

The life of Elisha

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[0 : 00] And so we read these stories about two meals and perhaps we ask the question, why does the Bible have another story about stew?

! Why does this, you know, kind of near disaster meal get recorded in the Bible? Why is this story of the bringing of some bread and corn and a simple meal for a group of prophets during a famine, why is it there?

What does it have to say to us in our day where I'm going to take a guess that for many of us we live and maybe have always lived with full cupboards. We live in a city full of cafes, restaurants, fine dining. It can seem so far removed for most of our experience.

We might find it interesting. We might be curious. But can these stories help us to know God? Can these stories help us to live by faith? Can these stories help us to understand God's redeeming love?

And wonderfully the answer is yes. And we're going to see that together. Our two meals, they're right at the very end of chapter 4, and they form the climax of this great chapter.

[1 : 24] It's a pattern that we're seeing of here are all the different ways that God is showing His faithfulness and His power. You might think in the Gospels, Mark chapter 4 and Mark chapter 5 are recorded story after story showing Jesus' power over storms and over diseases and sickness and death.

And here in 2 Kings chapter 4, and I'm thankful to Dale Ralph Davis, the Bible commentator, we see God's power over debt in the first seven verses.

And then over death in verses 8 to 37. And then danger when we come to that first meal. And then deficiency as we come to the second meal.

There is another pattern in inviting the people of God then and now to recognize the faithfulness and the power of God.

So that they and we would leave behind idols that have been failing them. Because there's a backdrop, and the backdrop has been faithless worshipers.

[2 : 30] And these stories become another invitation. Come to the feast of God's covenant love and grace. Don't go running to the idols that ultimately cannot satisfy.

Another reason why I think this story matters, because when we kind of take a step back, we maybe begin to see some parallels with our own day, with our own society, and maybe even our own stories.

As we followed the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, we've also been recognizing at different points the nation, God's people, have been wandering away from their God.

They are a society that have been experiencing hardship and losses of various kinds, in part because of God's judgment. We have met a people searching around for security and hope.

And that's what's led so many of them to run, to put their trust in Baal. So they've set up idols in their lives, but still they're coming up empty. Sounds somewhat familiar.

[3 : 38] Well, into this scene, as we've seen over the weeks, God, through his prophet, calls the people to repentance and to faith. He invites them to see that the answer to their longings is found in returning to relationship with God.

And this story of his dealings with the prophets and these meals helps us towards that. Maybe we're here this evening and we feel somewhat spiritually hungry.

Maybe we're running dry. Life has been busy. Life has been demanding. Maybe we're aware as we look back over weeks or months of mistakes and missteps in our Christian life.

Maybe it's simply the case that we're not sure. Do I trust God? Can I trust God? If we find ourselves in any of those kind of situations, then these meals, I think, are given to us by God.

Because they help us to encounter the God who is so merciful as to reverse the curse and the danger. The God who is so kind as to satisfy hunger.

[4 : 55] And as we understand that Elisha points us towards the one who is greater than himself, towards Jesus. The one who is both true prophet and true God. As we understand that Jesus in the gospel reverses the curse of sin and death.

As he satisfies the deep longing of hungry souls. We're invited once again to the love and goodness and salvation of God that we find from him. Before we jump into the stories, we need to recognize the backdrop that's very clearly given to us.

Right at the beginning of verse 38, we're reminded there was a famine in that region. I think one of the challenges that we find in entering into biblical stories is that sometimes their world is so different to ours.

So just by way of contrast, I was looking at the news this week looking for food-related stories. So I discovered, maybe you've noticed this if you do the shopping regularly, you like to tally things up. The price of orange juice has risen 134% in the last five years. It's a good indicator of the cost of living struggle. So we have that.

[6 : 04] There was also the story, maybe you saw, of parents caring for their kids and having to skip meals. Because there's not enough for everybody in the family. Food poverty is a huge challenge.

We know that from the rise of the food bank movement and the growing demand. But in God's mercy, here in the UK, we do not know anything that comes close to famine conditions.

We can't imagine that daily battle for whole communities and nations to survive. We see it on our screens, though. Those people who are literally on the bread line.

The ache, the fear for themselves and for dependence. We don't live wondering, will one bad harvest, will one locust invasion, will one failure of the rains to come lead to disaster and death? And so it's really important that we work hard to enter into the story. Otherwise, we won't get the significance. And so we're told there's a famine.

[7 : 20] And we also know, as we often see so often in the Bible, that this famine has a cause. The prophetic ministry, we especially see this with Elijah, is of him coming to announce God's judgment on his people's unfaithfulness.

Remember when Elijah appears on the scene, he appears right in the royal court and tells Ahab, there's not going to be any rain that comes for three years except at his word. The people had turned wholesale to worship the idol Baal.

He was their hope for plenty, for life, security. And instead, because of their unfaithfulness, they are now brought into a situation of famine and judgment and the threat of death.

So that's here in our backdrop. And it's here, usefully, for the people in their day, but also for us that we might see the contrast between what God offers versus what the idols can't offer.

So our plan for this evening is that we're going to look at each of these meals and we're going to follow the pattern that we find there. Maybe you noticed it as we read them.

[8 : 31] In each of them, we encounter a particular worshiper. We encounter a problem. And then we're brought to see Elisha the prophet and God's answer.

And we're going to use the two stories, one after the other, to help us to see the different ways that God expresses his faithfulness. To help us to see different ways God wants us to know that he is greater than anything, anyone else that we might place our trust in.

That ultimately for us, that we would see Jesus as the only Savior who can truly meet our needs. Who can truly satisfy the deep hunger of our soul. That we would come and keep coming to him to be satisfied.

So let's look at the first meal together. It's there beginning at verse 38. Where we see God by his prophet reverses the curse. Okay, so we're reminded Elisha returned to Gilgal.

There was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, put on the large pot and cook some stew for these prophets. Okay, so when you've got a famine, you know, we know every resource is going to be precious.

[9 : 37] And into that setting, isn't Elisha's generosity, his hospitality really striking? Remember, prophets are God's representatives.

And here, Elisha represents for us the generous, hospitable heart of God. His willingness to show mercy and to meet needs. Well, as the story develops, we meet this group of worshipers.

But attention really draws, is really drawn towards one worshiper in particular. But before we see that, just to recognize that as God promised, a faithful band of worshipers remained. There was a lot of talk in the prophets about a remnant who will remain. Or again, we could go back to Elijah's story, where Elijah was kind of bemoaning the fact, thinking he was the only faithful follower of God left.

And he was told there's 3,000 who aren't bowing down to Baal. And so this little group of 20 are part of that faithful. They're still following God, but they too are suffering the conditions of famine.

[10:50] And we know that because we meet them in verse 39, foraging around for any kind of herbs and plants they could possibly eat to add into the stew. So God is faithful.

He is preserving and protecting his church. But that doesn't mean that they or we will be immune from trials. God's people are not cocooned from the effects of God's judgment on the nations. They live in the same society as their fellow Israelites. That while they are being faithful, that they are still experiencing the effects of God's judgment in the form of famine.

We live in the same society as the people around us. And how should we live in that light? Perhaps we can think of the words of the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles, reminding them to seek the welfare of the city.

But here we find a group of prophets. They're being faithful, but they're experiencing famine. They're foraging around to try and find food to add to the stew.

[12:06] And then we discover the problem. This poor prophet who makes a mistake while he's out gathering some gourds.

One time and one time only, I've eaten foraged food. We had a mushroom pie served by a friend that was foraged from a nearby forest.

They worked for an environmental company. So they were trusted. But it's still quite a nerve-racking experience. What if they got the mushroom wrong?

And I was like, oh, it's nice to wake up the next day. No ill effects. But that's not the story here. This one guy thinks he's doing a great turn for the prophets. He finds a gourd and he sticks it all in his clothes and he throws it in the stew.

And then when it's all cooked up with the first taste, the cry goes up. There's panic. Death in the pot.

[13:09] The stews become toxic. It would be deadly if they were to keep on eating it. So again, we might think, okay, it's a bad meal. What do you do with a bad meal?

You throw it in the bin and you cook something else. You know, we have the Great British Bake Off and MasterChef and the recipe goes wrong. We see it multiple times. They'll just bin it and start again. That's fine in a time of plenty, but that doesn't work in a time of famine.

Now they have nothing to eat. And into that situation steps Elisha. Elisha said, get some flour. He put it into the pot and said, serve it to the people to eat.

And there was nothing harmful in the pot. The flour is just flour. It's not some kind of antitoxin.

Rather, it is a sign to strengthen faith. You can well imagine that group of 20 prophets, maybe the one guy in particular, retelling the story.

[14:13] Remember that day we came to Elisha's house and we were cooking up that stew and someone threw in the toxic mushrooms. And then Elisha, the prophet, threw in the flour.

And the meal was saved and our lives were spared. God does that. Like whenever we have the Lord's Supper, God is giving us signs to strengthen our faith.

Signs to help us to remember His love and His mercy for us. Because that's what happens here. God works a miracle of mercy, but also a miracle of necessity.

It's not in a sense really dramatic. It's not someone being raised from the dead. But it is one of His faithful prophets being able to eat safely for another day.

Now they can come and eat and live. I really like the story of the stew. It seems kind of small and incidental.

[15:14] But I think there's a lot of things that we can take for it when we think about how it shows us that God cares for His church. In this chapter, we've already seen God caring for widows, keeping them from starvation.

But now He does it for a little band of faithful prophets. Again, to read church history, to discover the story of global mission, is to see in so many ways that God is still in the business of protecting and building up His church.

Sometimes in really dramatic ways, sometimes in really simple ways. Perhaps we can think back to not that long ago when Adam came to speak to us.

God protecting the church in Iran, bringing down a regime, causing so many tens of thousands to become followers of Jesus.

And despite all the hostility, that church continues to grow. God cares for His church. He cares for our everyday needs.

[16 : 26] He cares that we need a meal. But the story also tells us about a God who can redeem mistakes. You know, spare a thought for that poor prophet.

As soon as the cry goes up and he realizes, I didn't mean any harm. But look what's happened. Creating disaster through a simple mistake.

And so when God redeems the meal, He's also in His kindness redeeming that prophet's hard work. He was trying just as hard as everybody else to provide.

He just didn't know what he was doing. I want to suggest that's really good news. When we stop and think, are there ever times where we have, despite our best intentions perhaps, said the wrong thing?

Have we ever tried to help, but somehow we've managed to make things worse? Have we failed someone despite our best efforts?

[17 : 35] I think there's a wonderful comfort when we recognize that God in His grace is in the business of redeeming lives, redeeming all creation one day, but also redeeming our own mistakes and our works.

In Psalm 90, the only Psalm that Moses wrote, he reflects on how short life is. And as that Psalm concludes, he prays, Lord, establish the work of our hands.

Yes, establish the work of our hands. And we go to the New Testament, we discover that that prayer is answered for the people of God because of the resurrection of Christ Jesus.

At the end of 1 Corinthians 15, we get this lengthy apologetic that Paul gives as to why the resurrection is true. And he concludes that since Jesus is raised and ascended and will return, and we will have glorified bodies one day in a renewed earth, he says this, know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

The God of resurrection and redemption. He's able to redeem every gourd that we pick, every cup of water that we offer in Jesus' name, every time spent with others, every effort, however small, taken to encourage others.

[19 : 06] God sees it, he loves it, he values it, and he can redeem. But the story also tells us about a God who reverses the curse, who is able to act in power so that in the place of death, there is life.

What was infected by poison by God can be made clean. It gives us a window into the gospel. Here is Jesus, the great prophet, the greater than Elisha, sent by his father into a sin-sick world.

And what does Jesus do for us? He draws out the poison of sin on the cross as he takes it into himself, as he becomes sin, as he bears the penalty.

So that as we come to him in faith, by God's grace, we are made clean. Though we deserve death, we can have life. Jesus, the true prophet, offers us hospitality.

He says to us, come to me, receive what I offer. Recognize that in me, the curse of sin and death is reversed. There is now nothing harmful in the pot for those of us who are trusting in Jesus.

[20 : 26] And we received his invitation to understand that he graciously offers us himself. He offers us to forgive our sin, to give us life with God, the love of God.

And all we need is faith to receive his mercy. And if we have received that mercy, our life takes on a certain pattern.

It was the Sri Lankan pastor, D.T. Niles, who put it this way, we become one beggar telling another where to find bread. In all humility, perhaps like Elisha, through hospitality, we seek to give people Christ with our lives and with our words.

So that's the first meal where God by his prophet reverses the curse. Now let's turn to the second meal where God by his prophet satisfies hunger. So remember, we're still in the situation of famine. We've had the first story, which is about poison, I guess. The second is about portion size. There are 20 loaves that are brought and there's the understanding that's not going to be enough to feed a hungry 100 men.

[21 : 45] We meet in verse 42, a different worshiper. A man came from Baal, Shalisha, bringing the mad of God, 20 loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe corn along with some ears of

new corn.

He's an unnamed worshiper, but his place of belonging is named. Doesn't it sound like he's from Baal country? Isn't this amazing that someone from Baal territory has become a true worshiper? And his action is remarkable. In a time of famine, here is a sacrificial act of worship. Here is this unnamed worshiper bringing a first fruits offering to the man of God, Elisha, in a display of generosity and faith and dependence on God to provide.

But we see a new problem, don't we? Even as much as there's that wonderful generosity and we see Elisha's impulse again, give it to the people to eat.

Here's the problem. How can I set this before 100 people? Elisha wants to show God's generous goodness to the crowd around him, but there's not enough to go around.

[23 : 14] Now we may have had situations in our own hospitality, maybe church catering have had this sometimes, where you're desperately trying to stretch a meal. You're looking, what can I pad this out with?

How can I add some vegetables, maybe some bread for those unexpected guests? This moves way beyond just padding out a meal. This is a definite deficiency of bread and corn.

But again, we see how the prophet of God provides the answer. Elisha answered halfway through verse 43, give it to the people to eat for this is what the Lord says.

They will eat and have some leftover. Then he set it before them and they ate and had some leftover in case we miss it, according to the word of the Lord.

Instead of famine, there's this moment of feast and the key to the feast is the word of the Lord. And the word of the Lord is a word of power and generosity.

[24 : 22] He supplies above and beyond. There's famine, but they all eat and are satisfied and there's plenty left over. It's a miracle of multiplication because what God says, He does.

And again, to just think about this very simple story, to recognize again that it's showing to us, God cares for everyday needs.

He is providing for the physical needs of His faithful people. He is showing to those men that day and He is showing, as this message would spread, He's showing to the nation, put your trust in the Lord God.

Don't put your trust in Baal or an idol. It reminds us, doesn't it, that Jesus taught us to pray, give us today our daily bread.

bread. That we are invited to a sense of dependence upon our Father to care for our everyday needs. And when we remember that Jesus would quote from Deuteronomy in His time of temptation, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord, we are reminded that God also cares for our spiritual needs.

[25 : 44] We need bread, but we also need to be fed on God's word. And maybe in our setting, the challenge for us becomes, how can I express true dependence, true thankfulness, when my cupboards are full, when I just nip to the local supermarket to buy my groceries, when I'm kind of disconnected from production and farming?

How do we make our moments of giving thanks before a meal a genuine moment of worship? But then spiritually as well, the challenge for us, how do we resist the junk food in order to pursue the healthy diet of God's word?

And I'm sure you know what I mean by that. How do we resist all the temptation towards distraction to fill in our life with lots of noise that's ultimately empty in order to be still, to know our God and to spend time in His word?

Because God cares for our everyday needs and our greatest need is to know Him. But this story, like so many in the Bible, tells us that God is the all-powerful King of creation, but He's not too big, He's not too distant, He does see, He does care.

And so we're invited to pray and to trust. But it also reminds us that God is worthy of worship. Even in famine times, God is worthy of worship.

[27 : 27] as we see this worshiper expressing gratitude. When we were down in the Lake District, we were in a little village church, but the head of Keswick Ministries was preaching.

And he's preaching about that lovely passage in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is at a meal and the woman comes and breaks the really expensive bottle of perfume and anoints Jesus' head.

And Jesus honors that woman for that really extravagant gift. But just a few pages earlier, Jesus also honors the woman who comes to the temple and drops in two pennies.

because it's not the size of the gift. It's not whether we bring 20 loaves of bread or two. It's all about the heart that seeks to honor and to worship God.

And it's amazing to see that even in the midst of a famine when you think, wow, you could feel so much bitterness towards God. God, why are you allowing this to happen? God, I'm being faithful.

[28 : 40] Why am I not having plenty? But even in famine, God was melting hearts with His love and with His faithfulness. And worship was seen as a response.

And how much more do we want that to be the case for ourselves as we have experienced so much more of God's love and goodness towards us in His giving us the Lord Jesus. As we understand so clearly that He holds nothing back as He gives us His Son.

Gospel grace produces generosity as we feast on the Gospel. As we remember His goodness to us in the Lord Jesus.

The story also helps us to see that God and God alone satisfies the deepest hungers that we feel. Again, as we see the connection between Elisha and Jesus.

Jesus, the one parable that's recorded in all four Gospels is the feeding of the 5,000. We heard a section of John 6. And as we hear the parallels, we recognize Jesus is being presented to us in the Gospels as the one who is greater than Elisha.

[29 : 58] The one who would come after Elijah but be greater. And in the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000, the gap between supply and demand is far, far greater.

It's not 20 loaves for 100, it's five loaves and two fish for 5,000, but Jesus supplies. In that story, we have the servants, the disciples, expressing helplessness.

How in the world can we take so little and make it work for so many? Jesus speaks. Jesus gives thanks to the Father. And again, there's a feast with leftovers.

But Jesus, in John's Gospel, he doesn't just leave us there, he then takes the crowd towards a deeper hunger, doesn't he? That hunger to be right with God, to find eternal life in relationship with God.

And he presents himself as the way to receive that life from God. As he says, work for the food that endures to eternal life and then shortly after he says, I am the food that endures to eternal life.

[31 : 04] And so he calls people then and now, come to him and we will never go hungry. Come to him and we will have eternal life.

Elisha's day and our day are not so different in that there are lots of people casting around today to find satisfaction and security. I noticed this week an article speaking about a rising interest in astrology and in the New Age movement.

There's a recovery of ancient mystics and people trying to try mysticism, the practices of the ancient mystics looking to find some kind of connection with God.

those efforts will come up empty. But also and encouragingly we hear reports of many connecting with Christian unions on campus, rising church attendances, a huge interest in Christian conferences.

If you were at Keswick you know it was packed out. Prayer movements beginning across the country. There is a day of spiritual opportunity and we pray that it would lead to spiritual harvest.

[32 : 24] That the famine experience would lead to feasting in God's goodness. And it's our calling to invite people to know not just what God offers but who God offers.

Because He offers His Son. He offers a love so great that He would enter into the problems and the suffering of this world. He came to seek and to save sin sick broken hurting people.

Those who are cut off by nature from our Creator from the source of life. In love He goes to the cross to reconcile to renew and to restore.

And Jesus from heaven by the Spirit has given us that invitation and He wants us to give the invitation come to the feast to know that we can bring ourselves we can bring our mistakes our missteps we can bring our worship and He will graciously meet our deficiency!

He will graciously supply all our needs! He is the true prophet! He is the true bread of life! He has reversed the curse! He can and He does satisfy all our hunger!