

Elisha And The Shunammite Woman, Part II: Serving God's Children

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II Kings 4 contains four miracles the prophet Elisha performed during the reign of the Israelite king Jehoram (c. 850 BC). Each of these four miracles—multiplying the widow's oil (II Kings 4:1-7), raising the Shunammite's son (II Kings 4:8-37), purifying the pot of stew (II Kings 4:38-41) and feeding a hundred men (II Kings 4:42-44)—applies in principle to the state of God's church today. However, the bulk of the chapter—more than twice the number of verses given to the other three miracles combined—relates the parable-like story of the resurrection of the "notable" woman's son.

This should draw attention to its lesson. It is important enough to God to devote thirty verses in His concise Word "for our learning" (Romans 15:4) and "for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:11). God feels so strongly about this admonition that He includes it in addition to a similar miracle Elijah performed several years earlier (I Kings 17:17-24).

What is this important message for the end-time church? It is a lesson aimed at the antitypes of all four main characters of this story: God's true ministers (Elisha), false ministers (Gehazi), the church in general (the Shunammite woman) and the individual member (the son). In other words, there is a lesson in it for all of us.

The False Minister

Once the Shunammite woman perceives that her son has died, she lays him on Elisha's bed in his room at her house and hastens toward Mount Carmel where the prophet lives (II Kings 4:21-25). Time being of the essence, she travels the 15-plus miles as fast as her donkey can carry her. After several hours of uncomfortable riding, she nears Elisha's house.

Seemingly ever-vigilant, the prophet notices her approaching and politely asks Gehazi, his servant, to meet her and inquire after her and her family members' wellbeing. The woman brushes Gehazi aside with the same evasive "*shalom*" that she had answered her husband's questions with earlier (verse 26). To her, her son's death is a matter the man of God himself must deal with, not anyone less. Subsequent events prove her right in this.

As she clutches Elisha's feet, a posture of abject humility, grief and supplication, Gehazi attempts to push her away from the prophet. Elisha sternly rebukes him for not noticing her distress and accommodating her in her sorrow (verse 27). The servant is not perceptive enough to see her heartfelt anguish—all he sees is another demanding supplicant to be dealt with, to be put in her rightful place before the great prophet.

Who is this Gehazi? The Bible describes him consistently and solely as Elisha's servant, shedding very little light on his background or position. In his *All the Men of the Bible*, Herbert Lockyer speculates that he "likely stood in the same relationship to Elisha as Elisha had done to Elijah" (p. 124). This would make him the prophet's probable successor as well as his assistant. If this is so, it makes him, as the type of a false minister, that much more significant and sinister.

Scripture records very little that is good about Gehazi. He heeds Elisha's commands well enough, but the sense of his basic unbelief and impure motives that hovers between the lines is real. He appears in three scenes, and only in one of them does he do anything of even moderate merit (II Kings 8:1-6). The second scene in II Kings 5:20-27 exposes his greed for money and the power it brings, and God through Elisha curses him and his descendants with leprosy, a hideous form of excommunication.

The third scene appears here in II Kings 4, bringing out his inconsiderate attitude and spiritual impotence. It shows him living intimately with the righteous example of Elisha but never instilling it into his own character. He is a servant who never learns how to care for those he serves. He is a man with great potential for growth in God's way and service who instead seeks material wealth and position in society. In the end he receives the "reward" of a false minister.

Gehazi's spiritual inadequacy comes out when Elisha sends him ahead to try to heal the dead child (verses 29-31). The text does not mention him praying for the child's healing, and even using the prophet's staff does him no good. The terse narrative suggests that, once Gehazi sees no change in the boy's condition, he says, "Oh, well!" and reports his unsuccessful attempt to Elisha and the grieving mother. "Try, try again" is not in his spiritual vocabulary (see Luke 18:1-8)!

This should give us some general clues about false ministers, tares among the wheat in God's service. Many are avaricious; they see "serving" God's people as a means to a profitable end. Many are inconsiderate; their "ministry" is more about them and their desires than the true needs of the flock. Many are spiritually weak, "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (II Timothy 3:8); they merely go through the motions of godly works. The apostles Peter and Jude expound on other elements of false ministers in their books (II Peter 2; Jude 5-19).

The Child's State of Death

The biblical writer uses an interesting clause to relate the child's continued state of death: "there was neither voice nor hearing" (II Kings 4:31). Today, we would say, "There was neither pulse nor breathing," but the Hebrew author highlights speaking and hearing as signs of life. Why?

Obviously, the Israelites knew that "the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Leviticus 17:11; see Genesis 9:4), and that God "breathed into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). The writer of II Kings, then, is not giving medical or clinical proof of the child's death but commenting on the state of death. When someone is dead, they can no longer speak or hear; communication is impossible.

What makes this especially interesting is that God frequently speaks of spiritual enlightenment as "life" and spiritual darkness or degeneracy as "death." Speaking of the uncalled, Jesus tells a potential disciple, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22). He tells the church in Sardis, "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:1). Paul writes, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). In Ephesians 5:14, he says, "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

The child typifies the individual Christian. He is dead and can neither speak nor hear. What happens to the Christian who dies spiritually? No longer does he communicate God's way in any fashion—by deed or speech; he cannot "talk the talk" or "walk the walk"! Nor are his ears open and attentive to God's Word. As Jesus says in Matthew 13:15:

For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them.

A biblical euphemism for death is sleep. For instance, in I Corinthians 11:30, Paul explains that many had died for taking the Passover unworthily: "For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep." He uses this euphemism similarly in Acts 13:36: "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption" (see also Daniel 12:2; I Corinthians 15:20, 51; I Thessalonians 4:14).

Because the Bible connects death and sleep so closely, it also uses the metaphor of sleep for spiritual decline. The best known example of this is the Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13. The lesson is that we must stay spiritually alert, especially as Christ's return nears, but Jesus prophesies that *all* of God's people will fall asleep on their watch! On this point, Paul advises us:

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.
(Romans 13:11-12)

In II Kings 4:31, Gehazi reports to Elisha and the Shunammite woman, "The child has not awakened." Like the individual Christian at the end time, this child is "dead"—he "sleeps" because of overlong exposure to the "fiery darts of the wicked one" (Ephesians 6:16), from which he had no protection. His only hope of revival lies in the mercy and power of God and the faithfulness of His true minister.

The True Minister

When Elisha arrives at the Shunammite's home, the situation has not changed: The boy lies dead on the prophet's bed (II Kings 4:32). Even this fact is significant in that, though the boy is "with" the prophet and even has close contact with the prophet's possessions, it does him no good—he is still dead. How many Christians are in the church, hearing the truth every week, fellowshiping with God's people, yet remain asleep to their perilous spiritual condition?

Unlike Gehazi, Elisha throws himself into the work of reviving this child. First, he closes the door to his room, shutting everyone else out (verse 33). This kind of work is private, not public. Next, he invites God in through prayer. Elisha knows that he is only a vessel through whom God would work, so he immediately seeks the only true help for the situation. He understands that his relationship with God is the basis for any resuscitation of the boy.

These two points are appropriate spiritually as well. Awakening sleepy Christians is a private affair; it would be shameful and unloving to blare the individual church member's spiritual weakness to the world! What a horrible witness for God this would be! Paul excoriates the lawbreaking Romans: "For 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,' as it is written" (Romans 2:24). It is far better for the church to reduce its public exposure during its revival until it can again represent God properly. Once God is satisfied with the church's spiritual state, He will open doors to proclaim the gospel publicly again.

It is also true that spiritual revival rests on the relationship between God and His true ministers, for the latter are the individuals through whom He works to effect the waking up of others. The preachers drive the revival! If the ministry is not close to God, they will not preach the truth, and revival will never make much headway. However, if the ministry's relationship with God is solid and growing, God will inspire them to preach His Word powerfully, and "those who have ears to hear" will listen and respond.

Notice the effort Elisha makes to heal this child. He stretches himself out on the child, eye to eye, mouth to mouth, hand to hand (II Kings 4:34), picturing total identification between the prophet and the child: They see eye to eye, speak mouth to mouth, act hand in hand. This is a metaphor for unity in understanding, teaching and works. The ministry and the membership must be unified and work together to cause revival.

But this is still not enough. The flesh of the child warms up, but he is not yet truly alive, awake and active. He hovers, coma-like, between death and life. Seeing this, Elisha gathers himself and plunges back into his work (verse 35). His walking "back and forth in the house" describes his efforts to restore his warmth after giving all of his to the child. Spiritually, this equates to the ministry preparing themselves for even more intensive work as they "try, try again" to effect revival. A true minister, through all the setbacks and discouragements, never gives up the fight to bring God's people "back to life."

Therapeutic Sneezing

Elisha again stretches himself out on the child, and this time something happens: The child sneezes seven times and opens his eyes! What a strange way to resurrect the dead! Its very peculiarity demands a spiritual parallel, and indeed it has one.

No medical rationale sufficiently explains the boy's sneezing. One commentator writes that, because the child's illness centered in his head, the seven sneezes relieved the pressure that had caused his death. Wanting a rational explanation, other commentators insist the Septuagint, which lacks this clause about the child sneezing, is correct. Yet others declare that the word should be "breathed" and Elisha is the subject (for example, the Revised English Bible reads, ". . . he [Elisha] breathed into him seven times")! The last two "solutions" have very little textual support.

These rationalists fail to recognize that miracles are by nature irrational! The child's sneezes, therefore, are not as medically important as they are spiritually significant. God is more interested in our grasping the lesson in this "parable" than He is in explaining how He worked the boy's resurrection. The seven sneezes are the key to the entire story! They are spiritual therapy!

What is a sneeze? *Webster's Dictionary* defines it as "a sudden violent spasmodic audible expiration of breath through the nose and mouth especially as a reflex act." This last phrase shows that most sneezes occur as a reaction to an irritant of some sort: dust, dander, allergen, etc. The respiratory system convulses, and a 240-mph blast of air attempts to dislodge and expel the offending particle.

Does sneezing have a spiritual counterpart? Yes! The act of repentance is the part we play in clearing ourselves of irritants—sins—that enter our lives. Through repentance, we expel everything that is foreign to God's way of life. Notice Paul's description of repentance in II Corinthians 7:10-11:

For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted. . . . For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter.

In the analogy of reviving a body to life, sneezing is a perfect picture of the individual Christian's repentance!

Complete Repentance

One other detail remains: The child sneezed *seven* times. The number seven—used multiple times in the Bible—is notable for signifying completion, totality, perfection. The book of Revelation contains numerous groups of sevens: lampstands, stars, angels, churches, spirits, eyes, seals, trumpets, plagues, bowls, thunders, heads, crowns, mountains and kings. Solomon uses the number seven to show a complete list of things God hates (Proverbs 6:16-19). Sacrifices are often in groups of seven (Leviticus 23:18; I Chronicles 15:26). Scripture includes numerous other references to seven.

That the child sneezed seven times is an illustration of complete repentance. Just as Elisha's part takes his complete exertion, so must the child put his all into the cure. One or two sneezes are not enough to rid him completely of his illness; he must sneeze until it is completely gone. Then, completely restored to his former health, he can live a new life without fear of relapse. Back in the embrace of his mother, he can go out and be a witness of God's mercy and power (II Kings 4:36-37; 8:5).

The spiritual parallels are obvious. David cries out to God in his prayer of repentance:

Wash me *thoroughly* from my iniquity. . . . *Purge* me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. . . .
. . . *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to you. . . .
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart—these, O God,
You will not despise. Do good in Your good pleasure to Zion; build the walls of
Jerusalem. (Psalm 51:2, 7, 13, 17-18)

This is the kind of repentance God seeks from us now. The church has *not* been scattered because of righteousness! God's displeasure with our deplorable spiritual condition has resulted in His violent expulsion of *us* (Revelation 3:16; see Leviticus 26:33; Daniel 12:7; Amos 9:9-10). To return to His good graces—to revive God's church—we have to expel the sin from ourselves completely, totally, permanently, so we can be suitable representatives of Him before the world. Only then will we be fit to preach the gospel with any power to the world.

When that time will come, only God knows, and He will open the door to get it done. In the meantime, our job is to become clean by the grace of God, the blood of Christ and the scouring effect of sincere and deep repentance. Revelation, an end-time book, contains one-third of the Bible's occurrences of "repent" (New King James version), and this should convince us how important repentance is at this time. Christ tells the Laodiceans, "Therefore be zealous [earnest, eager] and repent" (Revelation 3:19).

This is the lesson of Elisha's resurrection of the Shunammite woman's son: God's true ministers and the members must work together to produce repentance, putting God's church back on the road to His Kingdom and eternal life!

