

COMPASSION FOR THE CHILDLESS

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

By Ron R. Ritchie

Yesterday I received a phone call from a wonderful Christian woman in our community named Eda, who told me the story of her cousin who lives on the Island of Malta. (Her cousin's home is next door to a church dedicated to St. Paul in remembrance of his shipwreck while being taken to his Roman imprisonment in 59 AD [see Acts 27:9-28:1].) This cousin and her husband had been trying to have children for some fifteen years, but the only results were eight miscarriages. Finally a son was born to them, and there was much joy and celebration in their home and among the members of the extended family. But a month later this son died.

Then three years ago this couple's deep love for the Lord and for children motivated them to go to Romania to see if they could adopt a child. After experiencing a nightmare of paperwork and false promises, they were finally able to adopt a beautiful baby boy they named Joseph Raymond. They brought him home with great joy in their hearts. The next two years of their lives were filled with love and all the hopes and dreams that parents have for their young children.

Last Christmas the parents drove little Joe Ray to a major city to see all the holiday lights and do some shopping. After they were finished, they got in their car and headed home. Joe Ray was sitting on his mother's lap. When they were halfway to their village, a drunk driver crossed over into their lane and hit their car head-on. Joe Ray was killed instantly. The parents were hospitalized for several months.

Later Eda's cousin told her that the heartbreak she and her husband were suffering was so great that she wished they had all died in the accident. However, Eda's father (who at the time of the accident was in his nineties and has since died himself) suggested that because of this couple's love for children, the extended family members send them money so that they could try to adopt again. The family has responded. And the story isn't over yet.

I reminded Eda of the works of Paul, that tell us these difficult situations of life that bring all of us to a place where we realize we are to "...not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead..." (2 Cor. 1:9). Or as we were reminded in our last message, the spiritual reality is that "Hush, God is in it!" As I listened to Eda's story, I found myself thinking that at times I seem to be more caught up in life on earth, in time and space, in now and me and us, than in the bigger picture, in which God is working behind all of history to accomplish his will "on earth as it is in heaven." Keeping our Lord's activity in mind puts us in a position of faith in him, of believing that all he is doing is good.

You may have a similar story of your own to tell in which you can relate to the pain, joy, tragedy, and renewed faith of another nameless couple whom we are about to meet in 2 Kings 4:8-37. I hope that in this story we will all be able to get a glimpse of the deeper spiritual realities that are going on behind human events, and thus have our faith strengthened and encouraged so that we indeed no longer trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

A study we did of the life of the prophet Elijah revealed that he was an instrument of God's grace to the idolatrous Israelites of the northern tribes. He foreshadowed the forerunner of Messiah, John the Baptist, as he confronted the wicked King Ahab and his wife Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16:28-22:40 and Discovery Papers 4367-4372). Then his disciple Elisha was set aside by God to continue to minister for the next fifty-one years (848 to 797 BC) as an

instrument of God's compassion and confrontation to these same idolatrous Israelites as well as to the kings of Judah, Moab, and Aram. And Elisha foreshadowed the person of Jesus himself as he ministered in the crumbling and spiritually sick society ruled over by the son of Ahab and Jezebel, King Joram. Yet in the midst of all this idolatry, God moved Elisha to minister to those within the spiritual remnant—a grieving widow, a childless wife, some brokenhearted mothers—as well as to those within the Gentile nations—a leper and the physically and spiritually blind.

In our study in 2 Kings 4:8-37, we will see how the Lord God arranged a meeting between Elisha and a well-to-do and hospitable couple within the spiritual remnant of Israel who lived in the village of Shunem. Out of this relationship would come a blessing from Jehovah as well as a trial to increase their faith in him, eventually resulting in a witness to the Jews and Gentiles who were worshipping Baal, namely that the God of Israel is the one and only living God who should be worshiped.

The gift of a child

One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. She said to her husband, "I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. Let's make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us."

One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, "Call the Shunammite." So he called her, and she stood before him. Elisha said to him, "Tell her, 'You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?'"

She replied, "I have a home among my own people."

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, "Well, she has no son and her husband is old."

Then Elisha said, "Call her." So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."

"No, my lord," she objected, "Don't mislead your servant, O man of God!"

But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her. (2 Kings 4:8-17)

Shunem was a small village on the road between Mount Carmel in the northwestern part of Israel and the city of Jezreel in the southeast. That road was one Elisha used often. In this village was a God-fearing, rich couple with an open heart toward strangers. They came to know Elisha, and eventually the wife invited him home to have a meal with them. Once they found out about him and his travel schedule, the wife asked her husband if he would consider building an extra room on top of their house so that the prophet and others like him would have a place of rest and peace each time they came through town.

This spiritual ministry of hospitality has always been a part of the teachings of Israel and of Christianity: "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 19:34). The apostle Peter wrote to the Christians

in Asia (62 AD), encouraging them to open both their hearts and their homes to strangers: “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Pet. 4:9). The spiritual principle of hospitality was also encouraged by the apostle John when he wrote his second and third letters (90 AD).

Dr. Larry and Ruth Kwak ministered among us for several years both in our Couples Class and in our community before Larry took a new job in the Washington DC area about three years ago. I remember the day he came to my office to talk about the job and his concern about finding a church where he and his family could grow spiritually. He was also delighted that the new job would provide enough income so that he could afford to build a new home. In the midst of discussing where the house was located, the schools, and his travel distance to work, I asked Larry if he had any plans for building an extra bedroom so that they could offer hospitality to strangers, pastors, missionaries, family, and so on. He thoughtfully said no. But later I found out that he went home and spoke to Ruth, and within a few days they had the architect draw an extra room into the plan. In the first letter I received from them after they had settled into their new home was this note at the bottom from Ruth: “A room is waiting for you whenever you are in town.”

One day Elisha came to town and made himself at home in his room on the roof of the house of this gracious, godly couple. As he was lying on the bed, his heart was overwhelmed with their unselfish love for the Lord and for him as a prophet of Jehovah in a spiritually dark and sinful society. Moved by the Spirit of God, he wanted to know if he could provide a kindness to this woman. So he sent his servant Gehazi to bring her to him. When she arrived, he asked her if she had any need, for he had connections in high places: the king and the supreme commander of his army. But she replied, “I have every provision and protection I need, including a family who will care and provide a home for me when my husband dies.”

But Elisha was not content to let this issue rest. After she left he asked his servant, “What can be done for her?” The servant Gehazi replied with some discernment, “You know, Elisha, she has every material blessing a woman could want. But I have noticed that her husband is old and she is without any children. Her barrenness is a reproach to her, just as it is for any woman in Israel, so I am sure that she would love to have a child.”

Unger’s Bible Dictionary says:

The conception and bearing of children was a matter of longing and joy among the Israelites, especially to the women (Gen. 24:60;...1 Sam. 1:11). On the ground of the twofold blessing connected with creation [God blessed them and said to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”] and the covenant promise [which he made to Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth....”] (Gen. 1: 28; 12:2, 7; 13:16) a numerous group of children was considered as a special gift of God’s grace (Deut. 28:4;...Psa. 128:3....) and sterility in marriage was thought to be a divine punishment (Gen. 16:2;...1 Sam. 1:6....).

So Elisha told his servant to call her again, and when she arrived in the doorway, the prophet of compassion said, “About this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms.” Incredulously she said, “No, my lord! Don’t mislead me, O man of God! (Don’t play with my emotions on such a sensitive subject!)” But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

This miracle from the loving heart of the one and only living God of Israel would once again challenge the Baal and Astarte worshipers within and without Israel, who called upon these gods to reward them with children. It is the God of Israel, not Baal and Astarte, who closes wombs; and it is the God of Israel who opens barren wombs (see 1 Sam. 1:5-11). This truth can be seen in the lives of these godly wives in Israel who had been barren: Sarah who bore Isaac; Rebecca, whose husband Isaac prayed that God would open her womb and who bore the twins Esau and Jacob; Manoah who bore Samson; Hannah who bore Samuel; and Elizabeth who bore John the Baptist.

In this case God was working through his prophet Elisha to open the womb of this godly and kind woman so that in time she and her husband could rejoice in the birth of their son. Surely when the son was born she and her husband must have sung the song written in Psalm 127:3:

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD;
The fruit of the womb is a reward.

But as all parents know, with the joy of children also come tears and sorrow for most of us as we nurse them through sicknesses; struggle with them in their various relationships; and call on God to give us the wisdom, courage, and patience to lead them by word and deed into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. It is the deepest concern to us that they live a long and meaningful life for the Lord and bring blessing into their generation. But for many of us, our hopes and dreams for our children are not fulfilled the way we plan—

The death of the son

The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. “My head! My head!” he said to his father.

His father told a servant, “Carry him to his mother.” After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

She called her husband and said, “Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return.”

“Why go to him today?” he asked. “It’s not the New Moon or the Sabbath.”

“It’s all right,” she said.

She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Lead on; don’t slow down for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, “Look! There’s the Shunammite! Run to meet her and ask her, ‘Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?’”

“Everything is all right,” she said.

When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.”

“Did I ask you for a son, my lord?” she said. “Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes?’” (2 Kings 4:18-28)

The Shunammite woman’s son grew, and as all young sons do, he brought great delight to the hearts of his parents. One morning when the son was old enough to run and play, he went out into the fields where his father was taking in the harvest. As the sun rose higher, the heat affected his head, and he told his father. The father, not sure what to do, had a servant carry his son to his mother. The little boy lay in her lap until noon and then quietly died. Brokenhearted, the mother took the dead boy in her arms, carried him up the stairs to Elisha’s room, laid his tender

body on the bed of the man of God, shut the door, and went out.

Apparently she had heard the story from Elisha of how the son of the woman in Sidon had died, and Elijah had taken the boy and placed him on his bed, prayed for him, laid on him three times, and then prayed again, “O LORD my God, let this boy’s life return to him!” The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him and he lived. As Elijah handed over the resurrected son to his mother, she said, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth” (see 1 Kings 17:1-24). It is also possible that the Shunammite woman decided to put her dead son away until she could speak to the prophet. But surely the story of Elijah was on her mind as at least a remote hope that her son could be raised again to newness of life. After all, the prophet had by the power of God brought life to her barren womb; now she was hoping he could bring life to her dead son.

The woman told her husband that she would like a donkey and a servant to take her to find Elisha on Mount Carmel, fifteen or twenty miles away. She did not tell her husband that the son had died. He replied that since it was not a New Moon or a Sabbath, which were non-work days when the prophets could be found at their homes, he might be hard to find as he moved around teaching for the Lord. “And by the way,” he asked, “how is my son?” She replied, “It’s all right [*shalom*],” which was not a lie, but an indirect answer to a direct question. She was thinking, “The situation is all right in the sight of God, but I must get to the prophet to find out what is really going on before I answer my husband directly.” She saddled the donkey and rode north to Mount Carmel, where she was sure she would find Elisha.

As Elisha looked out on the mountain road, he could see the familiar form of the Shunammite woman with her servant, so he sent his servant Gehazi to meet her and ask her if she, her husband, and her child were all right, because her presence on Mount Carmel was unusual. Again she responded with a single focus: “In the sight of God, everything is all right.”

But the moment she saw Elisha, she slipped off her donkey, fell at his feet, and took hold of them. This was a symbol of her humble trust in Jehovah and his approved prophet. Gehazi, thinking her behavior was inappropriate, stepped in to drag her away from Elisha’s feet. But Elisha cried out, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.” Then with a broken heart and the memory of her little dead son lying on the prophet’s bed at home, the woman cried out to Elisha, “Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes’? What was the point of giving me a son and filling our hearts with love and hope for him and his children to come, if all the Lord had in mind was to take him back in death at such a young age? It doesn’t make any sense to me!” And I can hear her cry out in her tears, “Elisha, what is going on? You’re the only one I can turn to. Please help me somehow!”

In 1976 while Jack Crabtree was a pastor among us here at PBC, his two-year-old son John David choked on some food and died. At the memorial service, Jack shared out of his heart a wonderful message of reality and hope. He said in part:

John David was more than a son, he was a miniature man who was our constant companion, a really, really good friend. We are going to miss him. But the incredible thing to both Jody and me, I think—I just stand first, unbelieving that it happened; I’m kind of numb and disbelieving—but the incredible thing is our whole reaction to this. There are times when we experience joy at what a magnificent, merciful, loving thing God has done...Jody and I are both convinced that God has the right to take our son and that he has exercised that right; he has not done evil of John David, he has done good. But furthermore, he has not done evil of us, because John David is not our god, the Lord is our God. He is our life, he is the bread on which we feed, and he is the one on whom we are going to depend and find our fulfillment in the future.

Now this godly wife and mother within the spiritual remnant waited to see what God through his prophet Elisha would do.

The resurrection of the beloved son

Elisha said to Gehazi, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. If you meet anyone, do not greet him; and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy’s face.”

But the child’s mother said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So he got up and followed her.

Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy’s face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, “The boy has not awakened.”

When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy’s body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite.” And he did. When she came, he said, “Take your son.” She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out. (2 Kings 4:29-37)

Instantly Elisha understood that her son had died, and he immediately took action. He gave his servant his staff and told him to run on ahead of him. Once he arrived at the house he was to place the prophet’s staff on the boy’s face. Elisha may have been thinking about the staff God gave Moses to be used in several miraculous ways in Egypt and in the wilderness (see Ex. 4:1-4; 17:9-13), and hoping perhaps God might use his staff as an instrument of life. It appears that Elisha asked the mother to go with his servant, but she refused, saying, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” In the midst of her broken heart and confusion, she had not lost her faith in the one and only living God Jehovah, but she was struggling with God over the whole idea of the gift of her son’s life and then his sudden death. So Elisha went back to her home with her. Gehazi arrived ahead of them and did as he was told: He laid Elisha’s staff on the dead boy’s face. He then left the house, met Elisha, and told him in front of the mother that her boy had not responded to the touch of the staff.

As soon as Elisha arrived, he asked to be alone with the dead boy, went up to his room, and closed the door. In the same style as his mentor Elijah (see 1 Kings 17:17-24), Elisha the prophet of compassion then prayed to the Lord God, asking him to restore the boy to life. He lay on top of the young boy and pressed his face on his face, his hands on his hands, and his body on his body. Soon the boy’s body became warm. The prophet got up and walked back and forth for a few moments, and then he returned and lay on top of the dead boy once more. This time the boy sneezed seven times (a spiritual symbol of completeness) and opened his eyes. The prophet called for his servant and asked him to get the boy’s mother.

She walked into the room, and there was her dead son raised to life! Her immediate response was to fall at the prophet’s feet. I’m sure she then gave praise to the Lord, took her son into her arms, and went out to her husband to tell him the whole story and to witness to the love and mercy of God on their behalf. This story would in time become a witness to the Jewish people that the one and only living God Jehovah could also bring life out of their deadly situations if they would once again turn to him in faith and put away their foreign gods. A few years later

this woman and her son would become a direct witness to King Joram that the God of Israel is the one and only living God (see 2 Kings 8:1-6).

I have already mentioned that Elisha, as an instrument of God's compassion, foreshadowed the life and compassionate ministry of Jesus. This can be clearly seen as recorded by Dr. Luke in 7:11-17: Jesus went to the village of Nain with his disciples and a large crowd. As he approached the city gate...

...behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow...And when the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." And He came up and touched the coffin...And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. And fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" And this report concerning Him went out all over Judea, and in all the surrounding district.

There was a woman who had lost not only her husband as her protector and provider, but also her son who had become her sole provider, placing her in a terrible emotional and financial state. That woman had no husband, no son, no future, no joy. There was nothing left for her. But out of nowhere she came face-to-face with the compassionate Lord of life.

God is always placing us in situations to show us we have no resources to deal with crises. God will allow us to experience these deadly situations, as he taught Paul, "...in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." As God was able to bring life into the Shunammite's barren womb, then restore life to her dead son and Jesus to raise the widow's dead son, so he was, and continues to be, able to restore life to the spiritually dead Israelites if only they would return to him, obeying the commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind...." (Luke 10:27.) And it is this same wonderful God who can bring life back to any situation that you and I consider deadly. We need to turn to him in faith and trust him for all our deadly situations with the hope that if it is his will and to his glory, he can bring life back into a discouraged heart, a meaningless marriage, a broken relationship, the hearts of our wayward parents and children, and a dying society. For the God of Israel is the one and only living God, and his name is Jesus.

Amy Marchetti read Luke 1:5-17 about Mary's cousin Elizabeth and will share her own testimony.

In this passage Elizabeth knew the pain of childlessness. She had suffered greatly because of the social stigma of being childless in that day and time, and I wonder if she ever prayed things like, "Gee, God, I've been a good wife, done all the right things, married a priest, why me?" I, too, went through a similar time, although much shorter than Elizabeth.

Gary and I were married quite young, and waited before trying to have a child. Things didn't go quite as I expected however. We went through several years of trials before our first was born. It was a very difficult time of waiting, having hopes and expectations dashed continually. After two years of waiting, we were thrilled to find out we were going to have a child, only to be devastated a short time later with a miscarriage. That was a crucial time for me, when I had to make a decision. I could have gone two ways, either bitterness and anger or choosing to trust God. I made the conscious decision to trust God, and not to lean on my own understanding (Prov. 3:5). I experienced one of those times of joy in the midst of suffering that is only known when you trust God.

It was still a long process, full of testing, doctors, more waiting. It was tempting to start trusting the medical profession and focus on the charts and graphs and tests, and all their technology.

My friends became pregnant and I wanted to be happy for them, but I grieved, not only for my childless

situation but also for the loss of relationship with that person. As couples became parents, our relationship inevitably changed. I had to face the possibility of our never having children, and turn that one over to God, too. God had to teach me, and still is, that my identity is in Christ, not in being a mother.

Those years of waiting and learning to trust were so invaluable as we ministered in Romania and got involved here in the children's ministry. God was preparing for us to be parents. I am grateful for a God who cares so much to allow us to go through those times.

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