel.

Single-minded as she is, her determined course is the proper reaction. In times of trouble, especially during spiritual drowsiness or famine, God says through Amos, "Seek Me and live; but do not seek [counterfeits]. Seek the Lord and live" (Amos 5:4-6; see 8:11-12). In a similar vein, Isaiah writes:

Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

God says in Malachi 2:7, "For the lips of a priest [a minister of God] should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." Jeremiah 18:18 shows that the prophets functioned similarly, and II Timothy 2:24-26 gives New Testament verification that the ministry of the church should as well.

However, when she arrives at Mount Carmel, she must first suffer Gehazi's incompetence before Elisha provides the solution—and not an easy one at that.