

The Life of Faith

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[0 : 00] to that Old Testament passage. We looked at the passage earlier on in that same chapter last week, but tonight I want us to look at the last part, the part that we read, 2 Kings and chapter 4.

2 Kings chapter 4, which has the account of two distinct stories, two events that took place with Elisha and with the sons of the prophets.

These were his friends and colleagues. These were his fellow prophets. And the first was one in which, as they tried to cook a meal with using the ingredients that they could, the few ingredients that they could in a famine, that one of them was found to be poisonous.

And as they began to taste the stew that was made, it emerged that the stew was poisonous. There is death in the pot. Verse 40, they poured out for some of the men to eat.

While they were eating of the stew, they cried out, O man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat it. Then Elisha said, Then bring flour. And he threw it into the pot and said, Pour some out for the men that they may eat.

[1 : 15] And there was no harm in the pot. And then the second event, of course, and no prizes. If you see the connection between the event here and the New Testament, the feeding of the 5,000, I believe that the two events are deliberately linked.

One event looks forward prophetically to the other one. And this is the one, this is the first one, of course. A man from Baal Shalisha, bringing the man of God bread of the first fruit, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

Elisha said, Give to the men that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men so that they may eat. For thus says the Lord, They shall eat and have some left.

I want you to notice, first of all, at the very least, that both of these events take place on a level that you and I both are familiar with. The level of the earthly.

Chances are that many of you tomorrow will go back to your responsibilities, to your places of work. And all that that involves.

[2 : 28] As I look out over this congregation, I can see people who represent all different walks of life, all different ages, and different responsibilities, skills.

And that's the way God has made us. He's made us all different. And he's put us into different places. And yet, for most of us, wherever God has placed us, involves some degree of hardship, some more than others.

Responsibility, in which we have to tirelessly and determinedly work at whatever we have to do. Sometimes our work is easier than others.

There are times when it's not so busy, and other times when we are completely overwhelmed with, and we feel that we can't take any more. And that's sometimes when Christians, when we come to the Lord and we wonder what God is doing in placing us in that kind of situation.

And sometimes, for many of us, that work is very mundane. It involves unscrewing. It involves sawing and hammering. It involves paper pushing. It involves ticking boxes.

[3 : 40] It involves doing the same thing, as we've done for 20 years. And that we feel that we're never going to get out of this rut. It involves working with the same people that we've worked with for the last 10, 20 years.

Some of whom we like, we get on with really well. And for others, we find difficulty in working with them. And we kind of, almost if the truth were known, we wish they weren't there.

And we wonder sometimes why God doesn't put us among people, only people that we get on well, and how life would be so much better if we were only surrounded with people that we like.

That's not the world we live in. That's not the world we live in. And it's the same in the church, by the way. The church has to be able to identify with the world we live in.

And there's no point in God placing a bubble or a protection around his church, somehow making them immune from all the troubles and the anxieties and the difficulties of living in the real world.

[4 : 37] We have to be able to identify with the men and the women that we associate with. It's absolutely vital that they are able to see in the Christian life that we are able to suffer, suffer the same kind of ordinary problems that people suffer.

So that means we have to know how to live on this basic earthly level. And so it's an encouragement to us to come to a chapter like this. So much of the Bible is in the real world.

In fact, all of the Bible lives in the real world. The Bible is not a set of abstract rules or laws from God, God saying to us from afar. But the Bible is about real people in real situations in real life.

And that's what we read about here. People who are struggling. People who feel they can't cope. People who really have difficulty getting from one day to the other. So that when we're in those situations, we can come back to those real people and we can see how they struggled.

And we can take strength and comfort from that. And God is concerned about that level. That's the level into which Jesus came. And if anybody knows the Gospels, you know how mundane the life of Jesus was.

[5 : 56] I know he was able to do miracles and he was able to intervene. And there were times when he did things that were extraordinary. And yet, so much of his life must have been involved in taking up with the same mundane activities day by day.

He must have worked for his earthly father, Joseph, as a young man. And for him, work would have been a daily routine. And he would have just had to, he would have had to face the same kind of challenges as everyone else did.

And I believe that that's what made Jesus so approachable. He knew what real life was all about. The Gospel has its feet on the ground. The Bible has its feet on the ground.

And God knows what you're going to face tomorrow and what you might even be facing today. He knows everything about you. And so that's, of course, what makes it so useful to come around God's Word.

And that's why it's so harmful when we abandon God's Word or when we neglect the Bible, either by not coming to church on a Sunday or by not reading it from day to day.

[6 : 57] We neglect the source of strength that God has provided for us for our daily. You see, it's a complete mistake to believe that our lives are separated into the spiritual and the secular, if you like.

That's a complete myth. The whole of my life must be my spiritual life. It must be dedicated and committed to God. And there are times when I must come aside to read God's Word, when I must take time out to rest, like on a Sunday, and to come to church so that I can be refreshed.

But there are other times when God needs me to apply that, to put that knowledge and that change into effect in the real world. And I have no right whatsoever to elevate one more than the other.

The work that God has given me is the work that God expects me to do my best at. And that's the place, as I said this morning, that God has placed us. And we must never, ever think that somehow that's on a kind of lower level than, because God has given us that place.

And that means that we need to do whatever we do, the Bible says, to do it to the glory of God. Whatever, whether it's hammering a nail, or whether it's taking a cylinder head gasket off, or whether it's changing a wheel, or whether it's cleaning up after the kids, or washing dishes, or Hoovering the floor, or whatever it is, we have to do all to the glory of God, because that's the work that God has given us to do.

[8 : 28] Even if it's mundane, and even if we wish we were a million miles away, and if we get up in the morning, and we think, oh no, another day, same thing, time and time again, I've got to face the same people, the same routine, the same duties, and that's the way we feel sometimes.

But the Bible tells us about people for whom life was just as tedious, and yet God was able to work all of that mundane routine into his glory, and that's the marvelous thing.

You don't know what your life is going to contribute to the glory of God. You don't know, but it won't contribute if you've got this hesitant, kind of negative attitude, and that way in which we sometimes moan and spend our whole lives moaning and groaning and always seeing the negative side, always seeing the dark side, and never really showing in our lives the joy of the Lord that God has given us in Jesus Christ.

God has given us our lives. Yes, we live in a sinful world. Yes, we live in a broken world, a world that is difficult sometimes to be part of, particularly for the Christian, and the more different we try to be, the more we try to serve the Lord, then sometimes the more difficult it is, and yet that's where the Lord has placed us, because, and we know that it's possible to live that, because God himself, God never expects us to go where he hasn't gone before, and it's because Jesus has come into that level, into that real world, that we can face the difficulties of tomorrow.

So that's the level in which Jesus came, and this is the level also where sometimes there are hardships. There was famine in the land. I suppose a modern equivalent of a famine might be the credit crunch.

[10 : 22] It's a different kind of famine, brought about for different reasons, but nevertheless, real people are having to suffer hardship. Perhaps there are people here tonight whose lives are changed in some way, either one way or the other, because of the current credit crunch.

We don't know when it's going to end. We don't know if it might even get worse, and more of us might have to suffer because of that, financially, or in jobs, or whatever. But the Bible knows all of it.

God knows all of these things, and other people before have had to adjust and modify their routine and their lives in order to cope with changing circumstances.

And it's a reminder that you can't rely upon things always being what they were. You can't say that because two years ago I had a certain standard of living that now I have a right to that standard of living, and because I don't have that anymore, something's gone wrong, and somebody has to pay for this, and some heads have got to roll.

I have a right to that standard of living. You certainly can't say that as a Christian, because you know, the Bible tells you that this world is passing away, and there are times of prosperity, but there are also times of adversity, and the test is, it's easy to live whenever the going is good, and when we've got plenty of income coming in, and we've got a great lifestyle.

[11 : 47] There's no challenge in that at all, but how are we going to react when the going gets tough, and when the screws are tightened, and when we find it difficult, more difficult, how are we going to react there?

Are we going to react negatively by continuing to moan and groan about this present situation? Well, if you're doing that, and if you're a Christian, what you're doing is, you're just doing what everybody else does.

What's the difference in your life? If that's where you're looking, if that's where your hope lies, in politics, or in economy, or on all of these things. But as Christians, we have to show by our lives that our faith is placed beyond this world, in the God who is continuous, and who is constant, who is faithful, and for whom there is no change.

And that's the challenge. Can we say tonight, with the Apostle Paul, I have learned to be content in every circumstance.

I've known how to be elevated, and I've known how to be debased. I've known how to be rich, and I've known how to be poor. I've known how to live when things are going well for me, and I've known how to live when things are going terribly.

[13 : 03] That's the challenge. And we must remain constant because we are seeking first the kingdom of God. First the kingdom of God, and then only then. And whatever's provided for us, we know it comes from God anyway.

And we're thankful for what we have. I hope that we're thankful for every meal that we have. And I hope that every one of us expresses that thanks audibly, and makes a point of giving thanks to the Lord for all that He has given to us.

So it's a place into which Jesus came, but it's also a place where there were hardships, where there were changing circumstances. And I might also say, it wasn't just the kind of agricultural situation that had changed here, so that there was a famine.

The political situation in Israel at that time was a difficult one as well. Some years ago, Elijah had been the prophet, and they had the most horrendous king, and he had an even more horrendous wicked wife, Jezebel.

Ahab was the king, and Jezebel was the queen. Now they had wreaked havoc. They had systematically slaughtered many, many of God's people. So it left the whole nation demoralized and scattered.

[14 : 19] And many of the people, of course, had gone with a flow. It's easy, of course, to go with a flow. And they had become idol worshipers instead of worshiping God.

And that meant that if you really were serious about worshiping Jehovah, you were in a minority. And it's never easy to be in a minority.

Not only so, but it meant that you got absolutely no help and support or encouragement from the powers that be. Way back in David and Solomon's time, the whole country was dedicated and committed to the Lord en masse.

Now, a number of hundreds of years later, then hardly anybody is on the Lord's side. So that if you were a Christian in the days of Elisha, you had to know how to fend for yourself.

And although it was slightly easier in the days of Elisha compared to Elijah, you still had to live almost like a kind of a refugee. And that's the kind of situation we find here where the church has been reduced to only a handful of people.

[15 : 27] And they have to fend for themselves. So coupled with that, when there's a famine in the land, it makes it 10 times more difficult. And you might well say, well, surely if the Lord is protecting his people, why does he allow a famine?

Even you would... Why, when the going is tough already, does God make the going even tougher by sending a famine into the land or by allowing a famine into the land?

That's the world we live in. It's the real world, the world which is unpredictable, where we don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next.

And God is not going to wrap us in cotton wool. He's not going to make us immune to the sicknesses and the troubles of this world. He just doesn't do that.

And what we need to do in our prayer is not ask him to keep us from every eventuality, but give us the grace and the strength to go through the difficulties in a way that is pleasing to him and the way that brings glory to him.

[16 : 35] Even if that means our getting sick or our becoming poor or our death even itself. We have to live in the real world.

And sometimes I feel that, and I guess I'm probably as much to blame as anyone else, it's so easy in prayer to ask God for protection from this and protection for that, protection for...

Of course that is, of course that's what we want. And yet it's totally unrealistic, isn't it? God's not going to protect us from everything in the world. He wants us to be in the real world in order to bring glory to his name.

And sometimes that means being in the prison cell, being without food. Like the Apostle Paul, I know how to be elevated and I know how to be humbled. That's what we have to say.

So it's a place where there are hardships, but it's also a place where mistakes are made. We are part of the real world. And sometimes mistakes are made for the best of motives.

[17 : 41] I can well imagine these prophets, they were very often young men full of zeal, full of love for the Lord, and they wanted nothing more than for the kingdom to be transformed.

These were men who had been converted in their youth, as many of our own young people are, and they wanted to use their energy to support the work of the gospel. And because there was a famine in the land, they had to survive.

And somebody said, set, he said to his servant, that was Elisha, put the pot on and boil stew for the sons of the prophets. Now they were, they were pretty good at going and trying to be versatile in everything.

They were, they knew how to spot herbs and plants and ingredients and to make the most of whatever vegetation that there was in order to be nourished.

And wild melon, well, apparently this colokinth or the colosynth, although it looks almost identical to the wild melon, it is poisonous.

[18 : 42] And if you have too much of it, it can actually be fatal. And somebody suggested this is what it was. Somebody, and you can well imagine some, a young man maybe who didn't know any better, who, in full of zeal, who spent maybe all day looking for herbs and plants to put in the stew.

And he found this colokinth, he thought it was a wild melon, took it back, cut it up, put it into the stew and before anyone knew it, it was too late. And the stew was completely ruined.

The damage was done. There was no way it could be redressed. It couldn't be, it couldn't be reversed. And there was death in the pot. And that meant that it's all, you know, we are used to, of course, having a meal as a kind of top up, isn't it?

But when these people had meals, it was absolutely vital. They possibly didn't, hadn't eaten anything for a day or two days beforehand. So for them to miss out on a meal was an absolute disaster.

They needed all the strength that they could get. And they needed all the nourishment that they could get. So after all that they had done and they'd spent so much energy on trying to find ingredients for this, when they found out that there was death and that the stew was poisoned, it was a real disaster.

[19 : 55] You see, we can, we can do things with the best of intentions and only realize afterwards that what we've done has been wrong.

We live in a world full of mistakes. We've all made mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes. There isn't a single person in the world that doesn't make mistakes at some point in time.

Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean that you don't make mistakes. You can ask the Lord to keep you from making mistakes, but that's not going to happen. We live again in the real world.

And that's why I read that third story in 2 Kings chapter 6, once again, with the best of intentions as they went about building this new building. And again, someone was overzealous in hitting a piece of wood with an axe.

The axe head fell off and plunged into the water and into the depths of the water and it was borrowed. Disaster.

[21 : 01] A complete disaster. For us, borrowing a tool is neither here nor there. We just go to the shop and buy another one. But for them, they didn't have any money. And the person from whom he borrowed the axe head, he would have needed it himself.

It was part of his work. And if he didn't have his axe, he didn't have a job. So for both of them, it was a complete disaster. It was a life-changing, life-transforming disaster.

This is the world in which mistakes are made. The chances are that you've probably made a mistake over the past week or the past month and you've said exactly the same thing. It's all very well, oh, I wish I hadn't done that.

We all say that. I wish I hadn't. I wish I had spent a wee bit more time looking at that that melon or that colicinch and I would have known then. But it's too late because some of us are more impulsive than others.

Some of us are more in eager than others. And depending on our nature, the person who's more hesitant and wise will probably make less mistakes. But that depends on your nature.

[22 : 05] It depends on the way that the Lord has made you. Some of us are more prone to error than that. That's the same as what we speak, which one of us hasn't made a mistake in something that we've said to someone.

I know it happens to me a lot that I say something and I come away and I think, oh, that will be misunderstood. I shouldn't have said it. I wish I would have put it better. And for some of us, we say things that hurt someone else.

We don't intend to. And we say the wrong thing. We come away asking, oh, Lord, why did I say that? And sometimes we say, well, why did you allow me to say that? Once again, as if God is going to be putting out his hand and covering our mouth every time we're going to come out with something that's wrong.

God doesn't operate like that. Neither does he operate in a way that he would put his hand out and stop this man from picking up the colicinch.

He doesn't operate like that. And yet he operates, doesn't he? Yet the story doesn't end there. because as they came to Elisha, they came to God.

[23 : 11] And Elisha represented, as we said last week, the word of God. He represented the presence of God among his people. And the Bible has promised us that God works things.

He works all things. Sometimes we don't realize what he's doing. But nevertheless, the Bible tells us that God works all things for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

Some people react to that and they say, well, that's just a pipe dream. It's just nothing to do with reality. It is. Because all the promises of God are reality. They are real promises in which God really works all things together for good to those who love him.

And here is exactly what he's doing. Albeit it's a miracle. And yet, what we see here, if we set aside the miraculous, is God intervening and becoming involved in the affairs of ordinary people as they work for him.

And that's the one thing that we can be absolutely sure of as well as we go from day to day, as we live from day to day in whatever we're doing, that God is involved in what we're doing, taking an active interest and shaping and organizing and ordering our lives so that they are transformed to working out his purposes in his own peculiar way.

[24 : 38] We see that, for example, in Luke chapter 5 at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he went to the disciples and when they had had a completely unsuccessful night at fishing and he met them on the shores of the Lake of Galilee and he started talking to them and he said to Peter, launch out into the deep, Peter said to him, Lord, we have worked all night and we've caught nothing.

Yet, said Jesus, because you say so. Now, what's Jesus doing there? He's becoming involved in the ordinary. He's coming to where we are and he's involved in what we are doing and God's intervention makes all the difference and it makes all the difference for God's people to know that God has a purpose even in our mistakes and he's able, he's able to somehow or other weave our errors and our weaknesses and our mishaps.

He's able somehow or other in his own marvelous providence to, he's able to, to, to cover our mistakes very often and he's able to, and of course, doesn't give us an example, an excuse to, to make them.

For example, you see that again where Peter, when Jesus was arrested and of course, remember what kind of person Peter was, he was an impulsive man and he was outraged at the fact that these men had come to arrest Jesus.

Out came the sword and he was using the sword before he had even time to think. Peter, for Peter, he said first and thought later, he did first and thought later. That was the kind of person he was and before he knew it, he had cut off the servant of the high priest's ear.

[26 : 26] He had done something wrong and Jesus rebuked him for it. He had made a mistake. He'd done something that was completely out of order, completely uncalled for, same thing as you and I would do sometimes and yet, what did Jesus do?

He intervened, he's healed the man's ear. He covered up, he covered up what Peter had done and you know this, I believe tonight that we have every right to come to the Lord, I've done it myself very often, in prayer and ask the Lord, Lord, you know what I've done these past few days and I have come to realize that what I've done or what I've said has been wrong.

I didn't know it at the time. I might even at the time have acted out of good motives, the very best of motives but I've done something in retrospect that has been foolish, it's been so stupid and so, it's been so damaging and so harmful and it just makes me shudder, brings me out in a cold sweat to think of the harm or the consequences that there might be in what I have just done and I don't know what to do about it.

I can't do anything about it. I believe that when we come to the Lord, the Lord can, he can do whatever lies within his power to resolve in his own way to resolve that situation and that's a tremendous, tremendously encouraging fact, isn't it?

Well, I'll tell you, it's certainly given me encouragement on many occasions because I too have blown it on many occasions and I have to come to the Lord and say, Lord, I don't know how you can do this but somehow or other, will you please, please, make what I have done weave into your plan and your purpose so that your name may be glory because the last thing I ever want to see is your name shamed or debased in any way and God's able to do that.

[28 : 37] Somehow or other, he's able to do it in ways that are beyond our imagination and beyond our expectation. But the second, the second miracle or the second event is one which we're, which we recognize right away.

It's one which bears such a similarity to the feeding of the 5,000. It's quite remarkable, isn't it? In fact, you have to wonder whether Jesus planned the feeding of the 5,000 in order to correspond with this event here where the man from Baal Shalisha, he brought the man of God bread from first fruits, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack and Elisha said, give to the men that they may eat.

But the servant said, how can I set this before a hundred men? So Elisha repeated, give them to the men. Now there's two things here. First of all, there's the action of the man from Baal Shalisha who has an example to all of us of what it means to contribute to the work of God.

But then there's the bad example of the servant of the man of God who only sees the negative in what this first man has done. So there's an example to follow and an example to avoid.

The first example, the one to follow is the man from Baal Shalisha who came bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

[30 : 09] Now I'm quite sure that this man from Baal Shalisha knew perfectly well how totally inadequate his gift was. I don't believe for a moment that he brought this and even if he didn't, what he did was something quite, quite remarkable.

He took of what he had and he gave them, he gave it to Elisha and to his colleagues and in giving it to Elisha he was giving it to the work of God and when you give to the work of God you're giving to the Lord himself.

It's an act of worship. Now God doesn't expect what we don't have and it may very well be whatever that contribution is and we always think, we always end up thinking of contribution as only being money contributions.

Well that comes into it, doubtless. The New Testament makes that very clear but God expects far more than our money contributions. He expects us to contribute what we have and helping and encouraging and giving what we have of our skills and our qualities and our gifts to the help of other people.

Now very often when we think of what can I do for the Lord the answer is negative because you compare yourself to someone else and you think well that person is so much more gifted than I am.

[31 : 33] I wouldn't be surprised if that person became a Sunday school teacher but I couldn't do it. Why not?

God doesn't ask us for what we don't have, he asks us for what we have and when we come to him with what we have Jesus said this, I tell you he said whoever gives a cup of cold water in my name to the least of one of my disciples he shall not lose his reward.

And you remember when exactly the same and this is moving on to the servant's negative attitude wasn't it? Because how discouraging was this servant? And I hope he didn't say it in front of, I rather suspect that the servant did say it in front of the man from Baal Shalishah as soon as he brought his offering as soon as he brought his gift the servant said how can I set this before a hundred men?

How discouraging is that? Not only to the man who brought the gift but to everyone, everybody would have listened to the servant. You know it amazes me how the person who's negative is always the person who's listened to.

I don't know there's something within us that if you say something negative it kind of just makes everyone well it just kind of makes you retreat. It's much more effective to be negative than to be positive.

[33 : 02] And instead of saying, instead of saying how can I set this before a hundred men, what this man if he was truly a man of faith, he should have been so thankful that God had put it into the heart of this man from Baal Shalashah, it was a wee bit like when the spies went into Canaan, twelve of them, and they came back and they brought their report to Moses and the rest of the people.

Ten of them said we can't go in because the people in Canaan are far too mighty for us. We're all dead the moment we go in. And then all of a sudden, all of a sudden, it was as if Caleb and Joshua didn't exist.

They were like, is anybody going to listen to us? They couldn't be heard because everybody was wailing and moaning so much and threatening to stone Moses and trying to drag them all back to Egypt where they thought they were actually better off.

See, the people with the negative report, they were the ones who had the most influence on the people. And before they knew it, it was as if they had no God at all. And it was as if God had done nothing for them.

And what they should have done is they should have said, they should have used the logic that said, well, God has brought us thus far and he's done so miraculously. He's made every provision for us.

[34 : 22] Then why can we not continue to trust him to do the impossible? But instead of that, all they looked at was the outside. Just like this servant.

How can I set this before a hundred men? Make sure you are not a discouragement. Do not be a discouragement. Look at what God can do with something rather than its inadequacy.

That's the life of faith. The disciples said exactly the same thing. There's a boy here with five loaves and two fishes. What are they among so many? Jesus said, make the people sit down.

You have to learn that God can do all things and that you can do all things through God who strengthens you and nothing is impossible with God. And if God is for us, then who can be against us?

And we need to learn the same thing. That's the life of faith. And that's the way to face every situation tomorrow or today. That's the way to face every difficulty.

[35 : 26] With the Lord, I can overleap a wall. Nothing is impossible. Because God who, Paul says, spared not his own son, but gave him up for us all, how shall he not also freely give us all things?

He can cover up our mistakes. He can make all things work together for good to them who love him. He can do in us and for us more than we can ask. Let's think big about God because God is a great God.

He is able to do what we cannot do by ourselves. He can take our little contributions and do in them and with them what we never even imagined.

He can take your contribution whether it's money or anything else, he can take it and he can make it go to feed thousands of people and to be an influence in this world.

And so let's not be discouraged. Let's not listen to the voices of negativism. Let's keep our eyes fixed upon the God who is the same yesterday and today and forever.

[36 : 44] Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we give thanks for the confidence that we can have in your reality and in your power.

We give thanks, O Lord, that when we step out in faith and when we look only to Jesus, believing that he will fulfill his own word and his own purpose, that it gives us, it fills us with such certainty so that we know that we can rest in you and trust in you for every eventuality.

And Lord, we pray then that as we face whatever difficulties, whatever situations face us in the coming days, we pray to remember what these men of faith did, men like Elijah and Elisha, were prepared to go through this world and suffer all kinds of hardships and difficulties because they looked for a city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God, and they lived and died not having seen the result of their lives, and we will live and die not having seen the result of our lives, but we pray nevertheless to believe completely that your purpose will come to pass in each of us, and each of us has a contribution to make to that.

Lord God, we pray that you bless us and forgive us in Jesus' name. Amen.