

Death in the Pot

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Preacher: Simon Rehberg

[0 : 00] We're going to read together from the Old Testament, from the book of 2 Kings, and we'll read chapter 4. Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, your servant, my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.

And Elisha said to her, what shall I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house? And she said your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil. Then he said go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty the vessels, and not too few.

Empty vessels and not too few. Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels, and when one is full set it aside. So she went from him and she shut the door behind herself and her sons, and as she poured, they brought the vessels to her. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, bring me another vessel, and he said to her, there is not another, and the oil stopped flowing.

She came and told the man of God, and he said, go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest. One day Elisha went out to shun him, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food.

So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food, and she said to her husband, behold, now I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small room on the roof with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there.

[1 : 40] One day he came there and he turned into the chamber and rested there, and he said to Gehazi, his servant, call this shunamite. When he had called her, she stood before him, and she said to him, say now to her, see, you've taken all this trouble for us. What is it to be done for you?

Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army? She answered, I dwell among my own people, and he said, what then is to be done for her?

Gehazi answered, well, she has no son and her husband is old. He said, call her, and when he had called her, she stood in the doorway, and he said, at this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son. And she said, no, my Lord, O man of God, do not lie to your servant, but the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.

When the child had grown, he went out one day to his father among the reapers, and he said to his father, oh, my head, my head, the father said to his servant, carry him to his mother. And when he had lifted him and brought him to his mother, the child sat on her lap till noon, and then he died.

And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door behind him, and went out. Then she called to her husband and said, send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.

[2 : 59] And he said, why will you go to him today? It is neither a new moon nor Sabbath. She said, all is well. Then she saddled the donkey, and she said to her servant, urge the animal on, do not slack in the pace for me unless I tell you.

So she said out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Ghaazi, his servant, look, there's the Shunamite. Run at once to meet her and say to her, is all well with you? Is all well with your husband?

Is all well with the child? And she answered, all is well. And when she came to the mountain to the man of God, she caught hold of his feet. And Ghaazi came to push her away.

But the man of God said, leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress. And the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me. Then she said, did I ask my Lord for a son? Did I not say, do not deceive me?

He said to Ghaazi, tie up your garment and take my staff in your hand and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him. And if anyone greets you, do not reply and lay my staff on the face of the child.

[4 : 02] And then the mother of the child said, as the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So he arose and he followed her. Ghaazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life.

Therefore, he returned to meet him and told him the child has not awakened. When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and he shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the Lord.

Then he went up and he lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm.

Then he got up again and walked once back and forth in the house. And he went up and he stretched himself upon him and the child sneezed seven times and the child opened his eyes. Then he summoned Ghaazi and said, call the Shunamite.

So he called her and when she came to him, he said, pick up your son. She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son. And she went out and Elisha came again to Gilgal when there was a famine in the land.

[5 : 07] And as the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, set on the large pot and boil stew for the sons of the prophets. One of them went out into the field to gather herbs and found a wild vine and gathered from it his lap full of wild gourds.

And came and cut them up into the pot of stew, not knowing what they were. And they poured out some for the men to eat. But while they were eating of the stew, they cried out, oh, man of God, there is death in the pot.

And they could not eat it. He said, then bring flour and he threw it into the pot and said, pour some out for the men that they may eat. And there was no harm in the pot. A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits.

Twenty loaves of barley and fresh years of grain in his sack. And Alishah 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 they shall have some left. So he said it before them and they ate and had some left according to the word of the Lord.

[6 : 19] This is God's word. Okay, what a chapter, very long chapter. And as we said in the last few weeks, in these long chapters, it's impossible to talk about everything that the chapter says.

So forgive me when I miss out on some of the things, but I have to pick and choose and try to talk about a few points rather than everything.

And I don't want to preach for three hours, so I don't think you want me to preach for three hours. We have three, four stories actually in this chapter. We could look at each one individually, but I'd like to look them all together and to see what the common theme in this is, what the commonalities of those stories are.

So in the first story, Alishah, he helps out a woman who had just lost her husband. Her husband was part of the son of prophets, kind of like an order of prophets.

And as a consequence, her children are taken away from her because she can't pay the debt, she can't put food on the table. However, miraculously, God provides through Alishah endless amounts of oil, which is very valuable.

[7 : 41] So the woman can sell that and pay off her debt, get back her sons and live on the rest of the money. And then after that, you hear about a woman in Shunem. The Shunemite woman who is very kind to Alishah and she provides him with a room to stay.

And to return the favor, Alishah promises her a son. And she's not yet a mother, probably quite old. She reacts in a way that where it seems like she tried to have a son, but it didn't work.

But indeed, the next year, she gives birth to a son. But then events take a dramatic turn. The son dies and the Shunemite woman, in her desperation, seeks Alishah and through the power of God, Alishah brings her son back to life.

And as if that wasn't enough for one chapter, we get another story. Alishah wants the sons of the prophets, the group that he hung out with, to make some stew.

At that time, there was a famine in the land. So the sons of the prophets, they go out and one of them finds something interesting looking and he cuts it up, he puts it in the stew and they actually realize that it's poisonous.

[8 : 56] So that guy probably never cooked again for them. Alishah knows just what to do, he puts in some flour and the stew becomes edible again.

And the theme that I think combines all these three stories is a theme of death. Death in the pot, that's what I titled the sermon just because it sounds very dramatic and gives a good effect.

But we see death in all three stories, don't we? We see death in the pot, we see a dead son. We see death of the land in the form of a famine which causes a woman to lose everything.

And the good thing about this chapter is that things don't stay that way. Instead, God performs great miracles and signs through Alishah, his prophet.

And through that, he shows us his plan for the land of Israel and for the people in Israel. And if we would look at the next chapter, we would see that it's for the non-Israelites as well, for the Gentiles as well.

[9 : 58] But we're not there yet. I've got three points today. So it's going to be a good sermon, right? There are not very fancy names, the three points. I'm not at the level of...

So yesterday I saw Thomas Davis at the Free Church Youth Conference and he always has these alliterations. I'm not on that level yet, but we'll get there eventually, I'm sure. Now the first point is called Death Through Idolatry.

So let's talk about that for a second. Death through idolatry. We see that in this chapter there is a lot of death going on. And why is that?

Israel has a problem, or many problems, but one main problem. And the main problem we talked about already, the main problem is idolatry. Rebellion against God, having our own little gods in our life.

And the Israelites had that. They had their bals, you know, their gods. And we already talked about that idolatry and sin leads to death.

[11 : 01] We know from Genesis 3, from the fall, that sin leads to death. We know from verses like Romans 6, 23, that the wages of sin is death. And I mentioned two weeks ago that in James chapter 1, we see that pattern of having desires, wrong desires, and the desires leading to sin, and then sin leading to death.

So we have this emphasis on death. And here in this chapter this is made very obvious. The land is dead, people experience death, and people become deadly as well.

What do I mean by that? I mean that their behavior is deadly. Their behavior is not life-bringing. Think about the people who take away the sons of the widow.

I mean, what kind of behavior is that? That's heartless behavior, cold behavior, not life-bringing, but rather taking away greedy behavior.

And all of that is caused by their idolatry and by their falling away from God. And that is weird, isn't it? Because God promised them that Israel would be a fruitful land, a land where milk and honey flows.

[12 : 20] And Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, he promises them a lot of blessings. If the people keep the covenant, right? But he also says that if they don't keep the covenant, there will be consequences.

Covenant curses, as it were. So let me read from Deuteronomy 28, I think it is. It says, curses shall you be in the city and curses shall you be in the field.

Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground. So that's what's happening here in Israel. That's what happens in this chapter. The city is cursed, the fields are cursed, the fruit of the womb is cursed, and the fruit of the ground.

All of these curses are given here in this chapter in 2 Kings 4. And to our 21st century western minds, that is a bit difficult to hear, isn't it?

It almost sounds unfair, you know, they messed up okay, but just forgive them and get on with it. But if we're honest, then the Israelites knew exactly what they were agreeing to in the first place.

[13 : 31] But then the kings start to go astray and Israel finds itself in so much idolatry that it becomes unbearable. It's not that they messed up once or twice or three times or four times or fifty times, but it's continually walking away from God over years and years and years, and God sending prophets and trying to get them back on track, but they just keep on sinning and rebelling.

And at some point, God has had enough. Every parent will know that if you have a child and you tell them to do something and they won't listen to you.

There is no, it doesn't make sense to just keep telling them. There have to be consequences at some point, right? So God does that and God sends a famine and things become poisonous.

And symbolically, this chapter is trying to tell us that death has entered the culture and the land. So the Shonomite woman's son, as soon as he leaves the house and goes to the field, he dies.

He starts feeling ill. The little food that the land is producing becomes poisonous. People's hearts are far away from God because the way they treat orphans and widows is just horrendous.

[14 : 55] It's not what God's word says. One commentator says, what's going on here is that we have a social, an economic, and a religious death in Israel.

Now let me press pause on that because there's a guy called Philip Reeve, an author, a Jewish agnostic. He died in 2006, but he wrote a book called Death Works.

And in that book he says this. He says, culture and sacred order are inseparable. So culture and sacred order are inseparable. No culture has ever preserved itself, or there is not a registration of sacred order.

What is he saying? He's saying that culture will die and devote itself to death works, as he calls it, if a sacred order is denied. So when people begin to disconnect themselves from a higher being, from God, from some sort of higher being, that gives them morals, that gives them commands, that gives them meaning.

And when people start to disconnect from God, they start to create their own meaning. They start to create their own pleasures, their own morals.

[16 : 10] And all of that finds expression in what Reeve calls death works. So for example, if you have art that makes fun of religion, of tradition, of religious symbols, or is blasphemous, that is a death work.

Or even comedy that talks about religion and tradition in an ironic way, sarcastic way, can be a form of death work.

Taking something out of the sacred order and separating it and doing something that God didn't mean for it to happen is a death work. So pornography is a death work.

Taking something out of the sacred order, doing something different. Talking about God in a cynical way is a death work. And if we look around us in our culture, we can see that.

We can see that our culture is full of these death works, of separating, disconnecting from that sacred order. We already talked about the little bals and gods in our hearts, in our lives.

[17 : 15] And the freedom that we want to choose and to control our own lives, maybe even the freedom to choose about our own life and death.

If I look around me, I see that people start thinking that death can be a good thing. Advertisements for euthanasia, for abortion.

I'm not an expert on these things and I don't want to talk about these things tonight. But it seems to me that our idolatry, our longing for freedom, freedom from God, has led us to a culture of death.

And we can see that here in Edinburgh, around us. But what this chapter is showing us is that God wants to bring life into death.

God wants to make dead people alive again. God wants to make poisonous food edible again. God wants to give hope to the hopeless. God's kingdom is not a kingdom of death, not a culture of death, but a kingdom of life.

[18 : 19] So let's look at our second point, faith in the living God. In this chapter, we have two really strong examples of faith. One of them is the first woman, the widow, her faith.

In this chapter, we see God providing to her what she needs, when she needs it. The widow receives oil to pay off her debt.

And what does that tell us about God's nature? He provides, and he provides abundantly. And I don't want to preach a prosperity gospel and I don't want to say if you pray really hard, you will become super rich or anything like that.

But I believe that God loves to provide. And when you need something and approach God in prayer and seek Him, He will help you. He will give you what you need, often something different than what you expect.

But that is not all. Oil in the Old Testament is very valuable, but it's also a symbol. It's used as a symbol for grace throughout the Bible.

[19 : 26] And I want to think about that for a second. In the story, the oil keeps pouring out as long as the widow is able to receive it. In verse 6, we can see that.

So what that seems to imply is that God probably would have given her even more if she would have found more vessels to contain the oil in.

I want you to think about this for a second. Receiving God's grace. The Westminster Confession says that faith is the instrument by which we receive God's grace.

By faith we ask and by faith we receive. So we will talk a little bit more about faith in a second, but my question is quite simple tonight.

Do you have faith here right now? Do you have faith? If you do, then I think the task is quite simple.

[20 : 29] Give thanks to God for that faith. Ask Him to provide for you, to continue to provide for you. But do give thanks tonight when you pray before you go to bed. If you don't have faith tonight, then I would just like you to think about that, to consider that.

To think about what it means that there is a God who gives life and that you can have all of that by faith.

One simple but powerful example of how I experienced that in my life was that when I was thinking about coming to Scotland to study here, I was struggling financially.

I was applying for the degree at Edinburgh Theological Seminary just across the street, but I didn't really have the money to fund it. My parents told me, you know, you can do that, you can go, but we can't support you.

So I started praying and I had to trust God that He would provide for me. And as I started praying, people started messaging me and they said, look, I know you want to go to Scotland, so I would like to support you.

[21 : 39] One friend even offered me 20,000 euros, said, my parents put this aside for me, I don't need it if you want it, you can have it. And I was like, wow, okay, prayer answered. Now, I never needed that money, I wasn't, I never relied on that money.

I was able to fund myself, but I knew that God was there for me. I knew that God was going to provide. Money wasn't going to be the problem.

Faith was much more important. But God doesn't just provide financial means. He cares about a physical well-being, a spiritual well-being.

But also whether we are safe or not. So the woman, the widow, she is an example of faith. Now, the other woman in this chapter, the Shonamite woman, she's also an example of faith.

And I'm actually, I'm not sure why it's always women in the Bible who portray strong faith, but it's interesting, isn't it? And maybe, I thought maybe in this chapter, the Shonamite woman is such a strong example because she knows what it feels like to have a son.

[22 : 52] And all the mothers here will understand what the love is that you have for a child. I don't understand, I'm not a mother, obviously. I don't have a son, I'm not married.

All the mothers and fathers here will understand what it feels like to love your child. And she wanted a child and she couldn't have it.

And then she got it and then God took it away. But the interesting thing is that she didn't give up.

She had faith. She had faith so much that even though her child was dead, she wanted to go and find Elisha because she was sure that if there was any chance of her child coming to life again, it was through the power of God, it was through this man of God who she knew.

And her husband, her husband asked her, why are you going to see Elisha? It's not Sabbath, it's not Sunday, right? It's not the full moon, it's not any other special day. You don't go and see a prophet on just a normal Tuesday afternoon, right?

[24 : 08] In that time, I was accustomed to visit a priest, a prophet, on special occasions. But the woman says, I don't care, my son is dead. I don't care about anything else because I know that if there should be any chance for him to become alive again, it will be through that prophet, it will be through the power of God.

I know he's a man of God, I know he is a man of the living God, the God of Elijah, the God who gives and takes away, the God who created everything, who gives life.

So she says, no, I don't care whether it's full moon or half moon or Sabbath or Easter or Christmas, I'm going. Because I'm not giving up hope because I believe.

Can you feel that faith? I don't have to come up with an illustration in this sermon because the whole chapter is an illustration of that. The desperation that you feel when everything around you seems to crumble, when the whole world starts falling down, when you receive a message that changes everything.

The death of a loved one, a diagnosis that your life might be over soon. When suddenly all the light seems to leave the world and you're left behind in darkness.

[25 : 20] And all you manage to do is to hold on to a promise maybe that you read in the Bible, to hold on to something you heard in a sermon many years ago.

And you remember, there is a God who cares, there is a God of life. When you need something, someone to hold on to and you go and like this shonamite woman who throws herself at the feet of Elisha, you go and you throw yourself at the feet of Jesus and you say, help me.

Out of desperation because you're surrounded by death and illness and sickness. A good friend of mine lost his son about half a year ago.

And his son was three weeks old and they had a couple of difficult surgeries. But he died. And again, I don't know what that feels like.

But I do remember looking my friend into his eyes and seeing that he lost weight and that he couldn't sleep at night and that instead of toys, they had to choose between different gravestones.

[26 : 37] Pure desperation and the question, why God? Why did you give me a son and took it away again? And that's what the woman does. She cries out in front of Elisha and she asks, did I ask my Lord for a son?

Did I not say, do not deceive me, don't give me false hopes? She never asked for any of this. So why does God first give and then snatch it away again? And I can't tell you.

I don't have a good answer for that. But I do know that God is the one who's in control. And that in this chapter we see his amazing grace, supernatural grace, something that is mind-blowing.

And he sends Elisha and Elisha goes there and it's not Elisha, it's not the rituals he does. That's just trying to show you that he's breathing life into that child.

Just like God breathes life into Adam and he raises up the son again. Elisha is much like Elijah.

[27 : 43] He learned from him, right? His miracles in this chapter are very much like Elijah. But there are some differences. Elijah was bringing bad news to the kings of Israel. Elisha is bringing good news.

Elisha prophesies judgment. Elisha announces life and healing. Elisha is the bearer of bad news. Elisha is the bearer of hope.

And what Elisha is doing is portraying God's mercy and God's grace in desperate times, in times of death. Do you see the picture that this chapter is trying to paint for us?

Elijah is a prophet of justice and Elisha is a prophet of grace. And that's what we see on that cross, isn't it? God's perfect justice meeting God's perfect grace in his son who bears the punishment for us.

Hanging there, bearing all the sin of all the world, of all the times, of all the ages on his shoulders. And he dies so he can live.

[28 : 53] God truly is the life giver. And that's my third and last point. God is the life giver. And what I mean by that is that God is a God who is a life and who gives life.

You see, Elisha is traveling around the northern part of Israel. They don't have Jerusalem, they don't have the temple. What they have instead is a man of God, Elisha, in a little room upstairs in some random woman's attic or whatever.

And he's doing the work of God, the life-giving work of God. It's very interesting, one commentator that I read points out that his room is actually a bit like a temple.

The furniture we see mirrors the furniture in a temple, especially the lamp. It's this seven candle lamp that we know from Jewish traditions.

It's called menorah. And it indicates that this is a bit like a temple, right? God is starting revival from one small little room in north Israel somewhere with a man with a receding hairline.

[30 : 07] You know, not an attractive guy, but someone who trusts in God. And the point that I'm trying to make is, I think, that God is not dwelling in that room or in the temple only.

But we see that God shows his life-giving power through Elisha, and wherever his prophet goes, God's power is made visible. It's truly amazing. It's truly amazing what happens there in Shunim.

And very near that place, not far from Shunim, but many, many, many years later, we find another man of God walking on probably the same roads as Elisha.

But this time, not just a man of God, but God as man. The God-man, the truly incarnated son of God, Jesus, our Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

And Jesus walks around, and in Luke chapter 4, you can read about that. You can read about Jesus going into a synagogue, and he announces the great jubilee, the great year of redemption.

[31 : 13] And he quotes from Isaiah 61, and he says, And Jesus quotes this, and he talks about it.

And Jesus quotes this, and he talks about Elisha and Elijah. And you see the connection right there. Elisha is a little bit like a proto-incarnation, to use a fancy word.

Like a first incarnation of Jesus, one who foreshadows that Jesus will come, and that Jesus will bring life to those who need it, and hope to those who are hopeless. And he will help the poor, and the widows, and the orphans, and those who need God.

And Jesus does a similar thing. We can see that in the New Testament. He raises up the servant of a centurion, and the centurion portrays so much faith in Jesus that Jesus says, Not even in Israel have I found such faith.

And the centurion and the woman in Shunam, the Shunamite woman, they have this in common. They understand that in a crisis, the only thing that matters is the kind of God we have.

[32 : 41] In other words, the only comfort that we have in a crisis, the only comfort we have in a culture of death, where it seems like God and all life is squeezed out, is gone.

The only hope we have is that we know that we dwell in the shelter of the most high. And the 1901 calls it, the most high our God, Yahweh, the God who is, the God who was, the God who will be.

He's a God of life in a dying world. And he's a God of hope in a desperate society. And he's the one who gives life, and who takes life away.

The God who becomes like us, and who gives his life, and who dies, so that we can have life forever. Jesus came to make things right again, to encourage the poor, to help the brokenhearted, to release captives, and to console those who mourn.

And in this chapter we see that Elijah foreshadows this in the Old Testament. And Jesus made it a reality. And that is true for me, and that is true for you, and true for the Shunamite woman in the widow, and all who hear it.

[33 : 55] So let us pray and give thanks for that. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this word today, for these stories. We can see death because we started falling away from you.

And Father, we give thanks for your son. We give thanks for the work, his perfect obedience, all the way to the cross, which we will celebrate soon in Easter.

Father, it's hard to grasp, it's hard to describe in words sometimes what that means to us. So I pray that through your Holy Spirit you would make it a reality to us.

I pray that those who don't have faith will have faith as a gift from you, Father, so they can see and that they can hear all the promises that you have given them.

Father, I pray that in this coming week you would make it a reality for every single one of us to live, to live in a culture of death, and to mirror and reflect the life that you give.

[35 : 00] Forgive us all our sins. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen.