

Introduction: This Reformation Day, we simply cannot be given too many reminders of God's mercy toward us in our worst and most needy times. Do you have profound needs which seem to contradict your assurance that God will in fact take care of you, come what may? Are you on the edge of despair, like the widows to whom Elijah and Elisha ministered? How can the LORD apply the amazing deeds by which He helped these women so that *you* are persuaded afresh that He cares for you too? Let's focus on these women in 1, 2 Kings, to see how amazingly God provides for the lowliest and most forgotten elements of society and of His church.

Monday: read 1 Kings 17:1-22. These notes on the widows of Elijah's and Elisha's day were originally given to you on May 15th of this year, but merit further reflection. May God greatly increase our confidence to "wait upon Him" - no matter what is happening in our lives as we look afresh at their stories.

Consider first the widow of Zarephath, to whom Elijah is sent in 1 Kings 17, who has only enough firewood, oil and flour to cook one last meal before she and her son die. That is her hopeless situation in 1 Kings 17:12. Yet, by the power of God, that small amount is miraculously enough for the widow to provide for herself, her son (and even Elijah) for as long as the famine lasts (1 Kings 17:14).

Meditate and Pray: Do you believe in God's ability to "provide a table for you in the presence of your enemies?" Do you believe He can rescue your life from the jaws of despair when you run out of all options for self-preservation? This is how the LORD our God works – He delights to lay bare His saving arm when all other help vanishes! He often waits until the 11th hour and then snatches victory for us from the jaws of defeat. As the hymn writer John Newton says, in a great hymn on how the LORD unexpectedly provides at just the moment when our faith and hopes burn low:

*Begone unbelief,
My Savior is near,
And for my relief
Will surely appear:
By prayer let me wrestle,
And He wilt perform,
With Christ in the vessel,
I smile at the storm.*

*His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink;
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review,
Confirms His good pleasure
To help me quite through.*

*Though dark be my way,
Since He is my guide,
'Tis mine to obey,
'Tis His to provide;
Though cisterns be broken,
And creatures all fail,
The Word He has spoken
Shall surely prevail.*

*Determined to save,
He watched o'er my path,
When Satan's blind slave,
I sported with death;
And can He have taught me
To trust in His name,
And thus far have brought me,
To put me to shame?*

*Why should I complain
Of want or distress,
Temptation or pain?
He told me no less:
The heirs of salvation,
I know from His Word,
Through much tribulation
Must follow their Lord.*

*How bitter that cup,
No heart can conceive,
Which He drank quite up,
That sinners might live!
His way was much rougher,
And darker than mine;
Did Jesus thus suffer,
And shall I repine?*

*Since all that I meet
Shall work for my good,
The bitter is sweet,
The medicine is food;
Though painful at present,
Wilt cease before long,
And then, O! how pleasant,
The conqueror's song!*

Tues/Weds: read 2 Kings 4:1-7. It is striking to see the confidence of Elijah in the face of every enemy, even death itself. He declares drought against Israel and king Ahab (1 Kings 17:1); provision for the widow and her son facing starvation (1 Kings 17:13-14); and by the mighty prayer of faith, sees the widow's son raised (1 Kings 17:22). But we may wonder, did Elisha have the same confidence in the LORD? Let's look now at 2 Kings 4 for an answer.

In a similar situation of desperate need (2 Kings 4:1-7), the widow cries out for help to Elisha, fearing the impending enslavement of her children. Elisha says in response, "What shall I do for you?" What Elisha seems to be saying is that in himself he has no ability to help. Like Isaac's despair in being unable to give his oldest son a blessing (Gen 27:37), Elisha speaks out of a sense of real human weakness before problems that appear to be too big for a solution!

The point is that Elisha appears initially to be at a loss – just as we also often face such despair! We simply don't know what to do! We don't know what to say. We don't know what words to offer in response to someone who comes to us with a gaping need! We lack the funds, the strength or the wisdom! "Oh, LORD, we believe you can do something," we may say, ... "but we surely don't know what!"

In just this way, Elisha's doubt continues. He does not know what is at hand *as a God-ordained means* for helping this desperate widow, so he says, "What do you have in your house?" Well now – look at the widow's reply in 2 Kings 4:2: She emphatically responds that she has, "nothing in her home at all."

The scene is so bleak. The woman is a widow; her sons are soon to be taken and there is nothing in the house except one very small bottle of olive oil for anointing one's face, a common health or cosmetic practice in the ancient east. She sees her life as completely empty! And in his own estimate, Elisha recognizes that he *himself cannot humanly help her*. Her plight is beyond any *normal expectation of human aid*.

Meditate and Pray: Learn this lesson even from this story of bleak hope: where mere human wisdom or effort cannot help, God alone is able to care for us in a world given over to judgment, destruction, suffering and injustice. In the face of all our sin and misery in Adam, we sing in hymn # 57 in our red Trinity hymnals:

*1 Hallelujah, praise Jehovah,
O my soul, Jehovah praise;
I will sing the glorious praises
of my God through all my days.
**Put no confidence in princes,
nor for help on man depend;
he shall die, to dust returning,
and his purposes shall end.***

*3 Food he daily gives the hungry,
Sets the mourning prisoner free,
raises those bowed down with anguish,
makes the sightless eye to see.
Well Jehovah loves the righteous,
and the stranger he befriends,
helps the fatherless and widow,
judgment on the wicked sends.*

*2 Happy is the man that chooses
Israel's God to be his aid;
he is blessed whose hope of blessing
on the Lord his God is stayed.
Heav'n and earth the Lord created,
seas and all that they contain;
he delivers from oppression,
righteousness he will maintain.*

*4 Hallelujah, praise Jehovah,
O my soul, Jehovah praise;
I will sing the glorious praises
of my God through all my days.
Over all God reigns forever,
through all ages he is King;
unto him, your God, O Zion,
joyful hallelujahs sing.*

Thurs/Fri: read 2 Kings 4:2-7. In answer to the empty hopes and lack of provision gripping this despairing widow and her family, God brings abundance. What a shock it must have been for the widow when the prophet said to her, “Gather as many empty vessels as you can from your neighbors!” Listen to how one scholar, Yael Shemesh, describes the initial doubts running through this panicked woman’s mind, followed by the prophet’s promise:

How can the widow be saved by *empty* vessels which seem to be part and parcel of the sad picture of her empty house? But when Elisha goes on, “pour oil into all the vessels, removing the *full* ones” ((2 Kings 4:4), the mystery is solved. The story is raised to the level of the miraculous and the height of fullness! The prophet is telling the widow that a miracle will enable her to pour oil from the one small jug she has and fill an unlimited number of vessels...

Meditate and Pray: What a reassuring and enduring lesson of God’s superabundant power to “provide more than we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20-21). For the rest of history, this poor widow threatened by debt and slavery, will become a symbol of super-abundance! As Elisha promises in 2 Kings 4:7, the widow and her sons, after selling enough of this miraculous oil to pay off all their debts, are able to, “live on what is left.” Though this story started ominously, it ends with Elisha’s words, “Now you and your sons will *live* on the rest of God’s provision.”

Incidentally, the same theme of abundant provision concludes this chapter of miracles performed by Elisha. In 2 Kings 4:42-44, the loaves offered to Elisha as a “first fruits offering”, are generously and miraculously shared with one hundred poor and starving disciples – so that they eat to the full and have some left over as well. Sing about God’s abundant provision, using hymn # 689:

*1 Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in ev'ry change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul: your best, your heav'nly
Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*2 Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
to guide the future as he has the past.
Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know
his voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.*

*3 Be still, my soul: when dearest friends depart,
and all is darkened in the vale of tears,
then shall you better know his love, his heart,
who comes to soothe your sorrow and your
fears. Be still, my soul: your Jesus can repay
from his own fullness all he takes away.*

*4 Be still, my soul: the hour is hast'ning on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still, my soul: when change and tears are
past, all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*

Sat/Sun: read 2 Kings 4:42-44 and 2 Kings 3:16-20. Notice how Scripture in 2 Kings 3 and 4 emphasizes the LORD's ability to fill our needy lives "up to the brim" with His unlooked for help. In 2 Kings 3, God sends abundant water into the middle of the desert of Edom so that Israel's army does not perish from thirst (2 Kings 3:17). Moreover, because the place of this miracle is the most unlikely of settings in which to find water – the wicked Moabites misinterpret God's gift of living water as bloodshed inflicted upon the Israelite army. As they swoop to the plunder, they realize their deadly mistake in 2 Kings 3:21-24. In this way, the water of life for God's people becomes the water of judgment against the Moabites. In both cases, God's waters of salvation and judgment are a veritable flood of Divine power to help His people and destroy His foes!

God continues to pour out his life-saving blessings in order to fill the lives of His own, first with the miraculous oil in 2 Kings 4:1-7, then with the purifying of the food for his poisoned prophets (2 Kings 4:38-41), and finally by providing enough bread from a small offering to feed one hundred starving prophets (2 Kings 4:42-44)!

Finally, notice especially that, in every case, the writer of 2 Kings is at pains to point out that God's supply *always went beyond the actual need* to become an *abundant, overflowing provision*. He writes of the oil and the bread:

"You and your sons can live on the rest." (2 Kings 4:7).

(and)

"The prophets shall eat and have some left over." (2 Kings 4:43)

(and sure enough, when the promise is fulfilled ...)

"The prophets ate and had some left over."

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks for this demonstration that God is always an all-supplying God, who more than meets our needs. When he takes something away in His wisdom, His intent in the end is to provide *more, more, more* than He took away! What a generous God we have!

Sing about God's abundant provision by His Spirit to do "more than all we ask or imagine" in this old hymn by John Newton. Newton writes this hymn *about 2 Kings 2 and Elijah's ascension*, but it also answers Elisha's fear that there was no provision that could help the distraught widow in 2 Kings 4. How wonderfully God answers us in such fearful, destitute times, as Newton's hymn says:

*1. Elisha, struck with grief and awe,
Cried, Ah! where now is Israel's stay?
When he his honored master saw
Borne by a fiery car away.*

*3. Where is Elijah's God? he cried,
And with the mantle smote the flood;
His word controlled the swelling tide,
Th'obedient waters upright stood.*

*5. When Peter first this mantle waved,
How soon it melted hearts of steel!
Sinners, by thousands, then were saved,
But now how few its virtues feel?*

*7. Assist Thy messenger to speak,
And while he aims to lisp Thy truth,
The bonds of sin and Satan break,
And pour Thy blessing on our youth.*

*2. But while he looked a last adieu,
His mantle, as it fell, he caught;
The Spirit rested on him too,
And equal miracles he wrought.*

*4. The wonder working Gospel, thus
From hand to hand, has been conveyed
We have the mantle still with us,
But where, O where, the Spirit's aid?*

*6. Where is Elijah's God, the Lord,
Thine Israel's hope, and joy, and boast!
Reveal Thine arm, confirm Thy Word,
Give us another Pentecost!*

*8. For them we now approach Thy throne,
Teach them to know and love Thy name,
Then shall Thy thankful people own
Elijah's God is still the same.*