

Miraculous Meals

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[0 : 0 0] Just for a little while, I want to go back to 2 Kings chapter 4 and to the verses we read, verses 38 to the end of the chapters on page 372. And it's quite interesting, I think, that some of what we'll see tonight, some of what I'll say tonight, is very, it parallels a lot of what we said this morning, not deliberately, just the way it's happened.

And that's always a good thing, I think, because it usually means that God is wanting to remind us of something important in our lives. And I guess part of it is about the nature of faith. We looked a little bit about what faith is this morning, a little bit about that and the nature of living the life of faith today.

And I want to just back that up again, because this is a passage that does speak about faith, yes, in an Old Testament context. But it does speak about faith and it speaks about miracles, faith and miracles being very important.

And I think one of the things that comes across in this passage is that miracles don't happen in a vacuum. They usually happen in a particular context and very often the context of miracles happening is in the context of struggle, in the context of difficulty.

So the first thing I want to focus on is that faith, I've entitled this but faith laboring, and then I'm going to talk about faith working.

[1 : 3 2] Okay, let's start by talking about faith laboring, what do I mean by that? I think this morning we looked at faith being a gift, didn't we? We saw that briefly that faith is a gift, it's a precious gift that God gives.

In other words, it's not just something we work up ourselves, it's not just something that's within us, but it's a gift that comes from God. It's the ability to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Okay, it's his gift. Faith is his gift. And because faith is his gift and because grace is his gift and salvation is his gift, sometimes I think we feel that because it's given to us in this way, why are we struggling so badly?

And because faith is his gift, then we think, well, it must be his fault if I'm struggling so badly, because we've rightly given him, acknowledged him as the giver of this gift.

But why is it sometimes we feel that we don't see any miracles? Why is it that the promises do seem quite empty in our lives? What part do I play if faith is a gift that we receive from God and salvation is a gift and grace is a gift?

[2 : 4 8] What place do I play? What part do I play? But there's a very important part that we play. The responsibility that we have as Christians to work out our faith, to live our faith, and to show the fruit of our faith, because what faith enables us to do is to have that relationship with Christ and to have that life in us that enables us to follow Him and obey Him.

We love Him. We obey Him because we love Him. It's a little bit like being given a beautiful new overcoat, really nice overcoat.

As a gift, we're given that, but it's no good for us if we just leave it in its expensive box wrapped up. We need to take that gift, that overcoat, and we need to wear it, and then we need to walk with it, if it's going to be of any use to us.

And in many ways, faith is the same. It is God's gift that we receive and we accept and we take from Him when we ask Him for the faith to believe. But then we've got to live it. So we've got to go from here and we've got to live out that faith in our lives.

God doesn't live our life for us at that level. He gives us the responsibility to follow Him and to serve Him and to love Him. And we're still in this world.

[4 : 12] And you're still with your friends. You're still with your family and you're still in your jobs. And often, we are being asked to work out that faith in these very difficult circumstances.

And that was the situation. I noticed the Old Testament and it was different from the situation we did. But nonetheless, this is the situation that was happening to God's people in the middle of the Old Testament.

There was a remnant of them, a small number of them at this point, that had faith, that believed, including the prophets and some others. And they had faith. Yet, life went on for them.

They were believers. They were under God's blessing and they knew God's grace in their lives. But life still went on for them. And it wasn't like everything was easy for them because they believed.

It may well have been that, well, not may well have been, there definitely was a famine in that region. We're told that Elisha was living at a time in Gilgoth where there was a famine in the region.

[5 : 12] And very often, famines were not as a result of God's judgment. But in the Old Testament, sometimes they were. Because there was this whole covenant between God and His people, blessings and judgment.

And if they didn't follow God and if they didn't serve God, if they ran after idols, that God would bring judgment on them. And sometimes it was a very physical judgment. So that famine could often, or could at least sometimes be linked with their rebellion and sin.

So there was these believers, these who trust in God. Yet, they were affected by the general malaise of unbelief around them. And they were affected in the point of facing up to a famine as well.

And often to persecution and difficulty. So here we have the company of the prophets, the theological seminary of students who were going to be the future preachers, as it were.

And they were all together. And they were having to spend their time. They were having to spend their time gathering food. It was subsistence living that they were doing.

[6 : 18] They were in a famine. They didn't know much time to be learning the Bible and to learning God's word or listening for what God was saying. They were cooking and they were gathering by the sweat of their brow.

And it was a difficult time for them to live out their lives. And yet in this story, in the two little stories we have here. We see that life went on for them, although it was difficult times and it was a famine.

Life went on for them and life went on for them where they worked out their faith. Where faith was at the core. So this is a little vengress here of two stories where life was difficult.

Life went on as normal for everyone around them. Their life was no different from what everyone else's was in terms of their circumstances. But they continued to work out their faith in the difficult circumstances they found themselves in.

They obeyed God. They listened to God. They followed God. They continued to serve God. The company of the prophets were still together. Worshipping God, Elisha, was still listening for God.

[7 : 24] And in the second story, there's this, we're told about a man who came from Baal Shalisha. And bringing the man of God, 20 loaves of barley from the first ripe corn along with some years of corn.

And here's a story of, this is just someone from another region. It was another region that was an idolatrous, or an idol-worshipping region.

Even the name gives that away. And yet he, in that difficult circumstance, was searching out for a true man of God to support and to help and to bring the first fruits of his crops or his land to offer them to this man who would be a representative of God.

And it was a great act of faith. And so there's little indications that these guys, despite the famine they were living in under, and possibly under the wider judgment of God as a people, the life went on for them, but they continued to work out their faith in difficult circumstances.

Now, that is an important lesson for us as well in our own lives, that we recognise that when we become Christians, our life doesn't automatically change.

[8 : 46] And our circumstances don't automatically change. You know, there was still famine in the land here. And so for us, life goes on even though we have been born in you as Christians, and we've moved from darkness to light spiritually, we're still living in a world where there's difficulties and problems and illness and drudgery and sweat of the brow.

A lot of you might feel that tonight as you go home and think of tomorrow. When at the workplace, you might have a particularly rough week, rubbish week, difficult week, week when you're going to be opposed, week when you've got to meet up with people or have reviews or difficult things that you're going to have to face up to, or awkward customers or difficult situations, and life goes on.

You might have an appointment with the doctor that you're dreading, fearful of. And generally speaking, there's no exception to that, that life goes on for people, even when they become Christians.

God doesn't give us a king-size bed just to relax in for the rest of our lives. But we are asked, just like these people here, and this man who's even unnamed, to live in this situation that we find ourselves in, but to do so with faith at the core.

And I think that's a very significant lesson because when we struggle, we often want to throw out faith at that point. And we want to question God and say, well, why is he doing this?

[10 : 20] But the reality is he wants us to take our faith and act on our faith, however life is panning out for us, and to continue to obey him and continue to serve him with gratitude and with obedience and with gratefulness and with Christ-centeredness.

And it will not be easy for us. I don't for a moment believe that for Alicia, the company of prophets, and for this man who travelled a long way to bring his offering, it was easy for him to believe, easy for them to believe and easy for them to serve.

I think much of their time would have been spent in tiredness and weariness and struggling to work out what it meant to be a believer and why God was letting these things happen.

But nonetheless, they continued to serve and as a result, continued to serve and see their faith working in difficult circumstances. And that's encouragement for us that when we go on in our lives in testing and challenging and difficult times, we are asked primarily to continue to walk by faith.

We're asked to persevere, to keep going, to be steady, to be solid, and to commit our lives consistently to the living God, whatever is happening around us.

[11 : 50] And that is, I think, a significant and important lesson that we learn throughout Scripture and that we can take from this passage here also that faith often works and is asked to work in the monotony and drudgery and difficulty of everyday living.

Not many of us have a life of luxury. Not many of us have a life of ease. Now you may think that I'm always banging on about that.

And maybe it's just my particular perspective, my doer, Calvinistic, Presbyterian perspective, maybe. But maybe it's because that is reality for us, for so many of us, that we take our faith and let it shine in difficult circumstances rather than looking for our circumstances to change and become easy for us in life.

So we take our faith and we live with that faith. So faith labours in these circumstances, but we also see faith working in these circumstances.

And I think that's very important as well. In other words, faith isn't broken. And we're not under God's judgment because our situations and our circumstances and our struggles and the sweat of our brow is what we're experiencing from day to day.

[13 : 14] I think rather we find that as we continue to work out our faith and work out our salvation with fear and trembling, that we begin to understand God is with us in this and God is for us in this and God will act on our behalf and for us through the circumstances we find ourselves in.

These believers continued in their faith, despite the fact that very few people were believing, despite the fact that there was a famine in the land, and despite the fact that most people were worshiping idols, they went forward in these difficult circumstances and they saw God's faithfulness and they saw God's miracle at work.

And I think there's two very small miracles, not very small miracles, but there are miracles here and they point the people here to something better and they point us to something better as well.

They point us very much to Christ and to the provision of Christ. So there's two miracles. There's the miracle of the death in the pot, quite a dramatic title, the stew that was made and obviously one of the prophets went out to get some flavouring and he got some kind of herbs that were from a wild vine that were poisonous and without really realising it, he put it into the stew, or not realising it was poisonous, he put it into the stew and obviously we're kind of given a very summarised picture here but obviously some of the guys had started to eat that and were either violently sick or were aware that they were going to become very, very ill very quickly because the poison was setting in and there was death in the pot.

It was obviously a very serious case of food poisoning, probably which would have resulted in death and Alicia simply visually uses this demonstration of asking for flour and he puts it into the pot and it's served to the people and there's nothing harmful in the pot.

[15 : 25] Now there's different levels in which this is significant, it would have been significant because there was very little food, because there was a famine. So the thought of having a large pot of stew just thrown away because someone had put some poisonous herbs and it was frustrating.

So there was that level of frustration but also there was also the poison which was very, very deadly. And then the second picture is the feeding of these men, 100 men who are miraculously provided for with this guy who comes with 20 loaves, probably pretty small loaves of barley bread.

It doesn't seem enough for 100 men but Alicia says, give it to the people for this what the Lord says they will eat and there will be some left over and we'll come back to that. You may have heard this story or one like it somewhere before but what's interesting here and also in many other places, particularly maybe in the Old Testament, many of the miracles that went on, and this is just on the side but it's an important one, revolved around food.

Now for us that might not be quite so significant because we just got to the supermarket and buy our food. And it happens, it's not a big deal to us, in fact we can just do it online and it's delivered to the house and it's not a big deal for us, we don't think about where our food comes from, we don't think about how much food we're going to have, it's all there, it's all on tap as it were, and we get the food that we want as often as we want it, and whenever we want it.

But many of, you need to remember that the Bible was written in many situations to people who were living in subsistence, living. They were living hand to mouth.

[17 : 10] Food was absolutely precious and valuable to them and in this situation these company, the prophets, they were spending all every day. You know we see it on live, oh well that's going back a bit, see it on different times when there's a peel, you see children walking for four hours to get, to carry home two pots of water, fresh water, and it takes them four hours to go and four hours to come back and the rest of the family is out looking for food and it takes them all day.

And so their lives revolved around simply finding food and subsisting on that food, living on that food, gathering, preparing, eating, and that was their life.

And so many of the miracles which may seem slightly insignificant are fairly small to us because they revolve around food were crucially important to these people and they were revealing a God who was different from Bale, for example, this God of apparent fertility, who couldn't provide for them.

And this was the living God who provided food and who cared for their day to day needs, you know, food is so basic and so significant in life and this was God saying that He is providing for them in a miraculous way.

So God's intervention in both of these stories was important at the time because it reminded them that while life was difficult and while they weren't excluded from the famine and the problems of day to day living, as they followed God and as they trusted God by faith, then God would provide for them.

[18 : 57] God cared for them, God was living, God was worth trusting, God was a great God. So you've got these two stories and the death in the pot is just a reminder to us that a basic level of God's care and provision but also a more significant level that He was the God who was stronger than poison and stronger than death and He was the one who could bring life out of death.

Now I don't think that's spiritualising the story, I think it's just moving the story forward to the greatest revelation of God's power over death on the cross.

It points forward to a greater revelation of His power over death. This is, by comparison, a small picture of what God does.

God is the author of life, God who can turn death into life and bring nourishment and provision for His people. And that is a great reality for us, even in the struggles we face in our Christian lives is that we continue to remember that our trust is in the one who is the author of life and the one who has defeated death on our behalf.

So whatever is happening to us in our lives of this great hope that the sting of death has been removed and that we will live with Him forever.

[20 : 42] But I think if it's not spiritualising it too much, I think there's a reminder too, just like these guys here, particularly the poor bloke that went out into the fields to gather herbs with the best intention in the world and with no malice aforethought whatsoever, but he just makes amnest of it.

And he gathers and puts something into the stew which he should never have done. And his fallibility is exposed here. And I think there's just a gentle and sweet picture there of the way God deals with us as His fallible servants when we will often make stupid mistakes and we do things wrong, sometimes that might cause great harm.

Maybe we say things that could cause, without really meaning it, great harm, or we do things that we do genuinely, but they're genuinely disastrous for Him.

And as we recognise and see the mess we've made, see that there's just death in the pot of our experience in our lives and that we've really screwed things up, we can come back to Christ and we can come back to God and we can see His ability to neutralise our stupidity.

Isn't that great? From a day-to-day basis, He can neutralise the stupid mistakes we make, the stupid things that sometimes we say. He can forgive these things.

[22 : 19] There's that great verse in Joel, I think it's chapter 2, where he returns to us the years the locusts have eaten. You know, so we can amess things up and there can be a famine in our own Christian experience, a famine of wisdom and of grace and of right living.

But as we come to Him and recognise that, He takes very often what are the bad situations we find ourselves in because of us, because of what we've done, because maybe we've gone out and not thought about what we've done, or not asked for help or not asked for wisdom.

He can take that and He can neutralise it, and not just neutralise it but make it good. That's a great thing and it's a miraculous thing.

And it's something that is a remarkable encouragement in our faith, because no one else can do that for us in the way God can.

He can take the mistakes we've made that we can't change, that we would love to change, and He can turn them round as we cry out to Him and make that situation good.

[23 : 38] And then there's the little story of the feeding again of the hundred. And that is that story that's repeated so often in the Bible, isn't it, of God providing food, whether it's manna in the desert, or whether it's a widow with the cruise of oil, or whether it's the feeding of the 5000, or the 4000, you just see the classic provision of God in these stories of bread, bread, the basic necessity of life that God provides again and again for our Christian lives, and that He does that for us so much so that even His model prayer for us is give us this day our daily bread.

Asking God for His provision materially, practically in our lives, not for the luxuries, but for the necessities of life to get through, and knowing that when we trust in Him and live by faith in Him, even in a famine, even in a famine, even in a famine of faith, even when it's really difficult and no one else believes, and those who do believe don't seem that committed to believing, that as we are faithful and just and obedient to Him in grace, that He will provide for us because He loves us, and it will be miraculous, and He will give us what we need, and He will constantly be raising up the low places and bringing down the high places so our walk is straight as we trust in Him.

He provides for us, that's what He does, and of course it points to that great cry that Jesus made to Himself, I believe, and I don't think it's spiritualised too much to bring it round to that as well, where He says, I am the bread of life.

It's in the same chapter as where He's provided the bread for the feeding of the 5,000, but He goes on to say, there's a more significant spiritual feeding that I will do, and even if we were to go physically hungry and thirsty physically, we have this spiritual provision which is for eternal life, and we trust in Him for His promises, and we believe in Him that He is worth believing and cast your bread upon the waters for after many days, you will find it against, you know, go out in faith and it will return to you many times over.

Let not become weary and well-doing for at the proper time, you will receive a harvest if we do not give up, and the promise of God as the bread of life providing for us, bring your whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, trust me and see if I will not open the flood gates of heaven, the provision for us as we obey and serve and follow Him.

[26 : 41] Whoever sews generously will reap generously, go out with faith even in a famine and trust in Him and find His provision and His goodness and His grace.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you will, and it will be given to you trust. It's great God of promise and see faith at work in the most difficult of circumstances.

And just as we close, there's a mention of His servant, verse 43. The servant is mentioned by name here, but it's, I think, most likely to be Gihazih, because Gihazih is his servant right through this story, and he says, how can I set this before a hundred men?

And Gihazih is the kind of the opposite of the company of prophets and of the man from Baal Shalisha, because he just can't see God, and he can't see how God will work in this situation, and he doesn't believe.

Even though he's seen miracles previously through, that God has done through Elisha, he's blind, he just doesn't trust. And he can't believe because he's just looking with the natural eye, and he's seeing the bread, and he's seeing the hungry men, and he's saying, it doesn't match up, it's not going to happen.

[28 : 08] And that is how we are naturally. And there's people that will come and have been coming to this church for a long, long time, and who have heard the Gospel, and who have been invited to come to Christ, and who have been told about the miracles, and it's been made clear to them so much of the transformation that Jesus brings into people's lives.

And they've seen answered prayer, and they've seen the testimony of others, but they're living in a spiritual famine, and they're not willing to entrust themselves to the living God.

Please pray for people like that, because it's their heart that needs changed, and they need to see that it's not just an earthly thing, they must look with more than just the natural eye.

At both their own lives and the circumstances they find themselves, they must seek the faith that God gifts that will enable them to see exactly what there is.

And there's some great stories further on in Elisha about that vision, about seeing with the eye of faith rather than seeing, just with the struggles and difficulties that we might have in our lives.

[29 : 26] So it may be that we see this faith, even in famine, and the trust in God to work out miracles for us on a day-to-day, ordinary, everyday basis, providing us with what we need, and assuring us of his comfort and care and love.

Let's pray. Lord, help us to see in these stories pictures of your faithfulness, pictures that you're a living, compassionate God of relationship, not like the idols and the bale and other idols that were, idols of wood and stone that were dead and were just figments of nations, imaginations.

And may it be that we believe and trust and put our faith in this God of, this living God who reveals himself in the Bible. Whatever life, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in life, that we would find this loving, gracious, good and holy relationship with Jesus and accept the gift of faith and live by faith, even when it seems like in Scotland today we're very much in a famine, maybe not a famine of food, not a famine of wages or a famine of materialism, but certainly a spiritual famine.

But may we not give up, but may we walk the walk of faith and find amazing answers, sustaining us and encouraging us and keeping us going every day, before we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.