

TWO WOMEN IN NEED

SERIES: FIRE FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 5207
2 Kings 4:1-37
8th Message
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October 29, 2006

Bonita Thompson is in the last one-third of her life. She has a grown daughter. She was a long-time public school teacher and elementary school principal, established and successful. Her life had a predictable trajectory. But two years ago she left all that and she and her husband Roy went to Bangkok. She is now going into bars seeking to befriend young prostitutes, encountering hostility and great sadness.

Bonita does not claim to have extraordinary gifts, great courage, or singular training for ministry. But she is sure that God has called her to go into this difficult place. Two audacious beliefs led to this. The first is that each one of the girls she finds in these bars is important to God. Bonita does not expect to change the economic pressures or cultural tides that are the foundation of the sex business in Thailand. Her calling is to love some in the name of Jesus, knowing that they are precious to him.

The other audacious belief behind Bonita's and Roy's decision to go to Bangkok is a Spirit-born confidence that their efforts will bring honor to Christ and eternal benefit to the people among whom they minister—a conviction that God will use them.

The gospel is revolutionary not only in asserting that the God of heaven is master of nature and nations, but also in proclaiming his loving awareness and compassionate outreach to every woman, man, and child, without respect to their worldly status. The decisions of national leaders are important, but they're not the most important thing. As we read Scripture, our attention is repeatedly drawn to small stories. Someone writing the history of the day would not notice these things. Yet it pleases God to make himself known in people and places that are not prominent.

Let's turn back to our studies of Elijah and Elisha in ninth century B.C. Israel. Elijah had been taken by a whirlwind to heaven, and he anointed and trained his young disciple Elisha to step into his place. Elisha had the responsibility not only to speak as prophet to Israel in his day, but also to lead the schools of the prophets. We don't know a lot about them, but we observe that they were poor and marginalized communities of faith.

It's clear that Elisha, like his father in the faith, Elijah,

was not particularly interested in the activities of kings and was not impressed with armies (2 Kings 3:14). His calling was to reignite faithfulness to God in a nation that had lost its way. We're going to skip over 2 Kings 3, and give our attention to the stories of two families in need described in chapter 4.

It's worth noting that these two accounts focus on women. They are not introduced by connection to their husbands or fathers; each of them is the central person in her story. These two stories also recall events that Elijah experienced (1 Kings 17:8-24). They are each about sorrow and circumstances that are hard to bear. I hope we'll find them instructive.

Ordinary miracles

2 Kings 4:1-2:

¹Now a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves." ²Elisha said to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" And she said, "Your maidservant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil."

This is a very hard word. Remember, during a time of drought Elijah stayed with a widow in Zarephath, and one of the first things she said to him was, "We're about to eat our last meal and die." It was close to that here, and even more heart-wrenching in some ways. This woman was married to a good man, one of the sons of the prophets who served God. They were poor and found themselves facing creditors. When her husband died it was a terrible burden for this woman. Not only was she widowed and a single mother, but the only way out of debt was for her to sell her children as slaves.

Some, in such a circumstance, would shake their fist at God. "Why have you taken my husband? He was a good man. We don't deserve this!" Anger, despair, and attempts at manipulation all assert themselves at times like this.

But this woman continued to believe that the promises of God are true and that the death of her husband was not evidence that God was against them, but evidence that he would do something that they hadn't seen yet. So she went to the prophet and said, "What is God's answer?" She moved toward the Lord, rather than away from him.

Verses 3-7:

³Then he said, "Go, borrow vessels at large for yourself from all your neighbors, even empty vessels; do not get a few. ⁴And you shall go in and shut the door behind you and your sons, and pour out into all these vessels, and you shall set aside what is full." ⁵So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons; they were bringing the vessels to her and she poured. ⁶When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." And he said to her, "There is not one vessel more." And the oil stopped. ⁷Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your sons can live on the rest."

They hadn't won the lottery. God hadn't showered them with an extraordinary sum of money or amazing opportunities. What he did was invite neighbors to share what they had, empty containers, so that all could participate in and be encouraged by God's intervention. He gave the woman and her sons enough to sustain them so they could stay in the community of the school of the prophets. The boys had a role to play, they learned that their heavenly Father is attentive to them even though their earthly father would not be there to raise them.

Many of the girls who end up as prostitutes in the bars in Bangkok begin with a fantasy that they're going to meet a wealthy American or European man who will fall in love with them, sweep them up, and take them off to luxurious surroundings in a far-away place. Often, Christians hope for that kind of miracle when life is really hard. "Lord, change everything! Throw over all the difficulties and give me great gifts. Meet all my needs and destroy all my enemies."

But the miracle in our text is not of that sort. It is the more common sort, in which the Lord uses the people around us to stand with us and be part of his intervention and his supply of our need. He makes changes that are sufficient for us to live on in faith.

There are people in our midst who are in circumstances

similar to this widow's. Looking at their lives, some will say, "I'm in hell. Every hard thing has descended at once. And when I look at the future it's even worse." Do you know people in that circumstance? Are you there yourself?

I talked to a man this week who has been to the doctor three times regarding prostate cancer and each time the hope was that he would hear good news and each time the news was worse. The results of the biopsy were worse than expected, the prognosis was worse than expected, and there was really no good way for the doctors to help.

Recently we hosted a lecturer, Chap Clark, who studies and works with young people. He described an epidemic of loneliness in American adolescents. Abandonment is the term he used. Their main perception of themselves in the world is that nobody really cares. They make destructive decisions about how to live life because the present is terrible, and the future is worse, as far as they can see. Who is going to help young people believe that this is not true, that God will step into their world and they're not abandoned or alone?

Parents are as desperate as the kids. "How am I going to reach my kids? They won't listen to me anymore. I've lost contact with them. I love them, but my life is out of control. Who's going to help me parent in circumstances in which the present is terrible, and the future seems worse?" The message of the hope of the gospel is that the Lord will help us. Sorrow often makes us turn to God, opening us to his tender intervention and to renewed connection with a community of faith.

Jesus said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows" (Luke 12:6-7; Matthew 10:29-31). You are of incalculable value to God! Let him tell you so.

Now let's consider the story of the second woman in this chapter. Here we find somebody who faces a different kind of difficulty.

Learning to let go

2 Kings 4:8-10:

⁸Now there came a day when Elisha passed over to Shunem, where there was a prominent woman, and she persuaded him to eat food. And so it was, as often as he passed by, he turned

in there to eat food. ⁹She said to her husband, “Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God passing by us continually. ¹⁰Please, let us make a little walled upper chamber and let us set a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; and it shall be, when he comes to us, that he can turn in there.”

The woman we meet here led a predictable life. She didn't want any change or intervention, nothing different from what she'd grown to expect. In verse 13 she refused Elisha's offer to intervene for her with people in power. Her contentment was laudable in one sense, but it may have also indicated a loss of hope.

This passage is filled with interesting details. The man of God often came by, but unpredictably. She wanted to provide some hospitality for him, so they built him a little room and it was very orderly. You can almost see it: a bed, a table, a lamp, and a chair; it's color-coordinated and attractively arranged. She was that kind of person, I imagine, who liked to be hospitable, but didn't want to be taken by surprise in hospitality. She wanted the house to be clean, to have things in order, to have a nice meal when people came over. For her the unexpected was uncomfortable. Predictability was good. But why was she such a person?

Elisha enjoyed the hospitality for a time, and then he finally said to his servant Gehazi, “This is a little awkward. I want to do something nice for her in return.” He found out that she had no children, and her husband was elderly.

2 Kings 4:15-17:

¹⁵He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. ¹⁶Then he said, “At this season next year you will embrace a son.” And she said, “No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant.”

¹⁷The woman conceived and bore a son at that season the next year, as Elisha had said to her.

“Embrace” is an interesting word in Hebrew. He didn't say she would bear a son, he said—with tenderness—that she was going to hold her baby in her arms by this time next year.

Much of Israel's history comes rushing to mind, doesn't it? Sarah and Abraham were too old and unable to have a child and yet God provided; Hannah and Elkanah were unable to have a child and God provided.

But how did this woman react? Why did she object? Why was this a source of anxiety for her? Well, almost certainly she had asked God for a child before, and was denied. Perhaps she had miscarriages, and she and her husband experienced tension over whose fault it was that they were childless. Perhaps the subject was one she had closed the door to, and she didn't ever want to open that door again. She wanted her life to go forward as it was. Her husband was rich and they lived in a nice place. Things were just fine. “Don't change things. Don't make me face all that again.”

She lived a life that minimized the unknown and risks. She didn't make requests, didn't hope for what she couldn't see, and loved within limits. But God knows better, and through his servant broke up her routine. She gave birth to a son. There was new joy, new adventure, uncontrollable, and chaotic world of parenting.

Now for perhaps ten or twelve years as the boy grew up, the thing she feared more than anything else happened: some bizarre illness befell her son and he died almost instantaneously. She took the boy and put him on the bed in the room that they built for Elisha, on the roof of their house, and she made her way as fast as she could from Shunem to Carmel to talk to the prophet.

2 Kings 4:27-28:

²⁷When she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came near to push her away; but the man of God said, “Let her alone, for her soul is troubled within her; and the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me.” ²⁸Then she said, “Did I ask for a son from my lord? Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me?’”

Even while she raised her son, she'd been saying in the back of her mind, “It's not going to work. It hurt before, and it's going to hurt again.” Now the awful thing she feared had come to pass and the boy died. She came to cry out to God and spoke to Elisha.

One of Paul Simon's most memorable lines is, *If I never loved, I never would have cried.*¹ I loved, but now my heart is broken again. Why was I given joy and hope if pain would follow? Isn't it better to keep life all boxed up, narrow, not asking too much, not attempting too much?

Elisha rushed back to her house. This room that had been his tidy little place for reflection and study had become a hospital room. It was chaos. He laid on top of the

boy, embraced him, paced around, prayed, and wrestled with God. Then the boy started to sneeze and awakened. He was given life again, given back to his mother.

What's the point of the Shunnamite woman's story? The older I've gotten, the more I want to be able to predict what's going to happen; and the more I want to be able to have adventures on my own terms. When I was younger I could charge off in any direction, do something that was way out of the box, and not care. But eventually life teaches you its lessons, and you find yourself comfortable not attempting too much, having pleasant relationships with people instead of love relationships, having friendships that take place on predictable occasions without getting wrapped up too tightly in each other's lives. If I don't love, I won't hurt.

But the Lord doesn't settle for that, and he intervened on behalf of this woman as surely as he intervened on behalf of the poor widow. He wants better for us, that we would need him and love him and draw on him when he cracks open the things that we've held tightly to.

Do you know somebody who is hurting so much right now that they can only fear the future? Could you tell them that God will meet their needs, and invite them to be part of a community of folks through whom God can draw near to them and give them a life that has faith in it? Do you know someone who is holding on to things so tightly that there is little hope, little love, little risk, and little of God in their lives? Maybe you have a word for them as well.

NOTES

¹Paul Simon, *I Am a Rock*, © 1965.

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