

## **GOD PROVIDES**

2 Kings 4:1-7 with 2 Timothy 2:20-21

GOD IS SALVATION SERIES, MESSAGE II

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### **INTRO**

Last week we started a series about Elisha called “God Is Salvation”. That’s what Elisha’s name means... GOD IS MY SALVATION. Last week we revisited a great story of the Old Testament, how Elisha’s mentor Elijah the great prophet of Israel was taken away in a whirlwind, with chariots of fire and fiery horsemen, leaving Elisha to carry on the work God called them to do. No doubt Elisha felt alone as he stretched his mentor’s mantle toward the Jordan River and yelled, “Where is the God of Elijah?” God demonstrated that He was right there. Elisha performed several miracles right off the bat, validating his ministry to the company of prophets and the rest of Israel and Judah.

Before Elijah was transported to heaven, he asked Elisha what he could do for him. Elisha, in his realism and humility, asked if he could possess a double-portion of Elijah’s spirit. I’m not sure that such spirit can actually be measured, however, miracles can be counted. There are many miraculous events written in Elijah’s life. I ran across a graphic this week that detailed five miracles that Elijah performed, maybe six if you count God sending ravens to feed Elijah when he was running away from Queen Jezebel, but that was something God provided for him, not a miracle that he directed. **Elisha** performed 11 miracles when he was alive, and one more after his death. But that’s a story you’ll have to come back for. 😊

There are differing opinions about the number of years Elisha spent being mentored by Elijah. I mentioned 20-ish last week; a scholar I read this week talked about 8 years. I think a shorter time period makes a little more sense. By the time we get to 2 Kings 4, Elisha has been the leading prophet of Israel for 1 ½ to 2 years.

Being a prophet in those days was a demanding and difficult job. No one who is doing wrong really enjoys being dressed down for their wrongdoing, and there were plenty of wrongdoers, from peasants to kings. Idolatry was rampant. Now with two Israeli nations, Israel and Judah, the people of Judah mostly kept to themselves, and kept the Temple to themselves, too, while the nation of Israel went back and forth between two pagan religions. One of them, set up by former King Jeroboam, masqueraded as God-ish worship in which the people of Israel were invited to one of two convenient locations marked by huge golden calves, where they could offer sacrifices and pray.

Do you remember when the children of Israel worshiped a Golden Calf in the wilderness? God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments, and he took so long up on Mt Sinai that the people pressured Aaron into building them an idol to worship. According to Aaron, the people threw their gold into the bonfire, and out of the fire came a giant Golden Calf. Right. Moses was furious! He ground up the Golden Calf and made his people drink it. Then God struck the people with a plague, because as Commandment Number One says, YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GOD BEFORE ME, says the Holy One of Israel.

If you remember this, you would think that Israel would have rejected any worship at the base of a huge statue of a golden calf, but they didn't seem to care. King Jeroboam and his own priests established their own festivals and religious practices. After the leaders watered down the truth and compromised some more, it wasn't difficult to accept the second pagan religion: the false religion of Baal, complete with human child sacrifice.

How many of you know that when a society disintegrates it's easy for the church to go with it? How many of you know that when the church is compromised, she loses her ability to speak life into a culture?

Just out of curiosity, does any of this sound familiar? These aren't just Elisha's times, they seem to be your times and my times too!

The work of a prophet was difficult because they were constantly shouting against the false worship and immorality of their own countrymen, family members, and neighbors. Their lives were difficult as well, because, as you can imagine, they weren't well-received in most circles and they were dependent upon the generosity of others... generosity was hard to come by.

In addition to the spiritual confusion and rebellion of the people, there was also quite an economic crisis, which you'll explore a little this week if you're following along with the devotionals in the Bible app Events.

So... this was a bad time to be a prophet... as if there was ever a good time to be a prophet. Our passage today with the widow and the oil is set in the midst of this time of religious unfaithfulness and economic chaos.

## I. THE WIDOW'S PREDICAMENT, 4:1

Elisha was visiting one of the prophetic schools, probably Gilgal. I think this happened in a small town with less economic opportunity. I can see Elisha in Gilgal wrapping up his classes for the week. He's just finished a great series on how to dodge rocks thrown at you from every direction. There were lots of logistics and choreography and he hated choreography. It's Thursday afternoon. He's been teaching since Sunday and he's tired. After 10-hour days of instruction with the prophets, he counseled many of his students and people from the town, and healed a few lepers. He had to attend a Trustees meeting and ... well, that actually grew into three meetings, and he passed out awards at the annual Joshua Scouts banquet. It was a long week!

There was an aura of sadness over all the prophets and this school in particular. The untimely death of an esteemed senior prophet, Obadiah, hit them hard. Obadiah ministered in this town in this company of prophets. Sadness and a sense of helplessness hung over the entire community, and, although Elisha was a people person and sensitive to their emotional needs, he

was looking forward to returning to his modest but comfortable condo in Jericho.

Elisha tucked his last scroll in his backpack and was picking up his mentor's famous mantle when he heard her crying out to him from across the town plaza. It was the voice of Obadiah's young widow. She was clearly distraught.

"Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves." (4:1)

#### A. Financial Ruin

##### 1. Creditors threatening to take sons into slavery.

Obadiah was a good man, husband, and father. He was a good preacher and fulfilled his prophetic duties with excellence and humility. Obadiah was a hero. When Queen Jezebel launched a manhunt of all God's prophets, Obadiah found a hiding place for 100 of them. He hid them away until Jezebel's power was broken. There are a few problems with hiding 100 prophets for an extended period of time, one of the biggest would be feeding that many fugitives. He had to borrow money to feed his friends. His widow was left with the debt and his creditors were now threatening to take his sons away and force them to serve as slaves until the debt could be paid.

This compelling story of Obadiah's heroism is handed down through Jewish tradition and is spoken of by great historians of that time period, but it is not in the Bible. Perhaps Obadiah – if that's his name – went into debt for less heroic reasons. The debt was still real, and the creditors coming after Obadiah's sons to enslave them was still real, and so was the widow's sense of desperation.

##### 2. Symptom of a disintegrating, disobedient society

**A large part of this story that is not told is the failure of the community to help.** The community ABSOLUTELY had a responsibility to the widow and orphan, and not only that, but they had a responsibility, I believe, to the company of the

prophets. But the nation was in such disarray and unfaithfulness to God – so neglectful of their worship of Him and especially their responsibilities in that worship – that they allowed this obligation, too, to fall away.

### **B. Legacy of Faithfulness to God**

Regardless of the reason for the debt, **the prophet still left behind him a legacy of faithfulness** that the widow used as the basis of her appeal to Elisha. “You know that he feared the Lord!”

I’ve spent a bit of time this week thinking about the plight of Obadiah’s widow. How many dads of daughters are here today? As the father of two intelligent, creative, opinionated, and beautiful young adult daughters, I want them to have happy and prosperous lives. A key to that happiness and prosperity, I believe, is who they will marry, if they choose to marry.

Before this woman in our Scripture was a widow, she was a young single adult woman. A man named Obadiah started coming around and asking her out. Can you imagine this young woman’s parents when she finally told them that she was dating a ... prophet?

A prophet. Not a doctor / or a lawyer / or even a shepherd! A prophet. Not only would love be all they need, it would *literally* be all they had. And now here she was, the widow of a penniless prophet. And not just penniless, but heavily in debt.

**Yet, of the two legacies: being wealthy or loving God, if you could choose only one for yourself, which would it be?** If you had to choose just one for the future husband of your daughter, which would you choose?

Let’s remember Jesus’ words: **“No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)**

Obadiah loved God. He served the Lord! His widow, Elisha, and everyone else knew it. *That's* legacy! It was because of this that the widow could come to Elisha for help, and it was on this basis that Elisha directed a miracle on her behalf.

First Elisha asks her a question... well... two questions...

## II. THE QUESTION OF THE DAY, 4:2

### A. Elisha Asks, 4:2a

#### 1. Human/scarcity perspective

The first five words out of Elisha's mouth are so human. If you could ever relate to Elijah for feeling inadequate, you can really relate to Elisha for feeling just plain tired and wrung out. "How can I help *you*?" He asked her. He may have actually said this under his breath – or maybe loud enough for everyone to hear. Maybe he was ticked off at everybody else in the town. After all, it was the *community's responsibility to look after a widow, and it was their responsibility to care for fatherless children*. It's very likely that everyone knew the situation she was in, yet help was nonexistent.

#### 2. God takes over/abundance perspective

As Elisha said these words, his conscience may have spoken up or maybe God simply took over, but Elisha stopped his human scarcity train of thought to ask a question that lead to abundance for the widow, and even for the community. "What do you have in your house?" And just like Elisha's pair of questions, the young widow gave a pair of answers.

### B. Widow Answers, 4:2b

#### 1. Scarcity perspective

The widow said at first, "I have nothing there at all..."

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by an enormous problem? Ever felt like you had no resources? Surely Elisha knew she had nothing. Why was he even bothering to ask? But then maybe her

conscience spoke up or God took over because the widow remembered she did have a little something.

2. **Abundance perspective**

“Except a little oil...” A millennium later, Jesus’ disciples brought to Jesus a little boy whose mother planned ahead and packed for him a lunch of bread and sardines... just five mini bread loaves and two small fish. “It’s all we could find, Master,” they said, “and what are these among so many?”

“I have nothing here at all,” the widow said through her tears, and then, “except a little oil.”

**III. INSTRUCTIONS FOR ABUNDANCE, 4:3**

A. **Involve the Community**

So immediately Elisha says, “Go around to all your neighbors and ask for empty jars.” These were the neighbors and church folk who COULD have been caring for her and her boys in the first place. I think this shows us that God’s design is that all of us bless one another, and as we do that, we share in each other’s blessings.

B. **Ask for and Gather Many**

Secondly, you must exercise your faith. You may not see what God is doing now, but you will. Go get a lot of jars! You may feel foolish going around and asking, but do it anyway! Trust the Word and act in faith!

“Don’t just gather a few!” Elisha said, “Get as many as you can, as big as you can!”

For how many of us would this have been the end of our story?

“God, you know I can’t do that! This is just too hard! I don’t know my

neighbors very well. What if they say no? Oh, this is too much!"  
Thank God the widow and her sons exercised their faith!

#### C. Go Private

Elisha told the widow to close her doors and do this where no one else except her and her sons could see. We need to meet God in private to experience His abundance in public. More often than not, God prepares us in stillness and quiet and seclusion so that His glory may be displayed in the open with praise and wonder.

How many of you believe that God wants every generation to know Him? Obadiah's sons needed to see the goodness of God in the wake of their father's death. Obadiah's sons needed to be the first to see this miracle... to sense for themselves something supernatural was going on and to see their Mom's joy as she took her tiny pitcher with just a little bit of oil clinging to the bottom and with it filled up a small jar, then another small jar, and then... hey boys, let's go over to the really big jar over there! Boys! I can't believe this is happening! Boys! God was good to your Dad, and see now how good He is to us!

#### D. You've Got A Part to Play

All along the way, the widow had a part to play. She didn't just get to sit back and watch this play out. She was an active participant in the process. I think that's because of the kind of miracle this is. She had to be active. She couldn't rest on entitlement. She had to exercise her faith.

### IV. THE WIDOW'S ABUNDANCE.

#### A. Pouring the oil.

##### 1. Symbolism of Oil

The widow pours the oil into the jars, as many jars as they could find. What kind of oil was this? It was olive oil.

Olive oil was used for many purposes – from common to extraordinary, from ointment to anointing, cooking, baking, and healing.

Olive oil was valuable... and have you priced it at the store lately? It's not cheap today either. Given the economic problems of the time, and several years of famine, I'm sure that olive oil was a precious commodity.

As I've reflected on this story, I believe that for us today, this **oil represents the goodness and abundant provision of God.**

## 2. **Symbolism of Jars**

I believe that jars represent facets of your life that need filling, places in your heart that need filling, and even YOU yourself.

### B. God's Provision

Please note that **God's Provision = The Empty Jars, God's Provision not greater than The Empty Jars, God's Provision not less than The Empty Jars.** It is completely to the scale of the need and blessing. When the last jar was full, there was not extra oil that the widow had. And if she and the boys were able to gather 50 jars, there wasn't just enough for 49; or if they brought 200 jars, there wasn't just enough for 199.

C. After Provision, The Widow still had a role to play in order to activate her abundance. She had to sell the oil. But even in the selling of the oil there was a promise: there would be enough to pay her debts and enough left over for her and her sons to live on. As far as the widow was concerned, she was set for life.

V. EXPERIENCING ABUNDANCE: ***What are you bringing to be filled by God?***

I selected a couple of verses in 2 Timothy 2 because I think they can speak to us as we consider this story.

### **2 Timothy 2:20-21**

<sup>20</sup> Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

In those days running water meant that you ran to get water from a well or spring. Once you quit running, you stored the water in jars, or vessels, much like the vessels into which the widow poured the oil. Remember the jars, or vessels, in these verses, just as in our story, represent facets of our lives that need filling, or spaces in our hearts that need filling, or even ourselves. If pure oil is poured into a jar that is dirty then is the pure oil still pure? [No, it is not.] If the jar has other stuff in it, can it be completely filled with oil? [No, it cannot.]

It doesn't matter what your vessels or jars look like on the outside. The widow and her sons had small jars and big jars. They had vessels with long narrow necks and vessels with wide mouths and lids. They had big round jars and they had square jars. Some of the jars may have been chipped or their paint may have faded. God doesn't care what's outside.

But on the inside of our vessels... what are we doing to prepare the jars that we are bringing before God to fill? Have they been emptied and cleansed? Are we expecting God to fill them?

There is One who came to us, fully God and fully man, to show us the way to the Father and a life of abundance. This One, Jesus Christ, emptied Himself so that you could be full. He invites you to come be

washed in His blood and cleansed from all impurity, so that you can be filled with His goodness. Are you washed in His blood? Are you filled with His goodness today?

God is still in the jar-filling business. Come to Him with your empty jars – all that you want Him to fill. Come on your own in private, but also come expecting this community to stand with you. You will have your part to play in God's abundance in your life. Come in faith, ready to do what He says to do, and believing that He will provide even for you. Come and realize the goodness and provision of God.

As we close, let's read this verse in unison:

**2 Corinthians 4:7**

**"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."**

May God fill every jar we bring before Him with His goodness, presence, love, and power. Amen.