

Family Crisis

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[0 : 00] I'd like to turn back to the reading that we just did, the moving reading in 2 Kings chapter 4. It's quite difficult really sometimes to preach from chapters like this in the Old Testament because culturally they're so different.

The situation is so different from ours. It's pre-Jesus Christ, it's Old Testament. The whole situation is very difficult from our own experience and we look to apply and look to transfer it to ourselves and we certainly can do that.

But it's not easy and it's not easy also because if you read this story and it is a story, it's just a real life story.

It's only the bare bones of the story. So sometimes it's difficult I think for us to understand or as we're reading it, I don't know if you were, as you were reading it, you were kind of going, oh, I'd like to know more about what was going, where was the husband, what was happening and there's all kinds of details that aren't given.

[1 : 11] And so it can be difficult for us too because we like to have so much information to make the most and understand these stories.

But there are broad, I'm going to preach and I have been preaching on Elisha with a broad strokes, but there's broad lessons that we can take from a story like this.

Again, not dissimilar to the story we looked at last week about the widow's oil, how it's almost a kind of, it's a micro story within the bigger picture of what's happening in the Old Testament.

And it's very similar to the ministry of Jesus. You know, they got the ministry of Jesus and he's coming with a great task.

And he's coming to do something hugely significant and he is taken on flesh. He's become one of those human beings that he made.

[2 : 20] And there's this great task that Jesus has come to do. And yet the Gospels are full of micro stories of individual accounts of Jesus dealing with people on the way even to the cross, on the way to Jerusalem, on the way to being forsaken of the Father.

And there's all these personal stories, individual stories of Jesus coming in and affecting Zacchaeus and affecting, obviously, Lazarus and affecting other people who followed him and who listened to him and who were changed by him.

And in many ways, this is a precursor of that. The same reality is that the Gospel and God, while there's this great, great story, there's also these individual instances where God is dealing with people and unless we grasp that we're going to struggle in our own Christian lives.

If our own Christian life is simply a macro picture of what God has achieved for us on the cross, some kind of spiritual healing that will affect us in the future, then we're losing sight of the individual touch of God and Jesus Christ who wants to transform and change our own lives daily and will use our experiences so to do.

And there's really, in many ways, there's a very powerful message within this and I just want to cover a couple of things and apply it, bring it around to remembering that we celebrate the Lord's Supper this evening.

[4 : 08] And I think in this woman's life, I'm going to call her Mrs. S because we don't know her name, so the Shunamite woman will call her Mrs. S because that seems convenient.

For her opening her life to God was a dangerous thing. She opened her life to God and it was dangerous for her to do so.

Obviously I'm guarded in saying that because it was also amazing, but it was dangerous for her. It does seem there's a couple of hints in the passage that she was quite a private woman, that she didn't share her heart very openly, that she carried heavy burdens and a broken heart that she was

not willing really to share with many people.

But she opened her life to God through her contact with Alicia, the prophet of God, as it were, the representative of God and that for her was a dangerous step, was a good step, was a dangerous step.

And I do think we need to reclaim that truth and I'm going to be looking at that a little bit through this story this evening, that when we open our lives to God, it is a dangerous thing to do.

[5 : 35] It's a good thing to do, but it's not as it were from a human point of view, the safe option for us. It's not the easy, casual, safe option that we're looking for in life.

It's double edged because very often when we allow God into our heart, his light to expose the darkness there and to redeem us, he's redeeming us from a place of danger.

And it can be for us an earthquake if we will allow that to happen, if we don't close God off and keep him at the front door of our hearts.

Many of us will do that even as Christians. We feel that we can keep God at arm's length, that we don't need to let him expose and change and renew and review us, but we can keep him at arm's length and we still feel that we will benefit from relationship with him, but we lose out so much.

That he will challenge and play havoc with the human stability that you maybe feel you have, with you and my emotions and with our experiences as we allow the great surgeon to begin to heal our hearts.

[6 : 57] Other than what we often do is we want the great surgeon to heal our circumstances or other people's hearts.

So for Mrs. S, it was a costly decision for her to allow Alicia into her life and God through Alicia. We believe clearly that she was, although it's implied, she was a woman of faith.

And she knew about Alicia and she knew the days that they were living in and she knew it was a prophet of God and that it was a blessing to know someone like Alicia. And so he came every so often and stopped by and she opened her home to him and they had a meal together with the family.

But then she decided, let's make a small room on the roof and the chair and a lamp and he can be like a granny flat for him. Anytime the prophet comes, or a grandpa flat, or a prophet flat, he would come and he would stay there as he would open, she would open her home in this hospitable way. And who knows what her motive behind that was. Was it to gain more insight into God? Was it to hear prophecy? Was it simply to obey in Jewish tradition, to obey and to honour those who were God's servants?

[8 : 17] We don't know. It was a costly decision to be committed to Alicia and to his servant at this time.

It was costly because she bore this burden of being childless. And that made her very vulnerable and made her very fragile.

And particularly in the society in which she lived. It was this longing for a child, this deep, deep desire to have family. And with Alicia staying there, that longing could not be suppressed indefinitely.

She tries to, it's interesting. She's been so kind and Alicia says to her, you know, what is it we can do for you? There must be something we can do for you because you've been so kind. And she says, it's a very interesting reply.

She says, I have a home among my own people. It's a guarded reply. She's saying, I'm okay. I've got a home and I'm with my people.

[9 : 34] But she's hiding the truth. She's hiding her deepest longing. She's trying to suppress that. And Alicia probes further, but probes through Gehazi.

We don't know how Gehazi knows the family and knows what's going on. But she says, well, she has no son and her husband is old. So Alicia deals with this and prophesies by God and in God's strength and through the spirit that she would have a child and would hold a son in her arms this time next year.

Do you see her reply? Don't mislead your servant. Oh, man of God. It's a great vulnerability and a great fear in this answer.

No, don't tease me. Don't give me this answer because I've longed for a child for so long. Don't simply just give this request.

My heart is broken already. Please don't mislead your servant. And so there's a great fear in her life that is revealing this great need she has and it's been ripped open by her contact with God through the Prophet.

[10:48] Then there's an amazing answer. Exactly as the Prophet had said by one year later, she has the child.

And we read, there's only two verses there, but there's probably a good number of years in between. It's a very condensed version of the story because the child grew.

One day he went out to his father who was with the Reapers. We don't know what child was he. Wouldn't it have been a terribly small boy if he went out to the field with his father. But he complained of having tremendously painful headaches and a terribly sore head.

And he's carried into the mother and he dies. He dies. Can you imagine how we read that quickly? And we pass over that.

And maybe it's because we know the end of the story. The child lays on the couch. The child dies. Can you imagine the turmoil and the bitter distress of this woman?

[11:55] It's like doubly worse, isn't it? God gives her what she's longed for all these years and then takes him away. What could be worse?

What could be more cruel? What kind of God would do that? And she cries in bitter distress. But isn't it amazing that she does go to Alicia again.

She goes to Elizabeth. Alicia, and you notice again that she doesn't say to her husband, what's wrong? We don't know whether he knows by this point. It's not clear from the passage.

But she rides out to meet Alicia. This husband asks why. And she says it's all right. And then Gihazie goes to meet her halfway and she says everything's all right.

She doesn't want to do business with anyone, but with God's representative, nobody else is involved at this point. And there's this tremendous pain in her experience.

[12:56] And she says why? Yo, she's in bitter distress. Didn't I ask you for a son? Didn't I tell you? Don't raise my hopes.

What could be more ordinary than that in the middle of the Bible? This is someone complaining to God that her hopes had been raised by his action in her life and then they had been dashed.

Many people will feel like that in their Christian lives. But their hopes have been raised and then maybe their hopes dashed in desperate ways.

And then we have the great visual story of Gihazie not being able to do any effective change.

The servant, and not going to go into that tonight, might be that Gihazie didn't really have a genuine understanding and faith in God, though he was around the Prophet and though he was the Prophet's servant.

[13:58] We will see that later in the next chapter indeed. But Elijah goes, Elisha goes and with this remarkable act of lying on top of the boy, there is restoration and healing and hope renewed.

So we recognise that this woman's involvement with God was hugely costly to her comfort and to a life of ease and yet God was working very powerfully in her because she also came to recognise through the struggle and through the sadness and through the tears and through the bitterness a life of incomparable value that God had touched her, that God had answered her prayer, that God had taken her through the darkness and that God had restored what was lost to her.

And there's darkness, there's shock, there's healing, there's blessing and there's hope and there's a future for her through this visual story of her losing, againing, losing and gaining her child.

And I'm sure much could be said about this and much could be made in terms of spiritual parallels.

But can I just interject here a little bit in terms of the story for ourselves because Elisha, I think clearly for us is a prophet that points forward to Jesus.

Many of the prophets do and I mentioned this last time. But there's much here that points forward to Jesus. Elisha points forward to the restoration that God intends for his people.

[15:51] Ultimate I believe restoration and often in this life also restoration that is completed in glory. It's this ongoing picture of life out of impossibility, out of death, out of deadness.

And we see it with Abraham and Isaac when Abraham often offers up his son. We see it with Elijah with the widow of Zaratheth when he heals and brings her child back to life.

We see it in Job's experience when he loses everything and then we find it restored. And then we see it pointing forward to Jairus' daughter when Jesus goes and in very similar terms to this, that Jesus goes in and closes the door and brings life again to Jairus and Jairus' daughter and it is all

pointing to what Jesus has come to do in the cross.

He has come to bring absolute disruption into people's lives, bringing from death life and all that goes with that.

And there is a cost involved in that for us, a cost personally in allowing the great surgeon to open us up and to deal with our hearts.

[17 : 11] I think the problem for us so often is we want the salvation but we don't genuinely want the healing. We don't want him to cut our hearts open and expose what are some of the bitterness and jealousies and anger and unforgiveness and all that lies deep within us.

We want a cheap salvation and a cheap grace. We want healing and restoration. We want the child, we want the boy but we don't necessarily recognise the great work of transformation that God needs to do in our hearts.

We don't think we need to change very much and we don't feel that what he is offering is a life of incomparable value.

But there is that pointing forward to Jesus and I hope this is not over spiritualising but I think there is also a parallel between Elijah having to come to the boy personally to deal with his death situation and not only deal with him personally but in that very intimate way eyeball to eyeball, hand to hand, mouth to mouth with him.

It seeks symbolically at least of what Jesus has come to do. That Jesus needed to come into our situation. That Jesus needed to identify himself with us even more than simply that intimacy of touch but becoming one of us in order to die in our place.

[18 : 53] It goes further in other words than Elisha. It goes further than that situation and there is a reminder of the cost and the reality of what Jesus has done for us in our lives.

So I just want to in remembering that story apply these things to ourselves in an ongoing way that the Christian life as it was for the Shunamite Mrs. S as it was for the Shunamite woman which is very costly to allow God to act in her life, to even answer her prayers.

I've said this before the old version of Sam which I can't remember which Sam is, by fearful works unto our prayers and answered us to express.

So the prayers that we make in and of themselves can be costly. Lord pray for holiness, that's a costly prayer and we don't know what pain and suffering may be brought into our lives to bring us to that place where that prayer will be answered and for her to involve herself in this man's life and then for the request almost unwittingly to be made was very costly for us.

And so it will be and so it ought to be for us, I'm afraid of you closing and of me closing our lives to God, not being open to God. I'm afraid when our Christianity is pedestrian and nice and sweet because I'm afraid that we don't see and understand who he is and I don't.

[20 : 44] And we invite God into our hearts and invite him to be our Lord, that is a bomb under our lives because there's a cost to our choices and to our conscience, to our selfishness and there's also a cost to our fears because they will be exposed by God.

And many of us will be carrying undelted with issues in our heart and lives, unrequited issues and we will not allow God his Lordship to deal with them.

But he will push you over the edge because he wants you to fly spiritually. He will flick you out of the nest because he wants you to soar.

He will let you be bruised all over because he wants you to walk. You know we know that as parents, don't we? Our children when they're learning to walk they bang against radiators and they hit their heads and they do all kinds of things.

We can't cotton wool them. They need to learn to walk, try and protect them, of course. But these things happen as they learn to become strong and so it will be for us if we recognise that grace is certainly free but it isn't cheap in our lives.

[22 : 08] This is this, we are inviting the sovereign God into our lives who is not content that we simply paddle, that we simply just tread water.

He wants us to deepen in a relationship with him and have his blessing and healing over our black and ugly sinful hearts.

That's what he wants for us. It's not an easy option to become a Christian and to be a Christian and to live as a Christian.

But it is and this is the absolute corollary here is that it's a life as it was for this woman. It's a life of incomparable value. I think the anticipation of this story is a redeeming saviour who comes.

Is one who comes to restore and to bring life. And that is all that the Old Testament points forward to, to blessing, to fruitfulness, to life, to renewal and to relationship.

[23 : 20] Fellowship with God. Forgiveness. So that we die and we stand before God and we're forgiven before him.

It is the declaration has been made. We have hope and we have helped an ultimate way of great restoration. And that is an important and ongoing perspective in our lives as we consider him.

A life of incomparable value is what we need to consider and to remember. So as we head to the Lord's table, it's important that we, I do think in an ongoing way, recognise the cost of becoming a Christian.

I think in the society in which we live, it's an interesting mixture. There's a cost to being a Christian in the society we live in.

But I'm not sure necessarily there's a cost in the church because we're so afraid of losing people.

[24 : 32] We're so afraid of challenging people. We're so afraid of rebuking one another and of pointing us and talking of Christ.

I think sometimes the cost to being a Christian is more than how people react outside than what involves in terms of commitment in the church.

We do recognise the cost, but most of all recognise the cost in terms of honesty. That no one else can be honest with your heart before God and it is important to be accountable and it's important to be open and it's important to lay a request before one another.

But ultimately, if what's your heart like before God and what's mine like, are we honest with Him?

Are we honest with our choices and with our heart and with the potential darkness that we choose to hold on to and can hold on to and not allow Him to deal with?

And recognise the cost because it is a healing cost that until we recognise our need for healing, we simply will not be looking for this Saviour.

[25 : 50] But in recognising the cost, recognise to who He is, that He is the sovereign Lord and there will be many times that He will deal with us in ways we don't understand as it was in the story for the Shunammite woman.

There's mystery to trusting in God. We don't have all the answers. We can't have it neatly packaged. There is times of mystery and of crying out in bitterness and with a bitter heart, in bitter distress.

And even those close to God might know the answer. Elisha didn't know God had hidden it from him. He hasn't told them. And so there's times when we will feel and sense that in our lives but He's sovereign and He's good and He's holy and we will stand before Him.

But it is that life not only of cost but of incomparable value which I believe is why we are given the Lord's Supper. To remind us of that again is it not?

To remind us that there is a healing pain. It is not a deathly pain. It's a healing pain.

[27 : 06] There's a great difference between the two. However hard that is for us in our lives. And we remember that the hope we have is one of ultimate, is hope in this life.

It's life to the full now but it's ultimate hope as well which sometimes maybe the accused Christians in earlier centuries of thinking too much about that.

But in the New Testament a lot of the Christians were undergoing great and severe suffering persecution so it meant a great deal to them to know that this wasn't all there was. For us well we're pretty cushy so it's quite a good life to have here and maybe we don't appreciate heaven so much.

But for those who are persecuted and struggling then there is. But for all of us there's this great knowledge of ultimate value and truth. My uncle Alan passed away this week.

He was 91 years old and he had been a missionary for many years, a medical missionary with the leprosy mission in Hong Kong.

[28 : 11] And isn't it great? And it brings into perspective at times like this the value of being a Christian. That it matters and it is of incomparable value that he now knows incomparable joy.

And maybe that as we come to the table we are not guilty of closing our hearts.

Take the time just to examine your heart in the peace and quiet of the table. And don't be content with powerlessness.

Gihazie will say a little more about him again but Gihazie is kind of an interesting character hanging around this story. But when he's sent out to be the one to heal the boy it doesn't work.

It's a bit like the disciples isn't it? When they're asked to heal and they couldn't heal. They didn't have the power. Jesus said this comes out by prayer and fasting.

[29 : 25] And he's kind of, he's around the man of God and he's aware of what's going on but he's spiritually powerless. And he's not recognised even, he's not recognised by the Shunamite woman as having weight or holiness or spirituality.

He doesn't confide in them, he just thinks it's worth confiding in. May that not be what we're like, you know. Let's not be people whose hearts are closed that others will not confide in spiritually because they don't value what we have to say.

Or that are powerless in our Christian lives, don't recognise and see and aren't people don't come to us for spiritual reality.

It's an interesting challenge in the life of Gahazi and I thought for us. But maybe just for the few moments that we're together around the table that you just enjoy the peace and quiet and that you do that as we must all do, that work of examination in our own hearts and recognise the cost and recognise the cost to Christ but also recognise the incompatible value of who we are and who we serve.

And if you're not a Christian this evening then how much more urgent is that that you will consider him and recognise there will be a cost for you particularly in your independence and in your freedom to choose what you're doing just now because you'll become like we were saying this morning, a follower, a learner, a disciple.

[31 : 07] And you'll say not my will but yours be done and there's a cost to that but it's incomparably great the reality of what we receive from him in return.

Amen. Lord bless us as we turn to celebrate together and the peace and quiet and in the sense of just being a family together that we would enjoy sitting around the Lord's table in the way we do and remembering your death and its great cost and applying that in our own lives and hearts and being refreshed with the sacrament that you've given to us for Jesus' sake we ask these things.

Amen.