

The Work of the Word

As we work our way through the books of Kings, there are really two main groups of characters. Of course there are the kings of Israel and Judah, the clue for that one is in the name. But just as significant are the prophets, and in particular the two pioneering prophetic figures of Elijah, and now Elisha.

And obviously the two often overlap, as the prophets confront the wicked Kings, and the Kings seek to silence or even kill the faithful prophets. But in other cases, like this chapter, we simply hear of the ministry of the prophet. We're told 5 stories in this chapter about Elisha. And part of it, is to establish his credentials as a true prophet: when he speaks, things happen.

But even more than that, these stories cut right to the heart of what these two books are all about. For through the words and actions of the prophet, it is not only the credentials of the prophet that are established, but the credentials of God's word itself.

Through these stories, the writer of this book, is showing us not only what Elijah does, but what the Word of God does. He is showing the people of Israel, and he is showing us, that there is only one place they ought to turn for hope in the middle of despair, light in the midst of darkness, and life in the face of death.

This is the simple matter this chapter lays before us: look at what the Word of God does, and then respond rightly to what is revealed to you.

What does the Word do?

I think we could say three things about what God's word does throughout the chapter. Through the ministry and miracles of Elisha, we see that God's word:

1. Sets Free
2. Brings Life
3. And Abundantly satisfies

Sets Free

So in the first story, we see the *liberating power* of the Word, as it sets a widow free from her debts, and rescues her two young sons from slavery.

Now the whole scenario itself serves as an indictment on the state of affairs in Israel. God's Law made outlined the way God's people were to show particular concern for widows and the fatherless. But here, instead of gracious provision, this widow is soon to have her sons taken to be slaves. She has nothing but a single jar of olive oil to her name, no righteous king who will plead her case, and it would seem on the face of it, no hope of escape.

No hope except the prophet Elisha. And so in reality she has great hope. Last week I was on the Naremburn youth summer camp and one of the questions they often asked during little interviews was: "If you could have a container of something that never runs out what would it be?"

Well through the word of the prophet, this woman's single jar of olive oil miraculously never runs out until it has filled a whole town's worth of jars. There is such an abundance of oil that she is able to sell it all and pay off all that she owes. She is released from her debts and her sons are set free. This family has no one on their side except the prophet, and that turns out to be all they need. Because the prophet speaks *God's words*, the God who describes himself in Psalm 68 as Father to the fatherless, and protector of widows. And so God's Word brings justice and liberation.

Brings Life

In the second story, we see the *life-giving power* of God's word, as it brings life even from death.

This second story concerns Elisha's dealings with an unnamed woman from the town of Shunem. And we hear of two events that are separated by several years, but in both cases, Elisha the prophet speaks life into the most unlikely of situations.

In the first instance, Elisha sends his helper Gehazi to see if there is some way he can help the Shunammite woman in response to the generous hospitality that she has showed to him. Unlike the woman from the previous account, this woman is secure, she lives among her people and obviously is wealthy enough to have a spare room in her house! But she does not have a child, and both her and her husband are very old.

Yet, against all hope, the prophet speaks and a year later she has a son. What's so beautiful about this I think, is not just the sheer power of Elisha, but his eagerness to serve the woman who has served him, and his generosity to give her something that she thinks is far too good to be true. Elisha speaks the words of the God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine.

Then, we are transported years into the future and tragically, her son – now a boy – becomes ill, and quickly dies. But even in the face of death, there is life and hope to be found in the ministry of Elisha. And just as he brought life to the woman's barren womb, he now brings life to the son's dead body. It's all a bit weird with the whole lying face to face sneezing scenario, but again the power of the Word of God through the prophet of God is unmistakable.

If you were to summarise these events you could do much worse than Romans 4:17. The Shunammite woman, like her forefather Abraham, put her trust in the "God who *gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.*" This is what the word of God does, it brings life: new life, and even resurrection life.

Abundantly Satisfies

And then finally, the rest of the chapter shows us that the *liberating* and *life-giving* Word of God is also the *nourishing* Word that abundantly satisfies his people.

We're told of two potluck dinners shared amongst the company of faithful prophets that had banded around Elijah and now Elisha. And on each occasion there is a classic potluck faux pas.

The first time, one of the prophets has made something completely unpalatable, perhaps even poisonous. The review, "there is death in this pot" is hardly flattering is it!

The second time, one of the prophets brings some bread, but clearly not enough to feed everyone who is present. A few loaves among hundred men is simply not going to cut it. No wonder the man is a little embarrassed when Elisha asks him to hand it around.

But in each case, Elisha takes the inedible and the insufficient and provides a satisfying abundance. Again we see that the prophet, either through his actions, or by his words, possesses a peculiar power. And here, like the rest of the chapter, that power is directed towards the help of those who humbly seek it out.

And the writer wants us to be clear exactly where Elisha's power comes from. In the final verse of the chapter that the words of the prophet are equated with the very words of God. We read in verse 44:

*Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the **Lord**.*

Elisha does what God's word has *always done*. In creation God spoke and brought life from nothing. His Word set his people free from slavery in Egypt. By His Word he provided miraculously for his people in the wilderness. Elisha's words set free, they give life, and they abundantly satisfy, because as God's prophet, he speaks the liberating, life-giving and satisfying word of God.

And it's in this last short account, of course, that the little Jesus bells start going off in our head isn't it? This generous feeding of a hungry crowd, with plenty of leftovers casts our minds forward to the Jesus' feeding of the crowds. But it's not only this story, but in the gospels we also see Jesus bringing life to young children. He revives a widow's son in Luke 7, and he raises Jairus' daughter in Matthew 9. He miraculously produces an abundance of good wine from a few jars of water. All throughout Jesus' ministry he is in the business of liberating captives, rescuing people from oppression to demons time and time again.

We don't normally speak in this way, but particularly in Luke's gospel and in John's gospel, Jesus is pictured as the great *capital P Prophet*, who not only spoke the very words of God, but was the Word of God in the flesh. The ministry Elisha, who is called the *man of God* 10 times throughout this chapter, points us to the ministry of the God-man, Jesus Christ. And so even more than noticing the similarities between Elisha and Jesus's ministry we must notice that *differences*.

For Jesus doesn't feed 100 men, but many *thousands*. Jesus doesn't do a weird version of CPR to bring life to the dead, he simply *issues a word* and the dead are raised. And Jesus doesn't provide an overflow of oil to bring release from a financial debt. Instead he provides an overflow of love and grace and mercy and truth that brings release from the spiritual debt that we all bear because of our own sin.

Jesus *offered* his own body as the ransom price to release us from sin; He *stretched* himself out on the cross for us so that we might share in his resurrection life, he *gave* his body and blood as the spiritual bread and wine that feeds us and nourishes us both for this life, and for the life to come.

Elisha is a remarkable prophet, and this chapter establishes his legitimate credentials as someone through whom the Word of God is at work. But he is only a prophet, and he points us forward to Jesus. Jesus who is a remarkable Saviour, the very Word of God in the flesh, who speaks God's final and full word of liberation and life and satisfaction. As we read in Hebrews 1:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

What ought we to do?

And wonderfully, each of *us* has free and ready access to the Word of God in the written words of the Bible. Like Elisha, this book that we have bears witness to Jesus, pointing us to the Word who became flesh, lived, and died and who is seated at God's right hand. This word too, if we will listen, is able to make us wise for salvation in Christ, setting us free, giving us life, and nourishing us abundantly for life now and for eternity.

So then, given what God's word does, what ought we to do? Well I think the various responses and reactions to Elisha, God's prophet in this chapter point us in the direction of how we ought to relate to God's Word, as we hear it today through the Scriptures which testify to Christ.

1. Seek it
2. Welcome it
3. Wrestle with it
4. Trust it

Seek

So first, we must seek the word. It is striking I think the way that the two women who we meet in this story are so quick to seek out the prophet in their need. The Shunammite woman in particular goes to great lengths to meet with Elisha after the death of her son, and refuses to go back without him.

These women are earnest seekers of the Word of God, and as their stories show, their hope is not misplaced.

And I was wondering this week whether part of my problem when I fail to seek after God's Word in the way these women do, is that I fail to see how much I *really need* it. The earnest seeking of the women in this passage is surely borne out of their urgent and desperate need. They know they have nowhere else to turn. Where else could they go, except to Elisha?

If we are to be earnest seekers of God's word, we need to have that same realisation that Jesus' disciples had: "Where else have we to go, for you alone have the words of eternal life?" We must understand that we really don't have anywhere else to turn. We constantly need to find freedom from some sin or temptation, we always need to be nourished and fed for godliness, we always need the life of the Spirit to be at work in us as we seek to live for Jesus in the world.

In the world around us, we are constantly told to be self-sufficient, to deal with things ourselves. Try telling that to the women in this passage.

It's so easy to seek the Word on a Sunday, and then distractedly seek after all sorts of other things throughout the week. That's kind of what the Shunammite woman's husband said isn't it? *What are you going to see the prophet for*, he asks, *it's not a Sabbath!* But she was having none of it.

She saw her need, and she desperately sought the Word of God through the prophet. Let us, too, seek after the Word of God.

Welcome

Secondly, we ought to *welcome* the Word. As we see all throughout 2 Kings, there are many responses to God's word, the powerful King's of Israel show everything from anger and hostility, to indifference and suspicion. But again, the Shunammite woman is a far better example for us to follow. For the way she clears out a room in her house for Elisha is such a beautiful little picture of the attitude we all ought to have towards God's word. She is not angry and hostile when God's Word comes to town, but generously hospitable, welcoming the prophet into her home.

And so we too ought to make room in our hearts. Declutter all the trivial distractions, throw out all the sin that so easily entangles, drive out the idols that compete for our attention and affection. So that as God's word comes to us, we are ready to invite it in, to live with it, and to let it shape all we do and say.

I recently heard this little prayer from John Piper, which I think is a fantastic thing to pray to encourage a hospitable and welcoming posture to God's word:

- Incline my heart to you, not to prideful gain or any false motive. (Psalm 119:36)
- Open my eyes to behold wonderful things in your Word. (Psalm 119:18)
- Unite my will, that I may desire what you desire. (Psalm 86:11)
- Satisfy me with your steadfast love. (Psalm 90:14)

Let us not be like Israel's proud and arrogant kings, let us humbly honour the Word of God and, like the Shunammite woman, welcome it into our hearts.

Wrestle

But thirdly, let us also wrestle with the Word. Now I am not talking about prideful skepticism or cynicism, where we set ourselves over the Scriptures as their judge. But I am talking about the sort of honesty that we see in the attitude of the Shunammite woman.

After her son has died she runs to Elisha and she says defiantly in verse 28, "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?"..."Didn't I tell you, 'don't raise my hopes?" She pours her heart out to Elisha, making sure he understands the pain he has caused her by bringing her son into the world, only now for him to die as a boy.

Even when Elisha gives instructions for his servant to take the staff, she simply will not settle for anything less than the presence of the prophet himself. She honestly confronts the prophet with her grief, while at the same time wholly depending on the prophet as her hope in the midst of grief.

As we come to God's word, we ought not to leave the troubles and the trials *behind us*, as if God is not concerned with them. Rather we are to *bring* all of our pain, with the same raw honesty of the Shunammite woman. For it is when we bring our poverty before the Lord that he is able to provide for us. When we acknowledge our insufficiency, he will fill us up. When we recognise our weakness, then he will provide the strength we need. Cast all your anxieties on the Lord, we are told, because he *cares for us*.

Trust

And so then, finally, let us be people who trust God's word.

Now I bet the poor widow looked pretty silly collecting empty jars from her neighbours when the creditors were soon to be calling.

The Shunammite woman's husband thought she was crazy to ride for a couple of days on a donkey when her son had just died.

The man handing out a few loaves of bread to a hundred men must have felt at first like a bit of a fool.

But, however firm, or feeble and faltering their faith may have been, they had put their trust in the powerful Word of God which came to them through the prophet Elisha, and so in the end they received freedom, and life, and a satisfying meal. They were liberated, nourished, and amazed by the resurrection power of God's word, because they had put their trust in the right place.

Increasingly, our trust in the Word of God, and in the gospel of Christ is seen as a little strange.

A life of forgiveness, mercy, meekness, generosity and self-sacrifice is out of sync with a world of endless consumption, power-plays, and self-seeking.

Christian sexual ethics look to our neighbours as a little bit outdated, irrelevant, or even dangerous.

And staking our whole lives on a crucified criminal, and the claim that he was raised from the dead and rules the world, has always been foolishness to some, and a stumbling block to others.

But for us, who are being saved, it is the wisdom and power of God. In Christ, through his Word, and by the power of the Spirit, God has abundantly blessed us. He has set us free from sin, he has given us new life, he feeds us and nourishes us, he strengthens us to live for him, and abundantly satisfies us with Christ himself and all the blessings of the gospel. This is what the Word of God does: we see it here in 2 Kings 4, we see it in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, and all of us will have experienced it in our own lives. If we put our trust in God's word, he will never put us to shame, he will never let us down, he will *always* come through.

We may be tempted to put our trust in many things or people in the world around you. We may be tempted, as we're constantly told today, to put our trust in ourselves. But today, we are reminded to seek God's word, to welcome it, to wrestle with it, and ultimately to place our trust in it. For as another prophet, the prophet Isaiah declares,

*"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."*