

# Too Few Vessels for God to Fill

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[ 0 : 00 ] Will you turn with me to 2 Kings chapter 4 and we're going to look at verses 1 to 7 where we find this account of Elisha and this widow who was in need and who came to Elisha in her anxiety and distress.

Now you'll find many people nowadays telling us that the Old Testament is really just about God's judgment, God's severity that it's a book that's full of so many harsh things that is marked by mercilessness that there isn't really much in it apart from commandments and do this or else. That of course is a misunderstanding of the New Testament and of the way that God related to his people all the way through the years of the Old Testament.

And you can see that in the way that the regulations that God gave to Israel there were regulations which were very detailed. It wasn't just the Ten Commandments.

He gave them regulations as to how they should organize their lives as families. He gave them regulations as to how to deal with food, what sort of clothes they should use and what other sort of details they needed to take care with as they went about their daily lives.

[ 1 : 26 ] And as you go through the Old Testament and look at its details in those respects, God's instruction, you can see that God was actually minutely concerned for that well-being.

He was concerned that the relationships with each other would be proper and would be beneficial. He was concerned for their hygiene. He was concerned for their justice.

He was concerned that people like widows in these communities would not be abandoned and would be looked after. It's not about legalistic concerns and judgment and severity.

There are these elements to it. But they're in the New Testament as well. God in these instructions that he gave to his people, the instructions were designed for their care, for their well-being, in every respect, in every area of life, even in the most ordinary things.

And that's why you find someone like this widow in distress. Obviously something had happened that caused her to be left in her distress, whatever the reasons I were not told.

[ 2 : 40 ] But of course it was always the case that people didn't keep to God's instructions or meet God's standards just as it is with ourselves today. And somehow or other this woman had not been looked after properly by those in society around her.

Maybe she didn't have any immediate family apart from her sons. And in any case she was left and found herself in deep crisis.

She had very little left in the house. In fact only one jar of oil is all she had left. And at the same time she was being pressed by creditors.

In other words she was already in debt to people or to someone. And he had sent the creditors. He had sent the debt collectors to her door. And the debt collectors had said, Look you either pay up or we'll have to take your children and use them as slaves.

Or have them sold as slaves. That wasn't against the law. But it was applying the law very piteously. Piteously.

[ 3 : 49 ] Very mercilessly. That was her situation. That was her crisis. What was she to do? She didn't have money to pay the debt.

She didn't want her sons obviously to be taken and sent to be slaves somewhere. You may never see them again. So she came to Elisha.

Her husband had been one of the sons of the prophets. The sons of the prophets were a kind of college if you like. A kind of discipleship school.

And they followed Elijah. And then after Elijah died and Elisha took over. The sons of the prophets were those people who lived as disciples of the prophets.

And who received the teaching of these prophets. Something similar to what you find later on in the days of Jesus himself. Where the rabbis. And Jesus was known as a rabbi.

[ 4 : 49 ] Where they gathered disciples around them. And taught them. Gave them their teachings for them to pass on as well. So it's something similar like that in the Old Testament with these people like Elisha and Elijah.

So that's the kind of person her husband was. But he had died. And she was a God-fearing woman. She was a genuine believer.

But this was her crisis in life. And there are many genuine believers in the world today who have major crisis in their lives.

Just because we are Christians doesn't mean God doesn't in his providence bring us to a crisis point. It doesn't bring us to a position where we have this situation or a similar situation for ourselves.

So what do we learn from the passage then to apply to our own circumstances. Even if we're not in any particularly great crisis today. Well there are some things that apply very practically to our own situation in life.

[ 5 : 54 ] There are two things especially that we learn prominently from this passage. The first is that God brings us to know our need.

That God brings us to know our need. Through the gospel, through his own work in our minds and in our hearts he comes to persuade us of what our real need is.

And in fact in bringing us to know our need there's a sense in which we are spiritually like this woman was practically or actually. He brings us, as God brings us to the very end of our own resources.

Here was a woman who had only one jar of oil left in the house. Whatever way she was going to get out of her predicament. The one thing she could not possibly say about herself was that she was going to create a way out.

Was that she herself by her own ability, by any way that she herself could use, was actually going to find a way out of the crisis. She needed to come to look to God's way to bring her out of it.

[ 7 : 04 ] Through the prophet that God himself had sent and raised up, Elisha. Now that's how it is with God as well and ourselves.

Because we begin with a self-made foundation for ourselves as we think of our life and what it should be like.

Our progress in life, our dealing with the issues of life and then the big issues of life especially. Our relationship with God, our view of eternity, our coming to die, our facing God in his judgment which all of us will need to face.

The big, big issues of life, the spiritual issues, the moral issues are the things against which we try to build a foundation. And we put a lot of different stones together into that foundation.

We've got our own thoughts. We've got our own plans. We've got our own abilities. We've got gifts that God has given us naturally. We've got certain things by which we think, yes, that's something that will actually stand for me and I can stand on and that will take me through.

[ 8 : 10 ] And God, one by one, begins to dismantle our foundations. He shows us that our dependence on things which we thought were really dependable are not actually dependable after all.

People, the things of this world, our own strength, our own ideas as to what is right and wrong, what is good or bad. What people tell us.

All of these things at the end of the day, God takes and shows that's not going to be a sure foundation for you at all.

And you see, the thing is, the more God takes away these things, and there are things that we by and large depend upon. Sometimes maybe not really thinking about it very deeply, but nevertheless we'll find as God shows us what we really need to come to depend on, and that's himself and his grace and his power and his strength and his salvation in Christ.

The more God takes away, bit by bit, the foundation that we ourselves build, whether it's to do with our own reputation or our own assessment of the situation, but God is, bit by bit, through the gospel, taking that away.

[ 9 : 29 ] And we begin to think about ourselves differently. We begin to see that, well, actually I'm not such a good person after all. And my heart is not the kind of heart that I thought it was, and my

own efforts are not going to be good enough to create a fabric that will give me acceptance with God, that can cover my sins, that will actually be enough in the relationship between me and my God.

I need something more, I need something else, I need something different to what I can produce myself. And the thing is, as God does that, then you hear a knock at the door of your heart and say, look, it's the creditor here, this is God.

I'm the debt collector because you're in debt to me. You have a great sum to pay me. You have to pay for your sins. I demand righteousness of you.

How are you going to pay? It's right, God is saying, that I ask you to pay, that I require you to pay, because the debt that you have created is of your own making.

In your sins, in your rebellion against me, in your fallenness, in all of that, we are all in debt to God. And we need something with which we can pay that debt.

[10:49] And God has come knocking on our door through the gospel saying, pay or else face the possibility of being enslaved forever to your sin.

And that's where God breaks down our foundation. And that's where we realize that the provision that God has made for our debt is so, so precious and one that we are so much in need of.

And that is Jesus Christ himself. Because he has paid that debt. He has actually become the one who has faced the creditor and paid the debt on our behalf.

That's why we need him. That's why we must embrace him. And that's why, as we'll see now, the second thing that God actually teaches us from the passage is, as he brings us to know our need, so he also brings us to see that God's supply of grace meets all our need.

Here is this woman in her need with only one jar of oil left. What is that going to do for her? The need is so great compared to that small jar of oil.

[12:16] And yet God is going to show through that jar of oil in the way that he would have her to use it. That he will meet all her needs.

That's the supply that he has to give her, through the way the prophet arranges the matter, that he, God, is going to meet her needs by his blessing of that little jar.

And that's what he's telling us today. That the supply that God has will meet all our needs. Now let's look at the miracle itself. And let's be quite persuaded that this, in fact, was a miracle.

A lot of people have tried to explain this and other similar passages in the Bible, whether it's Old or New Testament, as if it wasn't a miracle. And try to explain it a way that, well, there maybe was more oil there than she thought.

Or some other sort of ordinary explanation for what seems on the surface of it to be really such an impossible thing.

[13:15] That one jar of oil could actually end up filling a whole lot of different vessels, bigger than itself, out of its own contents.

This is a miracle. This is God actually doing something miraculous. However you define miracles, and there are all kinds of difficulties, how do you define a miracle?

But let's not go into the complexities of that. Let's not get philosophical about it. Let's exercise faith and say we're talking about the God of wonders, the God who does things that we call miraculous.

And this is a miracle that God himself produced through Elisha, as he sent him to deal with this situation. But she needed to do some things in order to have this miracle brought about.

And it was a real test of faith for her. She was a believing woman. She was a woman who feared God. And here was a real test of faith.

[14:18] She was told to gather all of these vessels, and to go outside and borrow vessels from all her neighbours. Empty vessels, and not a few. We don't know whether she had a lot of vessels in her own house or not, but in any case she was to borrow of all her neighbours, as many vessels as she could bring, and actually bring these into the house.

She was to close the door. She was to actually shut the door behind herself and her sons. And she was to take the one jar of oil that she had left in the house, and she was to start pouring that oil into each of these vessels.

They would all be different kinds and different sizes, but they would contain a lot more oil than you would expect that one jar to contain. And so she started pouring the oil into the first of the vessel.

And when that one was full, another empty one, and the oil kept coming. And all the way through every single one of these vessels, different shapes and sizes, they were all filled with the oil.

And then when the last one came along, and there's a sense of real excitement there in verse 6, when the vessels were full, when all of them were full, she said, Come on, bring me another vessel. [15:33] And he said to her, There's none left. We've used them all. And then you read, Then the oil stopped.

Now that was a real test of faith, to be asked to go and gather all of these vessels, so that they would be filled from this one jar of oil.

She would maybe say to herself, Well, how is this going to actually meet my debts? How is this going to meet my needs? How is this strange arrangement going to actually be any use to me at all in my situation?

And anyways, you might have thought, Well, if the oil is going to be multiplied to that extent, why do I need to go to the effort of gathering all of these vessels together? Isn't God actually able just to keep the oil in the one vessel I've got?

Isn't he able to keep it going and to just keep it going and keep it going until he decides to let it run out? Why do I need all of these other vessels?

[16:36] But you see, that teaches us that, as it would teach her, that God's way of doing things has to involve our particular effort in the matter, has to involve our use of certain things that God himself requires us to use.

Yes, of course, God could have kept that one vessel filled with oil and performed a miracle within that one vessel of oil and just kept it pouring. That's not his way.

And that would not have involved any effort at all on the woman's own part. And there's the teaching there in that particular point in the passage is that when God does wondrous things in our lives, he doesn't just want us to say, Well, if God's going to do it, he'll do it anyway.

And it doesn't matter what I do or what I don't do. Yes, it does matter what you and I do or don't do. It is as this woman went about doing the things that she was told to do that the blessing of the oil to fill the vessels actually came about.

You see, you'll find some people saying, I don't need the church. I don't need to actually go to church services in order to get the blessing from God.

[17:55] If God has a blessing for me, he can bless me at home. And he can change my life sitting at home. And I can read books at home. And I can read my Bible at home. And I can go onto the internet at home.

And I can get sermons from that or whatever else I need for my way of teaching. I don't need to really go to the extent of joining myself to other people who together come to worship God in any particular place.

Yes, God can do that. But that is not God's way. God has given us what we call means of grace. Channels by which his blessing flows into our lives.

That's why we're here today. Because this is one of the means of grace. One of the primary means of grace. A service of worship where the word of God is preached.

And that preached word of God, along with the other things in the service, become for us means by which the oil of God's grace flows into our lives. So it's not right for us to say, If God's going to bless me, he's going to bless me.

[19:06] Because God is saying, I have a blessing for you, but you need to come for it. You need to do the things that I have arranged as channels for that blessing to reach you.

Or else there's no guarantee that you will ever come to receive that blessing. And it is a test of faith for ourselves as well.

We may think, well, why come to church every week? Or why come to services twice on the Lord's Day? But if the oil of God's grace flows through the channels that he has set up, then that's really what he's saying to us, isn't it?

You gather these together. You make use of these. You actually put yourself where the oil is flowing. And you actually place yourself there because that is God's method and the way God has chosen to bring his blessing into people's lives.

It was as they worked, as they went about doing what they were instructed to do by God's man, Elisha, that God actually made this oil to pour out into all of these vessels.

[20:24] That's the miracle of the oil. And it's an illustration for us of the grace of God as it flows into the lives of those who have come to use God's means of grace in order to have that grace flow into their hearts.

Oil is often, in the Bible, an illustration of God's grace. I mentioned there Zechariah in the notes of the sermon, Zechariah chapter 4, where you have the two leaders of the time, Zerubbabel, who was really, if you like, a representation of Christ as king.

And then you've got Joshua the high priest representing Christ as high priest. And the vision that God gave to Zechariah there was of this candlestick, which in the New Testament comes to represent the church in the opening chapters of Revelation.

And there's this candlestick with these lights on it and a bowl on the top of it filled with oil. And the lights on the candlestick are actually fed from the oil that the bowl holds and it flows down into the candlestick.

But where does the oil in the bowl come from? How is the bowl kept topped up? Well, the vision shows two olive trees standing on each side.

[ 21 : 52 ] And the olive trees keep on constantly supplying the bowl from which the candlestick, from which the lights are fed and kept going.

There is God in his grace. There is a picture for you of God in Christ, the two olive trees, as they represent the grace of God in Christ flowing into the bowl through which we are ourselves nourished and fed spiritually.

Through the means of grace that God has as a bowl, if you like, from which we receive through the pipework of the gospel, the oil of his grace into our personal lives.

That's just one example in the Bible as to how the grace of God is represented by oil. But then you see, this is what we have to conclude.

That we have to bring our vessels to God for him to fill them. Just like we said of this woman, she had to go out and gather all these vessels together.

[ 23 : 03 ] So we have to gather, if you like, all the spiritual vessels. And we'll explain that in a wee minute. The point is, we have to actually go to the extent or to the effort of arranging our lives so that we bring all the things before God that we see as our need.

And we ask God to fill the vessels for us to meet our need. The first thing you do is that you surrender your life to him. Now we were going through the Gospel of Luke.

And very recently we saw two incidents where people came and thought about God, thought about prayer, thought about relationship with God.

But they came stuffed full of themselves. the Pharisee in the temple along with the tax collector, he prayed and gave thanks to God that he was not like other people.

That he had all of this in his life already, all the things that he did, that he fasted, that he gave out arms, that he prayed these number of times in the week and all of these things.

[ 24 : 13 ] And he gave thanks to God that he was so good and especially that he was not like this tax collector. He came before God stuffed with the things that he was using as a foundation.

And Jesus, as he taught at that moment, was really destroying the foundation of all who thought likewise. And then there was the rich ruler that came in the passage immediately after that.

And the rich ruler came with a hugely important question to Jesus. What must I do to inherit eternal life? You see, there's the wrong, there's the flaw in his thinking as we saw.

What must I do to achieve or to inherit eternal life? And Jesus, of course, dealt with him in a way that showed it's not about your doing.

You try and do it and depend on your own doing and you will not get there. And Jesus brought that out in a remarkable way because what he said to him was, well, yes, you're saying you've kept all these commandments, but one thing I want you to do is sell everything you have and come and follow me and you will have eternal life.

[ 25 : 23 ] And he went away very sorrowful, very sad from Jesus because he had great possessions. There was a man who wasn't at all prepared to let anything go in order to have the eternal life that he had had in his question.

And he went away filled with these things, but empty of life. Now when we bring ourselves to God and our need to God, here is where this woman is such an accurate representation of us.

She was told by Elisha, go and borrow vessels from all your neighbors. Empty vessels. The problem with us is we bring our vessels to God and we have filled them ourselves or they're up to the top with ourselves.

vessels. And God is saying to us, if you want me to fill your vessels with the oil of my grace, you have to bring them empty. You have to empty them of your own achievements.

You have to empty them of what you think is best for your life. You have to empty them of your own reputation, of what other people may think of you. You have to actually empty your vessels of everything to do with self.

[ 26 : 36 ] Because as Jesus said, if you will be my disciple, then you must deny yourself. You must empty your vessel, your heart, your life of self.

And then there'll be space for the oil of God. Yes, we have to surrender our life to him. Or else come to him full of ourselves and be sent away, empty of his life.

The supply of the oil does not begin in our experience until the vessel is empty.

When we bring ourselves to God, I and you as well, we have to make sure that we're not trying to fill something of that soul of ours with our own achievements.

It's a difficult thing to do, but it's necessary. And it's necessary even as you go on as a Christian. Because when we come to God in prayer, we very often don't stop to empty the vessel first of all, in order that God will again fill it for us.

[ 27 : 54 ] But it is essential. And then you bring all the vessels that you can think of that belong to your need before God and he will fill them.

Bring him your mind. Let him fill your mind with gospel light, with gospel truth. Bring him the vessel of your heart. Your heart that needs peace, comfort, that needs assurance.

Your heart that finds so many circumstances in life to be ones that are full of anxiety, that are full of concerns.

And the concerns, as the providence of God brings them about in your experience, are not necessarily wrong in themselves to have them. There's nothing wrong with having concerns.

There's nothing wrong with having a certain kind of anxiety if it's over something that you cannot fully handle yourself and don't really see the way clearly out of. Your heart needs comfort, it needs assurance, we need encouragement, we need the vessel of our heart to actually be filled with peace, a peace that will actually last for us, and a peace that is above the ordinary peace that we ourselves or to one another can actually give, the peace of God, the peace that Jesus gives, the peace that's unlike any other peace, the assurances by which God in speaking to our hearts will say to us, yes you have all of these things but you've brought them to me, you've brought your empty vessel and you've said what am I to do, how am I to actually cope with this in my life, and God is saying don't you have me, can I not fill your vessel, is my grace not sufficient for you, is my strength not a strength that's made perfect as

[ 29 : 58 ] Paul put it, in your weakness, don't you need your weakness, God is saying, so that my strength will be shown up to be the glorious thing that it is, isn't that an amazing thing, that is through our weakness, that God's strength comes to show itself as his strength, it's not through our strength that God shows his strength, it's through our weakness, through our emptiness, through our bringing our vessels before him and saying Lord, whether it's my mind, or my heart, or my conscience, or my family life, or my life in work, whatever it is, wherever I have need, there is a vessel that I need to bring empty to God, and need to say to God, Lord please, fill this by your grace, let your grace be shown, to meet my need in this instance too, we may have to wait, it may not happen instantly, as part of the process, of the oil being poured out, but God will never deny, hearing our prayer, or deny its concern, if we seek, with an empty vessel, let he fill it, and you see, verse 3 there says, go and borrow these vessels from all your neighbours, empty vessels, and not too few, she wasn't to go out and say, well, okay, half a dozen vessels, that will keep me going for quite a while, if I take half a dozen vessels, that will be enough, no,

Elisha said, bring as many as you can, fill your house with them, because God is going to fill them, and you see, it says too, that it was only after the last vessel had been filled, that the oil stopped flowing, and that's really saying to us, supposing there had been another hundred vessels, the oil would have filled them, only when the last one was filled, did the oil stop flowing, well, keep the empty vessels coming, don't ever say of your life, that's all the vessels full now, and I don't need any more grace, and I don't need the oil into my life anymore, you see, the problem is, not, can God fill all of these vessels for me, that's not the problem, that's not the question, the question is, do we bring too few vessels to, are we not keeping back some vessels that he could easily fill, but we're not prepared to give them to, the problem isn't with

God, it's with ourselves, and you see, this woman, some people look at the passage and say, well, she bought a few, but why didn't she bring more vessels in order that they be filled, she couldn't have had much faith, I think this house was just full of vessels, I think she had crammed the house

as much as possible, she had been told to borrow these vessels and not a few, and that's what she did, and when all of these vessels that were then all around the house, even upstairs, wherever they were, the house was full of vessels, they were filled with oil, and only when the last, there wasn't room for any more, that wasn't little faith, that was strong faith, that was great faith, and today it's not a question of how much can God do for me, it's how much am I willing to give him, in order that he fill my life with his grace, how many vessels am I prepared to bring to him, because however many

I bring, I know the oil will keep flowing, until the last one is filled, is that how we think of God, of ourselves, of his grace today, that's why Paul, when he prayed three times for this thorn in the flesh that God had given him, whatever exactly it was, we can't be sure, and he prayed three times for this to be taken away, and God refused, God did not take it away, he heard his prayer, but he didn't answer it in the way Paul wanted, and what Paul heard from God, were words that are exactly fitting into this passage today, my grace is sufficient for you, my grace is sufficient for you, in other words, he was saying to Paul, Paul, whatever your need is, whether it's pain, or anxiety, or concern, whatever it is, look to my grace, because my grace will fill every vessel that you bring to me, supposing tomorrow you heard on the local radio, that Tesco were giving everybody one hour for their favourite product in the store, to be gathered as much as they could of it within one hour, your favourite product, what is your favourite product, maybe difficult to single it out, but let's imagine you've got one particular favourite thing, something you always buy when you're in Tesco, in the Cope, wherever it is, and that's something you just can't get enough of, you just love it, and here's Tesco telling you, right, that's your favourite product, you've got one hour to gather as much of it as you can, in that one hour, and you can keep it, it's all free, can you imagine you would go into Tesco, and pick up the little hand basket at the door, and say, okay, let's go and get as much as this basket product, you would go out and take all the trolleys you could from the car park, and you would fill them all, as many as you could, within that one hour, because here, free for you, is your favourite product, and the store is telling you, it can be yours as much as you can gather for an hour, wouldn't you do that?

[ 36 : 21 ] Sure, I would, especially if you like chocolate, well, here is God saying, I have all this grace to give, how much are you prepared to come with that I can fill for you?

That's what he said to us. Why do we take a hand basket to God when he can fill our trolleys? And you see, the use that she was to put it to, go and sell the oil, and pay your debts and you and your sons can live on the rest.

Well, that's really basically saying to us that when God supplies us with his grace, it's for every aspect of life. She was able to pay her debts and save her sons from slavery.

She applied, in other words, to her immediate need, but it went further than that. And when God supplies your immediate need, there's enough grace left over for every other need you've got as well, because he said to her, the rest of it, there's plenty for you to live at home with on the rest. So it is with God's grace. It doesn't just give us grace that meets that particular need, and it's confined to that. The grace of God, there's plenty of it to go round.

[ 37 : 43 ] However many needs you have, however great they are, the grace of God is greater. Lord our God, we thank you for the supply of your grace, for the fullness of your grace, for the freeness of it, for the way that it's given to us so that we can live our lives in every aspect of our lives depending on your grace, and in depending on your grace coming to know its matchless quality.

Lord our God, we thank you for the purity of your grace, that it is indeed purer than the purest of oils, that it flows into the lives of your people in a way that enables them to go about the business of being your people.

Fill us, we pray, and grant us grace to bring our empty vessels before you all our need and all its extent as we know it, and do even exceedingly beyond that for us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.