

1 KINGS 3:3–15, 28; 4:29–34; 10:1–10, 13

2 Chronicles 1:1–13

SOLOMON ASKS FOR WISDOM / QUEEN OF SHEBA

Story Notes

File no. 67

In the nine chapters beginning here, we are told the story of Solomon. His father's reign had been tempestuous but Solomon's was to be peaceful. David had remarked on his son's wisdom (2:6, 9). This wisdom, or perhaps, canniness, led him to cement ties with Egypt by a marriage. Already, we suspect that Solomon was one step removed from the immediate dependence that his father had on the living God. Perhaps he humoured the people with his maintenance of the 'high places'. (After the building of the temple, the prophets who recorded this history regarded the retention of these shrines as a sign of deficiency in a king.)

'High places' could be places for pagan worship (Num. 22:41) or for the worship of Yahweh (II Chron. 33:17). Moses had commanded that sacrifices be made in the place that God caused his name to dwell (Deut. 12:10–14) It was not a matter of personal choice (Deut. 7:5; 12:3; cf. 12:6–14). While Solomon chose the tabernacle for his own offerings, he did not seem to be so concerned about the proliferation of places which had no divine sanction.

1 Kings 3–4

Solomon, the beloved of God, did love God and was extravagant with his worship. God revealed himself to him. Solomon was grateful for the covenant made with his father and realised that this was why he had come to the kingship. It appears he had done nothing like his brothers in vying for this position. In meekness, he asked for wisdom for when he had to discern between good and evil. God was pleased to grant his request. Immediately, we are given an example of the practical value of this wisdom. The many rivalries common in Israel were tempered by Solomon's wisdom and the country settled down under his leadership.

His reign would not have been possible without the breadth of wisdom, knowledge and heart that God was giving Solomon. This gave him a wide audience with surrounding peoples.

1 Kings 10:1–10

Solomon's riches and wisdom gave him fame as far as Sheba (modern Yemen) and this was linked with 'the name of the Lord' and so, with the temple (8:20). The Queen of Sheba visited Jerusalem with more than trade in mind. She opened up all that was in her heart. Solomon's wisdom, and the riches she saw left her speechless. She heard of the Lord who loved Israel forever. Solomon had explained the covenant made with his father, giving glory to God. She saw that what God had done brought delight to Israel's administrators and justice and righteousness to the whole nation.

Numerous gifts were exchanged. We are also told of the exotic imports that Solomon was able to afford, and the amount of gold Israel received and how it was used in enriching his house. The Queen of Sheba left, but she was one of many world dignitaries who came to learn the wisdom and observe the riches of Solomon. He had asked for wisdom and our writer reminds us that God gave it to him. God had also given him riches.

1 KINGS 5:1 — 6:38; 8:1–66

2 Chronicles 5:1 — 7:3

SOLOMON BUILDS THE TEMPLE — A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

Story Notes

File no. 68

1 Kings 5–6

Hiram wanted friendly relations with David to continue (cf. 2 Sam. 5:11), and was delighted to discover that Solomon was eager for the same. The Gentile king recognised Solomon's wisdom. The biblical writer observed that this wisdom was the gift of God to Solomon. His wisdom still rested in the thought that his present peace and prosperity were the fruit of the covenant made with his father and of the battles his father had won. The heart to build the temple was Solomon's, but some of the skills required were from this foreign nation. Perhaps there is a suggestion that all nations will bring their glory for the building of the holy city (Rev. 21:24–26).

The temple followed the pattern for the tabernacle revealed to Moses but was double in size, and grander, and, of course, fixed. This was the place where the Lord would make his name to dwell (Deut. 26:2)—and so it did, for some 380 years.

A building site with no noise would have been awe-inspiring! (Was Solomon influenced by the need for unhewn stones as for an altar described in Exodus 20:25?) He 'finished' the building then covered it with cedar and added side chambers. God spoke to Solomon to remind him of what worship was all about, that is, hearing and obeying his statutes and receiving God's promises (Lev. 26:11–12). The building was 'finished' but he added more and overlaid the whole house with gold until it was 'finished'. Still, some furnishings and ornamentation were added until seven years had been spent building it. Then, it was 'finished'.

Kings of surrounding nations typically built a house for their deity, an idol that secured the unity of the nation.

Other kings had claimed that God had revealed the plans for the temple. But the institution of this temple would do nothing for Solomon or Israel without the relationship of obedience described here.

The carved cherubim in the most holy place and the engravings of cherubim, palm trees and flowers on all the walls suggest that in coming to worship God, Israel had returned to the gates of Eden (Gen. 3:24), a sign of the coming restoration of all things.

In Israel's worship, cherubim guarded the throne of God (Exod. 25:18–22) and God was present between, or on, or above the cherubim.

1 Kings 8

A new house had been made but not a new ark or copy of the law. God's covenant with his people, or rather, God himself, was central. The sacrifices God had prescribed Solomon supplied in abundance. God filled the temple Solomon had made, showing that it pleased him to be among them, and Israel's priests could not do their work because of God's obvious presence.

Solomon remembered God's word to his father: 'I have not sought a place for my name to dwell'. God had first sought out and prepared a person who would lead his people into their inheritance and in obedience to his ways. The temple was the result of what was in David's heart. He knew that worship was obedience before sacrifice (Ps. 40:6; Heb. 10:5, 8).

Jesus Christ would later come as King, purify his people and lead them in true worship. His flesh would be the temple for his people, torn down by man, raised up again by God in full glory (John 2:19–22).

Solomon, in what is possibly his greatest accomplishment, worshipped God and prayed for his nation and for the world. The coming of Jesus as King was an answer to this prayer (Isa. 56:7; Mark 11:17).

SOLOMON BUILDS THE TEMPLE — A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS con't

'Who can compare with you, Lord, a God who keeps his covenant with true worshippers? Lord, keep your covenant with my father! The universe cannot contain you, but you are here. Hear my prayer, and the prayers of your people always, and forgive their sins!

'Many would pray because of judgements on their sins or on Israel's sins. 'May they be forgiven and restored and taught the right way! Give them what they deserve, according to your right knowledge of all people, so that all may fear you! May the prayers of foreigners also be heard when they come to pray because news of your greatness has moved them! May Israel's armies be heard when they wage war. If, as is probable, they are given over to their enemies, even then, hear them when they repent and cry to you. May these enemies be kind and restore them to their inheritance! Lord, we are your inheritance according to your great deeds through Moses. Finish what you have begun!'

With such a prayer offered and heard, Solomon blessed the people. He confessed in their presence that God had fulfilled all that he had promised through Moses. He called on God to incline their hearts to his law. He asked God to continue his favour to them daily so the nations would know the one true God, and then called Israel to be devoted to God.

Then the worship began. Extraordinary measures were taken to accommodate the sacrifices offered and the people from all Solomon's dominions who wished to be present. These included the dedication of additional holy space and doubling the time for the feast. Being assured of God's forgiveness and of the blessing of fellowship that the sacrifices conveyed to Israel, the people of God returned to their tents with great joy.

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1 KINGS 11:1–13, 26–43; 12:1–24

SOLOMON'S SAD END / ISRAEL BECAME TWO KINGDOMS

Story Notes

File no. 69

The story has moved to when Solomon was old. From the beginning of his reign, he gathered foreign wives. His own needs for political stability may have given him excuse to ignore the warnings of Moses (Exod. 34:12–16). He thought his own heart was secure from turning aside to idols, but it was not so. The two warnings God gave him did not prevent him from turning away. He loved these idols and provided shrines for them. Solomon had broken the covenant.

However, God would keep his covenant by bringing judgement on Solomon's dynasty, delaying the judgement and keeping one tribe 'for the sake of your father David'. As with Abraham and Moses, we see God's purpose to have a faithful covenant partner to whom he could respond in love. David had been this faithful one, in anticipation of the Christ who would be the beloved Son in whom God was well pleased. For his sake, God would have mercy on us all and keep his covenant 'for the sake of Jerusalem'.

The downfall of Solomon's united kingdom came through the industrious young warrior, Jeroboam, whom Solomon had appointed to look after the Northern workforce. God sent a prophet to Jeroboam to announce his charter and limitations. (Israel's kings, even Jeroboam who would lead a revolt, could not succeed without a prophetic word.) Jeroboam could not foil God's promise to keep a 'lamp' alight in Jerusalem for David and to have his own name remembered at Jerusalem. He and his sons, if they kept the commands of God, could reign until God's purpose in this separation of North and South was accomplished.

A 'lamp' is a figure of speech for a life or a dynasty. It could also signify divine guidance (Ps. 119:105; Prov. 6:23). God had been David's lamp (2 Sam. 22:29) and David was a lamp for Israel (2 Sam. 21:17). Now, the purpose of God in David would be continued in his sons (1 Kings 5:4).

Solomon did not accept that his kingdom would be divided and continued in his political mind-set causing Jeroboam to flee the country. In this state, Solomon's life and reign came to an end.

Perhaps we should see this in contrast to David who had accepted the chastenings of God.

Samuel had warned that kings would demand a lavish lifestyle (1 Sam. 8:10–18). Now, Solomon's luxurious ways had bred resentment, particularly in the powerful Northern tribes centred in Shechem. (It is doubtful if it was as harsh as they claimed. Solomon's reign had brought abundant prosperity to the whole country.) Rehoboam chose the city of Shechem to be made king, perhaps aware that the North would have to be won over. Jeroboam came back and represented Israel's cause to the new king.

Solomon's older counsellors advised Rehoboam to moderate his Father's demands. saying the people would serve him if he served them. But the young king preferred the advice of his peers and rejected the loss of glory involved in downsizing his court. In this manner, God's judgement against Solomon was at work.

This episode demonstrates the folly of ignoring the advice of elders. It also suggests that service is the true spirit of leadership (Luke 22:25–27). Solomon could hold his large kingdom together, but his heir had little or none of his father's wisdom. Even at 40 years of age, he could not recognise the power of the forces set against him and moderate his demands with a view to the greater good.

It would be wrong to generalise from the particular elements of this story however. More broadly speaking, kingship involves discretion at all times, and severity and kindness at different times (see Proverbs 20:8, 26, 28). In Israel, kingship could be nothing less than representing the covenant faithfulness of God to the nation. We may compare God's own goodness and severity to his people (Rom. 11:22).

Rehoboam's claim to his father's kingdom was thwarted. His ambassador lost his life and the young king had to be content with Judah as his kingdom. He could raise a considerable army, but a prophet showed him that this had happened by God's will and that he should not war against his brothers.

1 KINGS 13:1–34

THE MAN OF GOD WHO DISOBEYED THE LORD

Story Notes

File no. 70

Jeroboam willfully, established rival worship centres at his Southern and Northern borders so that his people could continue to worship God without having to go to Jerusalem. He established a 'civil religion', a religion used for state purposes. However, the Lord was one Lord with one centre where he made his name to be remembered. Jeroboam returned to the sin Israel committed while Moses received the ten commandments, making golden calves and saying these represented the God who had led them out of Egypt (Exod. 32:4, 8). He ordained his own priests and feasts and sacrifices for which there was no command. This was the continuing sin of the Northern tribes because none of their kings ever abolished this idol worship.

Jeroboam, king of the northern tribes, perhaps is wishing to be like Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 8:62–64) offered public worship at his altar, but was confronted by a prophet from Judah, or rather, by the word of the Lord. The Lord had decreed the ruin of this altar, an event that took place under Josiah (2 Kings 23:15). Jeroboam opposed God's word, but God's word prevailed. There was even mercy for Jeroboam in the word of the Lord: he lived his life, not with a withered arm but a healed one. He had no reason to doubt the word of God or God's purpose to do him good.

The man of God rejected the king's hospitality, recognising it to be against God's word to him. However, he was led astray by the old prophet's lie and found the truth of the word of the Lord in a lion's teeth. It is better to be a prophet killed by the truth than a king living by a lie. Graciously, God 'killed' us in the killing of his Son, and then raised us up in him, so that we may live truly to him.

See the Martin Bleby song *The Lion on the Road*, in New Creation Hymn Book Vol. 2/53 at the New Creation web site: www.newcreation.org.au

Did the old prophet want the company of the messenger from the South? Did he want to test him to see if he was a true prophet of the Lord? Whatever the case, he discovered, by the word of God in his own mouth, that what God said would happen, not only to this fellow prophet but to false worship established by Jeroboam. Whatever compromises he had made in his life, he wanted to be with this prophet in his death and honoured the man by burying him in his own grave. In contrast, Jeroboam did not honour the servant of God or the word he brought. His dynasty was doomed from the beginning.

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1 KINGS 16:29 — 17:7; 18:4
ELIJAH SAYS: 'NO RAIN UNTIL I SAY!'

Story Notes

File no. 71

The scene was set for the arrogance of Ahab, king of northern Israel, who took Jeroboam's sin to greater lengths. He strengthened his position politically through a marriage alliance with Phoenicia, weakening himself by embracing and promoting the false worship of his wife. As a further indication of the arrogance of the times, Hiel ignored the prophecy against the rebuilding of Jericho, and the death of the builder's sons did not register with the North as to the danger they were in. However, far from God being far away, the scene is set for one of the greatest of Israel's prophets.

1 Kings 17:1–7

The God of Israel still lived. Elijah stood before him and knew the purpose and heart of God for his people. From seemingly nowhere, God had sent another man like Moses who knew the heart of God and was called and empowered to participate in God's jealous care that his name be honoured. Elijah asked for one of the curses predicted by Moses (Deut. 28:23–24) to come, and to remain until his further word. James tells us that such effective and fervent prayer can accomplish much (James 5:16–18). What James had in mind was the healing of the sick and restoration of sinners, so, we suppose that that is what Elijah had in mind. How could God's people be so ignorant of their Lord? Would they turn from their idols and be healed?

Revelation tells us that two witnesses prophesied for three and a half years (42 months or 1260 days) with power to stop rain during that time (Rev. 11:1–13). They are a picture of the church that participates in the prophetic ministry of Christ to the world. John the Baptist had come in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), but every person who holds the testimony of Jesus is greater than John. It is the high calling of all who believe in Christ to share in the jealous love of God for the world. Our prayers for the world are to be shaped by God wanting his Son to be known.

As famine spread, Elijah went to the river as directed by God, and there, was fed by birds.

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1 KINGS 17:8–24

ELIJAH AND THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH

Story Notes

File no. 72

Elijah had told King Ahab that, because of his wickedness, there would be no rain or dew until he said so. King Ahab had not listened to God and had made other gods to worship. God provided for Elijah at the brook Cherith until it dried up.

God's word then led Elijah to Phoenicia where he asked a widow to feed him. Jezebel's father controlled this territory and it was given over to Baal worship, the Canaanite god of rain. Here, God taught a bereft woman that Israel's God was alive and that Elijah was his servant. She obeyed the word of the Lord. Jesus spoke about this Gentile who had recognised God's gracious provision (Luke 4:25–26).

Israel's story is left for a moment while we are told about the crisis of death and resurrection through which this family passed. Elijah prayed a fervent prayer and the widow's son was raised from the dead. Was 'calamity' the final word of God? Would she have to have all her sins brought to mind? Elijah believed in God's mercy for this woman and asked him to demonstrate that it was so. As Jesus noted, God was doing for this family what he would love to have done for all his people.

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1 KINGS 18:1–46

OBEDIAH / ELIJAH AND THE PROPHETS OF BAAL

Story Notes

File no. 73

God had been caring for Elijah, during the time of no rain, in Zarephath (Phoeneciah).

Back in Israel, Obadiah's service to God in caring for 100 prophets and his concern at getting caught between Elijah and Ahab are in marked contrast to the bombast of Ahab and his feeding of 950 false prophets. Years of drought had not made him doubt his wicked policies. He thought Elijah was the problem and set out to eliminate him. He had not reckoned on the God who lives and before whom Elijah stood. Obadiah was wonderfully sensitive to God and his servants.

But not even Ahab could argue with the man who had stopped it raining for 3 years. Only by Elijah could the rain be restored. So Israel and their false religious leaders were summoned. The nation was not yet totally apostate but, as Elijah said, had been limping between two opinions. Even now, with Ahab watching, the people would not choose between the Lord and Baal, but preferred to let the Lord prove himself.

Baal's prophets could draw blood but light no fires. Their antics, scorned by Elijah, emphasise the futility of religion that does not arise from the word of the living God of grace. Elijah repaired an ancient altar to the Lord and made it for all Israel. Then he drenched the offering with water to demonstrate that no human intervention was necessary in what was about to happen. Elijah waited until the evening sacrifice was being offered (as ordained by God, in Jerusalem), and prayed that the Lord would show himself to be Israel's God.

Elijah wanted Israel to know that he was acting for the Lord and that the Lord had turned their hearts back to himself. It is one thing to challenge false powers, but it is another to turn the hearts of the children to the godliness of their forefathers (cf. Mal. 4:6; Luke 1:17). This was the spirit and power of Elijah, and of his successor, John the Baptist: to bear witness that it is the Lord who can turn our hearts back to himself, and so, to assure the continuity of a true worship.

Fire fell, Israel worshipped the Lord and the prophets of Baal were bundled to the base of the mountain and slaughtered. Ahab was sent off to celebrate the coming rain, but Elijah climbed the mountain again to pray. He waited long enough to see one tiny cloud, then warned the waiting Ahab to get out before he got bogged. We are not told why the Lord helped Elijah outrun Ahab's chariot back to the latter's summer palace (or to the turn off to the same). Perhaps he wished to be first to tell the story so no false account could blur its impact.

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1 KINGS 19:1–21

ELIJAH RUNS AWAY / GOD SENDS ELIJAH BACK TO ISRAEL / ELISHA FOLLOWS ELIJAH

Story Notes

File no. 74

Jezebel would not celebrate the break of the drought as Ahab had. She spoke of what the gods would do to her if she did not kill Elijah. She feared no gods in fact. She feared only not getting her own way. However, her actions reveal the demonic powers behind all idolatry (1 Cor. 10:19–20); she was not free at all.

Elijah's courage failed him and he fled for a safe haven in the South—the southernmost settled area of Judea. His witness on Carmel had not been his human strength pitted against Jezebel's but a divinely orchestrated confrontation. God would deal with Jezebel. In the mean time, God would help his servant and re-equip him for his next witness.

Elijah had not only run for safety. He felt a bitter failure in his mission and as a person. His emotions and confidence were in tatters. He wanted to die. God sent an angel with food and encouragement to eat, and on a second occasion, told him he would need the food for his coming journey. Then we find him travelling 40 days and nights, like Moses (Exod. 24:18; 34:28; cf. Matt. 4:2), to the Mount of God (Exod. 3:1), again, like Moses. Clearly, Elijah was still being directed in his powerful, Moses like ministry. His journey would have been 400 kilometres long.

At the Mount of God, he was still bitter about his failure. 'Why are you here?' God asked him. All his humanity had been poured out for nothing. Other prophets had been killed. His life was being sought. He could not see any people of God remaining. However, he was summoned to stand where Moses had stood and in a manner reminiscent of Israel at Horeb. Elijah saw demonstrations of the Lord's 'passing by' in a wind, an earthquake and a fire, but it was in a 'still' and 'thin' voice that God came to Elijah.

God asked his question again. Elijah gave his same answer. His depression was profound and persistent. But God had come to him. He announced the next part of the plan: he was to anoint three men. The first, a pagan king, would begin the judgement on Ahab and Israel's false worship. The second would continue the judgement and replace Ahab. The third would continue God's prophetic witness to his people and complete what remained to be done. Seven thousand people who had feared and been faithful to the Lord would be untouched by any of these judgements.

Perhaps Elijah then saw that he had assumed a responsibility for Israel which was not his to bear. The Lord himself would be responsible for his people. Things were not as they had seemed; the Lord knew what he was about, and Elijah was still his servant.

Elijah returned to Israel and anointed Elisha. Elisha signalled his change from prosperous farming to prophetic ministry by feasting with his workers, using the beasts he would no longer need.

We do not hear of contact with Hazael until 2 Kings 8:7–15 when Elisha foretells his kingship, or of contact with Jehu until 2 Kings 9:1–3 when Elisha sends a fellow prophet to anoint him as king. It appears that Elisha did these things in place of Elijah as the Lord had indicated.

2 CHRONICLES 17:1 — 18:34

1 Kings 22:1–40

GOOD KING JEHOShAPHAT

Story Notes

File no. 75

Jehoshaphat, king of Judah was a good king to his people and yet we will see that there were times he did not seek the Lord. Early in his reign he made sure the cities were protected and had some Levites and priests teach the people the law of God. He refused to follow the Baals, which Israel had chosen to worship.

Although Jehoshaphat 'set his heart to seek God' (2 Chron. 19:3) there were times when he acted unwisely. He made an alliance with wicked king Ahab by the marriage of his son to Ahab's daughter. Then in chapter 18, he was impressed with Ahab and joined him in battle. To get a bigger picture of Jehoshaphat it is helpful to know that in chapter 19 Jehoshaphat was confronted with an enemy and went to the Lord for help and was told 'this battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on you behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not fear . . . the Lord will be with you.' (20:17)

Later, Jehoshaphat foolishly joined with another wicked king in building a fleet of ships, and the Lord sent a prophet to tell him the ships would be destroyed.

In Jehoshaphat we see the blessings of seeking the Lord and the dangers of associating with the wicked.

Ahab had witnessed God's power at Mt Carmel, but his repentance, three years later, did not translate into listening to God's true prophets.

The nature of false worship in the North appeared through the visit of Jehoshaphat from the South. Jehoshaphat was ready to go with Ahab into war, and his request for a word from the Lord was granted.

Ahab had 400 prophets (not the prophets of Baal but compliant so-called prophets of the Lord) who would prophesy pleasing things for him, but one prophet remained faithful. Micaiah pretended to be compliant as the others were and provoked Ahab to demand a true word. But Ahab had no intention of listening to a true word from God.

Micaiah could explain the contrary prophecies of his colleagues. God could use them as well as true prophets if his purpose was to bring Ahab down. Naturally, the false prophets were not happy to be exposed. (Chenaanah, who struck Micaiah, would soon retreat in embarrassment.) As for Micaiah, he would languish in gaol waiting for a king who could never return, but his word would burn in the memories of all who heard him.

Israel and Judah's enemy, Aram, only had Ahab in their sights, and he could not escape the word of God spoken against him. Jehoshaphat's cry, when he was mistaken for Ahab, may have been for help, or to identify himself, but a later history says it was the Lord who heard and helped him (2 Chron. 18:31).

What then of Jehoshaphat? He was a good man and, with some exceptions, kept the covenant of the Lord. His peace with Israel had come at a price however.

2 KINGS 2:1–18

ELIJAH GOES TO HEAVEN

Story Notes

File no. 76

Throughout the books of 1 & 2 Kings, Israel had turned their affection away from God's covenant and commands. Elijah the prophet had been sent to turn them from their wickedness and back to God. Elijah's work was now coming to an end. Elisha had been chosen to be with Elijah and was preparing to take over from him.

The whole prophetic community knew that Elijah would soon be taken from them. What would this mean for Elisha? Whatever it meant, he could not be persuaded to leave his master. The Spirit of the Lord had been on him and that Spirit was Elisha's only hope of being a successor in the task of bearing witness to the reign of God in the midst of an idolatrous people.

Elijah and Elisha crossed the Jordan in a manner reminiscent of Moses leading Israel out of Egypt (Exod. 14:16), but this time, only a small prophetic contingent saw the miracle. They were a remnant who still lived by the power and love that had brought the whole nation into existence. Elisha asked for twice the portion of Spirit, which had been on Elijah; perhaps he felt twice as needful of it. He saw the chariot of Israel with its horsemen. He cried out to Elijah who had been father to him, but he had been taken up in a whirlwind. This vision of Israel's spiritual protection would be greatly needed by Elisha in days to come (6:17).

Elisha was now leader of the prophetic movement and began his ministry as his 'father' had left it, by parting the water, and also, as Joshua had led Israel into their land. Perhaps the prophets were encouraged to think of the new things God would do rather than dwell on the nation that had rejected Elijah. They made a shaky beginning however, and wanted Elisha to search for Elijah in whose physical presence they had taken comfort.

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2 KINGS 4:1–7; 38–44; 6:1–7
A WIDOW'S POT OF OIL /
STORIES FROM THE SCHOOL OF THE PROPHETS

Story Notes

File no. 77

The prophetic community, which had gathered around Elijah, may not have had wide support, and their practical needs quickly threw them back on God. Elisha moved from place to place, including the memorable Mt Carmel, and was careful for the needs of those who trusted God. He was also able to speak to the king and commander personally. These accounts tell us about godly people who were grateful to God for his mercy and how God provided for the prophet and his company. There is not a time in Scripture, apart from the days of Moses and of Christ, when we are told of so many miracles being performed. God was demonstrating to Israel that he still lived among them as their gracious provider. By this, he encouraged the faith and hope of his faithful people.

Selling the sons of a widow seems unjust to us, but it was within the law of the time. Payment of debt was a high priority in Israel. The woman's debt was not forgiven but she was enabled to repay it. Elisha asked what she had in the house, and, with that and some borrowing from her neighbours, he called her to participate in the miracle. She found that God's providing was as bountiful as her need. (Cf. the earlier miracle of a similar kind in 1 Kings 17:15.)

Stories from the school of the prophets

Famine came to Israel again. Elisha showed the prophetic community that, even if the only remaining fruits were poisonous, and even if there were few in the land who brought their gifts to the Lord's servants, they could be fed. When Jesus came, he taught his disciples, not only that they could be fed, but that they could feed the multitudes (Matt. 14:16).

We are encouraged by these narratives, as servants of Christ, not to expect great things in this world which goes about its life as though God did not matter, but, to expect great things of God who will not leave himself without a witness to his living among us.

The calling of Elisha was to be a prophet; nevertheless he remained careful for the welfare of those around him. Perhaps this is reflected in the desire of the prophets to have him come with them while they gathered timber for their residence. When confronted with the loss of a borrowed axehead, he was sure of the goodness and power of God in his care for the ordinary needs and emergencies of his prophets. Jesus provided for his disciples in similar fashion (Matt. 17:27).

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2 KINGS 4:8–37

THE WOMAN OF SHUNEM

Story Notes

File no. 78

The prophetic community, which had gathered around Elijah, may not have had wide support, and their practical needs quickly threw them back on God.

This woman was perhaps as rich as the widow was poor. She gave freely and asked for nothing, but, as Jesus later said, anyone who serves a prophet will receive a prophet's reward (Matt. 10:41). Elisha enquired as to her need so that he could discharge this 'debt' of love (cf. Rom. 13:8).

Her need was a cry from her heart for a son, a need she could not bear to be trifled with. The son was born, miraculously. When this son died within a few years however, all this giving of God seemed like a cruel joke. Although she felt mocked, she would not rest until Elisha came to her son.

His servant was sent urgently before them and was not to greet anyone on the way. We are reminded of the similar urgency with which Christ sent 70 disciples before him to announce the news of new life for Israel (Luke 10:4).

Elisha applied himself to seek God's favour. The Shunammite woman received the gift of her son again, like Abraham received his son as one raised from the dead (Heb. 11:19). She had encountered Elisha, and the God of Elisha, in her depths.

All this drew Israel on to understand that God is the God of resurrection. Our heart's cry is heard by the God, who has raised up from the dead our Lord Jesus (John 5:20–21; Heb. 13:20).

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2 KINGS 5:1–27

CAPTAIN NAAMAN AND THE PROPHET IN ISRAEL

Story Notes

File no. 79

The Arameans were enemies of Israel as far back as David's day and had continued their hostility to the Northern tribes. They continued their worrying attacks and captured a young girl who was now servant to their chief military commander. The writer of *2 Kings* acknowledges that it was the Lord who had given this commander his victories for Aram.

With remarkable simplicity and grace, the young girl was confident of the power of Elisha to heal this enemy of Israel and her own captor, and longed that it would happen. Perhaps unwittingly, she revealed the desire of God to be known as the living God of grace among all nations.

Naaman took the girl's desire for his healing with all the simplicity it deserved and approached his king. For the sake of this man, the king was willing to take the political risks involved in asking a favour of his enemy. He sent Naaman off with liberal gifts. King Jehoram received the request from his enemy with all the threat that is sensed by those who build their own kingdom. If he had embraced the ministry of Elisha, perhaps he could have anticipated that God meant to glorify himself by this request. Elisha, always a man of the kingdom of God, saw no reason for panic and asked for the man to be sent on to him.

Elisha's non-appearance to Naaman to prescribe his lowly remedy should be understood in the light of his words to Naaman after he was healed. Elisha wanted Naaman to understand, not merely that there was a prophet in Israel, but that there was a living God before whom he stood and who had power and grace to heal. Elisha would take no reward for a task he had not performed. Naaman went back to Aram a convert to Israel's Lord.

We do not know what affect this healing had on King Jehoram, but we know that when Jesus referred to it many years later (Luke 4:27), Israel was furious. Israel, for the most part, remained closed off to God's saving deeds. God had wanted to so bless his people so they could be a witness to the nations. Here, God went about his gracious work anyway, through a young girl and a faithful prophet.

Gehazi, in effect, had a different 'god' before whom he stood, a god who gave grudgingly or for payment. He could not see why they, or at least he, should not be enriched by this service, and did not understand the grace of this act that had awakened faith in a foreigner. Without the greatness of the true God before him, he gave way to covetousness and deceit. He spent the remaining days of his service with the power and fear of God powerfully at work in his own flesh.

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2 KINGS 6:8–23

GOD'S ARMY OF ANGELS

Story Notes

File no. 80

God continued to care for the whole nation, by warning the king of their enemy's tactical moves. This happened enough to make the king of Aram suspect the loyalty of his own men, and often enough for the story of how it happened to filter through to the Arameans. There were probably many natural means for Elisha to know Aram's movements. We know of one girl captive who remembered Elisha (5:3) and who could have been a source of information. But however the information was gained, the intelligence served to demonstrate to the king that the prophetic movement remained faithful to the nation.

The tactical importance of Elisha to the nation was demonstrated by his being made the focus for Aram's attack. Elisha knew he was safe. His eyes seem to have been always open to the power of God among his people, but a vision was provided for his servant who feared for their safety. The servant had seen the enemy all around Dothan, but now he saw that the army of God was all around Elisha. This event became the occasion for Elisha's loyalty to be even more remarkably demonstrated. He led the vast but blinded Aramean force into Samaria.

More importantly, Elisha was able to demonstrate that the power of the Lord had more to do with mercy than vengeance. In such a manner, the people of Christ are now told to feed their enemies and overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:20–21). In various ways, the Spirit of Christ in Elisha was already opening the eyes of the blind: the fearful saw his protection, the rebellious were delivered into the hands of the Lord's people for judgement, only to discover that they were pardoned. The feast may have sealed a covenant of peace precluding any further hostilities. The king of Israel had been sufficiently moved by these events to call Elisha, not 'my enemy' (as Ahab had done), but 'my father'. It was easy for him to respect the prophet when his enemies were in his power, but he had little idea of the gracious powers of the kingdom of God.

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2 KINGS 6:24 – 7:20

FAMINE IN SAMARIA / 'A DAY OF GOOD NEWS'

Story Notes

File no. 81

Aram attacks again.

After some time, Aram's peacableness and the king of Israel's respect for Elisha had vanished. Another attack from Aram had come to the point of Samaria being under siege and the people inside were reduced to eating unclean food, and their own children. The king's distress and the revealing of sackcloth under his clothes suggest that he was expressing repentance toward God; only the Lord could help them now. But his idea of relief from trouble was to vent his anger against Elisha.

It seems that the elders of the city respected Elisha, and they helped him escape the King's irrational rage. The king had given up hope for himself from God.

'Food would soon be plentiful and cheap' said Elisha, except that the captain who expressed his doubt would not taste any of it. His word could have done great damage if it had not been countered immediately. Then, God did for the King (who was effectively his enemy) what he had earlier instructed him to do for his captive enemy: he fed him and his whole city (6:22–23).

The lepers who had nothing to lose were the first to discover the Lord's generosity. They were the first also, to realise that it was time to live in that generosity by sharing it with the whole city. The king still could not believe he would see any good from the Lord. He was in danger of being like the later King Ahaz, to whom Isaiah said, 'If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all' (Isa. 7:9). The King's men, like the lepers, could see that they had nothing to lose and found a way around the despair of their king. So, the extent of God's power and of his care for his people was discovered and food was soon plentiful and cheap. But the King's captain missed the great feast that followed. The judgement on him was a warning to all concerning failure to believe in the God of Israel.

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