

“Widow’s Oil”

2 Kings 4:1-7

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Introduction:

I would imagine that most of us here this morning have been in situations that seem pretty much hopeless at the time. Maybe some of us have just been overwhelmed with life to the point where it seemed like there was no where else to turn. Perhaps others have been overwhelmed in financial difficulty. Some time ago, I remember two men being arrested for breaking into a Goodwill store, and as soon as I heard that, I knew that those men must have been desperate. Out of all of the stores in Madison, I doubt that Goodwill is broken into very often. Financial difficulty, then, can bring a lot of tension into a family. In fact, I have read that 56% of all divorces take place as the direct result of financial tension in the home. And so we understand what kind of impact a seemingly hopeless situation can have on a family.

This morning, I’d like for us to consider a passage from the book of **2 Kings**—****PPT****—a passage about a family in a desperate financial situation. In fact, their situation was especially desperate because the father had died and the widow’s two sons were about to be taken into slavery by those who had loaned the husband a certain amount of money before he died. This woman, therefore, was in a situation that appeared to be hopeless at the time. And whether our hopelessness is due to debt, or some kind of emotional struggle, or illness, or whatever, it appears that there are some lessons that we will be able to learn from this woman. We do not know very much about her, except for the fact that she was empty. She was at the end of her rope and had nowhere else to turn.

As the story begins, she approaches a prophet by the name of Elisha. You might remember that Israel was united under Saul, David, and Solomon, but after the reign of Solomon, the kingdom divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (a little bit like North and South Korea today). The Northern Ten Tribes were definitely more evil than those in the south, but at no time were they left without a prophet. God always made sure they had a messenger. At first, they were served by the prophet Elijah, but after many years, one of Elijah’s students took over, a younger man by the name of Elisha. At the beginning of Elisha’s ministry, you might remember that several young men made fun of Elisha for being bald. Almost immediately, two bears came out of the woods and tore up forty-two young men. We learn from that, first of all, to never make fun of someone for being bald, and secondly, to respect God’s messengers.

Not long after this, instead of starting his ministry in some spectacular way, the prophet Elisha is called upon to help a frightened young widow. If you will, please look with me at **2 Kings 4**.

I. And as we look at this chapter, we find first of all, that THE WIDOW TOOK HER TROUBLES TO THE LORD. **PPT******

Let’s look together at the first two verses—**2 Kings 4:1-2**—the Bible says, ***“Now 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.’ Elisha 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.’”

What I find interesting is that this woman starts by taking her case to a man of God. She goes to the prophet Elisha. We are not told exactly why she went to Elisha. We don’t know if she thought Elisha had funds or knew someone who did. We don’t know if she wanted Elisha to talk to the creditors and ask for mercy. We don’t know if she didn’t even want a solution—maybe she just needed someone to talk to. But regardless of what she was expecting, she goes and she explains the situation to Elisha, who was God’s messenger in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. She went to God’s representative—she went to God for help.

What I also find interesting is the advice that is given by Elisha. He does not go to his own bank account. He does not set up a fund in memory of the dead husband. He does not use his prophet skills to give this woman the winning lottery numbers. He does not hand her a pile of cash. Sometimes we may be tempted to think that a pile of money would solve all of our problems. And it might help, but then again, how often does money help people get closer to God? Often, it has the opposite effect! And so instead of just handing her the solution, Elisha (as God’s messenger) wants this widow to tell him what she has in her house (a rather unusual request). At this point, I’ve known some people who would say, “Well, that’s none of your business! How dare you even ask a question about my finances!” But the widow is already quite familiar with her own situation, she has apparently already taken the inventory—she knows what she has to work with, and so she says that she has nothing in her house except a jar of oil.

So many times, when we are overwhelmed in a problem, whether it is financial or otherwise, we are tempted to look on the other side of the fence. We are tempted to want what someone else has—if only we had the money they have, if only we had their marriage, if only we had their children, if only we had their education, if only we had their house or their car. But the prophet Elisha starts not by giving her something but by telling this woman to consider her own resources. And so she focuses in on that single bottle of oil.

And yet if any of us were asked to inventory our own resources, I doubt that a bottle of oil would even be considered worthy to put on the list. But when we think back to the history of the Middle East, we understand that olive oil was a very important part of the economy. It was used for food, but it was also used as a medicine. Sometime we sing the song, “There is a Balm in Gilead.” The balm in this song was most likely made from olive oil. You might have seen the study that was published about a year and a half ago that compared olive oil to the anti-inflammatory ingredients found in ibuprofen. The study showed that a 50 gram (1.75 ounce) daily dose of olive oil is equivalent to about 10% of the ibuprofen dose recommended for adult pain relief. According to the study, that dose is relatively low and won’t cure a headache, but researchers say low doses of other anti-inflammatory agents, like aspirin, have been shown to provide substantial health benefits when taken consistently over time. And so, even today, research continues to show some medical benefit to olive oil. In ancient times, olive oil was also used as a cosmetic. It was used in religious ceremonies. It was used to anoint kings. It was used in offerings and burials. It was used as a source of light. When it was prepared and stored properly, it had a long shelf-life, and so it could be traded—almost like currency.

And so we find that olive oil was far more valuable 3000 years ago than it is today. And it was all this woman had. First of all, then, we find that she went to a man of God for advice, and as God's messenger, Elisha pointed her back to her own resources.

II. As we look at the next few verses, we move along and we find that not only did she go to God for help, but SHE FOLLOWED GOD'S PLAN. **PPT******

Let's look together at what happens next, in **2 Kings 4:3-5**. The Bible says, ***"Then he said, 'Go, borrow vessels at large for yourself from all your neighbors, even empty vessels; do not get a few. And 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.' So she went from him and shut the door behind her and her sons; they were bringing the vessels to her and she poured."***

Once Elisha told her what to do, the woman responded with faithful obedience. And again, God could have dropped a chunk of gold from the sky. God could have told her to go home and there could have been a vat of olive oil waiting for her in her front yard. God could have threatened the creditor with leprosy unless he forgave the debt. God could have answered this woman in any number of creative ways, but it is interesting that God wanted her to do something.

In a similar way, Noah was saved from the flood, but he had to build an ark. Moses led the people across the Red Sea on dry ground, but he had to stretch out his staff. Joshua and the Israelites saw the walls of Jericho fall down, but they had to march around the city for seven days. Samson killed 1,000 Philistines, but he had to pick up the jawbone of a donkey to do it with. David killed Goliath, but he had to go pick up five smooth stones. Naaman was cured of leprosy, but he had to dip seven times in the Jordan River. Jesus fed the 5,000, but a little boy had to give up his lunch. Jesus created wine at the wedding feast, but the servants first had to fill the stone pots with water.

All of us have something. Even if it's only an idea, or a willingness to work, or a seemingly minor skill—God can use all of us to do some amazing things. And in the same way, Elisha tells this woman in **verse 3** that she is to go out and borrow containers from her friends and neighbors, and he says, ***"...do not get a few."*** In other words, there is an effort involved. The woman had to do something.

Can we imagine borrowing empty containers from all of our neighbors? What would you tell them? I would imagine it might have been a little embarrassing. Can we imagine going door to door asking for jars and bowls? And these are not Tupperware—these would have been clay or wood or stone, and so it would have taken a separate trip for almost every jar. They would have been heavy. They would have been fragile. It would have taken a lot of effort, but as James points out in **James 2:26**, ***"...faith without works is dead."***

What we learn is that we do not need to have a lot of money in the bank to do great things for God. Even if we have only a little—a little talent, a little skill, or even only a few resources—God can use all of us here this morning to do some amazing things.

But as we left it at the end of **verse 5**, the Bible says that she shut the door behind them, her sons brought her the vessels, ***"...and she poured."*** It is so interesting that Elisha told her to shut the door, and then she followed that instruction. You might remember the time when Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead in **Mark 5**—he started by clearing the

room. Peter did the same thing when he raised Dorcas in **Acts 9**. There are times when we need to be alone with our families, when we need to be alone with God. We remember what Jesus said in **Matthew 6:6**, "***But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.***" And so we find that this woman goes into her home, shuts the door, and starts to pour.

III. All of this brings us to verses 6-7, where we find that THE WIDOW'S BLESSINGS WERE IN DIRECT PROPORTION TO WHAT SHE EXPECTED TO RECEIVE. **PPT******

We can hardly imagine what this woman's house would have looked like—full of old pots and pans—borrowed jars, and bottles, and maybe even wineskins and jugs. It must have been a very strange sight to see. We can hardly imagine what it would have been like—the future of these two boys depends on what is about to happen. She begins to pour, and then we come to **verses 6-7**. The Bible says, "***When 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. Then 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.'***"

And so as she pours her small jar of oil into all of those borrowed pots and pans, the oil keeps on flowing. Maybe after the first few buckets, she figures she will no longer need to give up her children. But even after that, the oil keeps on flowing until there is not a single container left. And again, olive oil was a necessity with no real substitute! People used it for cooking food, for burning in lamps, for medicine...and this family was now practically swimming in oil! When they finally run out of containers, they go back and talk to Elisha. In humility, they once again look to God for direction, and Elisha tells them to sell the oil, and pay the debt, and then to live on the rest.

As we look back at these few verses, we understand why the oil stopped, and we understand that the widow's blessings were in direct proportion to what she expected to receive. If she had collected fewer containers, she would have had less oil, and if she had collected more containers, she would have had more oil. If she had collected another 10,000 gallon jugs, she would have had 10,000 gallons more oil. And this is certainly not to cut on this woman, because it appears that she is an amazing example of faith, but there seems to be a lesson for us. There are times today when we can be used by God in direct proportion to our faith as well.

This morning, then, we need to remind ourselves how powerful God really is. We remember Paul's words in **Ephesians 3:20**, where he referred to God, "***...who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us.***" We can think of other times when God went above and beyond what was expected. WE can remember the feeding of the 5,000. Not only did God feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, but when they were all done eating, the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers! When Jesus told the disciples where to fish after a night of catching nothing, not only did they catch a lot of fish, but they brought in so many fish they almost sank the boat!

In our daily lives, then, we need to make room for God by being open and obedient to whatever God is asking us to do. When we offer God an empty jar, He will find a way to fill it, and He goes above and beyond. King Solomon asked for wisdom, and he got so much more than that. A paralyzed man came to Jesus for healing, but he left with so much more

than that. The thief on the cross wanted Jesus to remember him, and he got so much more than that. Cornelius wanted to hear God's word, and he got so much more than that. A few moments ago, brother Harold read a passage from **Luke 6:38**. It referred to an ancient practice. When people would go to the market to buy grain, they would sit cross-legged (wearing a robe), they would put the container in their lap, and the merchant would fill the container. Jesus uses this picture to explain what happens when we give to others and when we give to God as we should. In **Luke 6:38**, Jesus said, **"Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."** So here I am getting grain—the merchant not only pours it in—he presses it down and shakes it together until it pours out into my lap. Jesus was making the point that blessings are often given only when we step out in faith to do what God has commanded us to do.

CONCLUSION:

This morning, we have learned several lessons from the widow in **2 Kings 4**...

- She looked for God's will in a very difficult situation.
- She followed God's plan with faithful obedience.
- And finally, her blessings were in direct proportion to what she expected God to do.

As I think back over these seven verses, I keep thinking about those vessels she was told to go out and collect. Those vessels could have been used for anything—they could have been trash cans, wash buckets, bottles, jars, whatever—but all of them had one thing in common—they were empty! And I was thinking that in a spiritual sense—God loves empty people. God loves desperate men and women!

- ***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***
- ***Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.***
- ***Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.***
- ***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.***
- ***Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.***
- ***Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.***

This morning, God is looking for people who know that they need him. A lot of people in Madison have not figured that out yet. In **2 Corinthians 4:7**, Paul was referring to the good news, and he said that, **"...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves."** As Christians, we need to keep trying to put ourselves aside so that we can make room for God. It is a continual process. As Paul said in **2 Timothy 2:20-21**, **"Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work."** Paul says that if we cleanse ourselves, God can use us. But if we are full of the world, there is no room for God.

This morning, then, let's go home and take an inventory—what are some ways that we can serve God that we have never tried before? What can we make available for God to multiply? What is the oil in our lives? What skill do we have that God can use?

INVITATION:

This morning, if you can admit to being empty and needing God, then God is looking for you. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins, and we respond to His offer of salvation with faithful obedience—just like the widow—we do what God has told us to do. Under the New Covenant, we turn away from sin and allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins. At that point, we are raised up out of the water to live new lives for God. If you want to study it further, we'd love to talk with you. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org

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