

Recognising and Responding – a Community-Based Approach to Human Trafficking

Through this study we have the distinct privilege of delving into Scripture to revisit an Old Testament story from the days of Elisha; to rediscover the nature of God as the champion of the marginalised and vulnerable; and to be reinvigorated to speak life over death as a community of believers. We are going to first look at this Old Testament story within its setting and significance at the time, and then see what it says about an unusual prophet, a desperate widow, vulnerable orphans and a war-torn community. We are going to see what this signifies for us here and now – after all, God didn't allow Scripture to remain so incredibly intact over the centuries to grace our night stands untouched...

Read 2 Kings 4:1-7

In these seven short verses we have an incredible three-scene miracle that establishes Elisha as 'the man of God'. So let's look at the scene in context:

- Elijah had been taken up to Heaven.
- Ahab is dead and his son Joram has just lost significant land holdings to Moab.
- The leader of the Moabites was a former vassal – a slave who beat a king. This was humiliating.
- Elisha's succession of Elijah was controversial because Elisha had called on bears to attack boys for mocking him.

The Scripture does not tell us about the geographical setting other than it takes place in Israel. Likewise, we know very little about the widow other than:

- She has two sons.
- Her husband was a disciple of Elisha.

We don't know the nature of the debt she is dealing with – how large it was or what it was, but we do know that wherever the story took place and whatever the cause of the debt, here we have a widow in the middle of a very patriarchal society with no way to produce income for her household. She is emotionally distraught not only because she has lost her husband but because she now stands to lose her sons as well. She is vulnerable because of her gender and her poverty. The boys are equally vulnerable as orphans.

SCENE 1: Providing Hope (vv 1-4)

In humility the widow approaches Elisha. She elevates the relationship Elisha had with her husband by mentioning their association. She makes no initial mention of her lack of material resources and does not ask for material or financial help. She simply brings her case before him. Having shared her situation, Elisha's initial response is a little surprising. He asks her: 'What shall I do for you?' In asking the question, some Biblical scholars believe that Elisha is indicating that his circumstances prevented him from having a direct approach to rectifying the problem. What seems to be impending doom is perfectly legal – the creditors are owed a sum that the widow cannot repay. The law permits that her sons can be sold in order to cover her debt. Though the creditors' actions were perfectly legal, the reality of losing her sons was incredibly painful and not something this recently widowed mother wanted to happen.

We get a sense from this passage that the widow understood that she had no legal grounds for not surrendering her boys to the merchants. She had little hope of preventing the impending separation and loss of her boys into a life of debt bondage. Noting that she had no legal grounds on which to stand, the widow takes her plight not to a judge, but to a prophet. And then...there is a glimmer of hope! Elisha asks the widow what she has. Keep in mind that she has not made her poverty known to Elisha, only

that she is desperate to save her sons. Elisha hopes that something can be done – that’s when her emptiness becomes evident! She lays her situation before him – her house is empty, except for a tiny bit of oil.

Elisha makes her aware that there is indeed hope. He tells her to go and borrow vessels from her neighbours; but not just any vessels – empty vessels! Imagine her confusion! This man of God has asked this woman with empty cupboards to go and get empty jars and that somehow her salvation will come through this. I don’t know about you, but if I told someone I was in desperate need of fuel for my car which was on empty and knowing my wallet was similarly gauged, and there response was go gather empty fuel cans – I’d probably laugh in their face! All the same this is what Elisha instructed the widow to do. With all this emptiness God was going to rescue her family from slavery. Elisha gives a little more instruction and the scene ends. She is told to collect, to close her door and to fill...

SCENE 2: Proving Means (vv 5, 6)

Now we get to meet the boys. This scene takes place behind closed doors – in secret. This is in contrast to the other two scenes. We look inside the widow’s home and see her sons bringing jars for her to fill, setting them aside and saying: ‘Next!’ and repeating the process again and again. We are not told if the widow followed Elisha’s instructions completely – if she collected all or just some of the available vessels. One commentator speculates that she most likely would have been a little embarrassed and didn’t really want to endure the comments from her community such as: ‘What does she need all those jars for anyway?’, and therefore only collected available vessels.

I once heard a story about a man who went to a restaurant for breakfast and, being very hungry, ordered “all the eggs and bacon in the kitchen.” His server looked at him rather peculiarly to which the man replied, “I am afraid that you may have misunderstood me. I’m not ordering a lot of eggs and bacon, I literally want ALL the eggs and bacon you have.” The hungry man in this story was not exaggerating in this case, all though we as people do have a tendency to do so. When the widows boys were going from door to door asking neighbours for literally ALL the jars it is entirely possible that the widow was a bit concerned that she, like the man in the story, would receive bewildered looks and sideways glances.

The collection efforts by the widow and her sons show obedience and the oil keeps flowing behind the closed door of this impoverished, vulnerable family’s home until all the containers are filled. What was empty has now been filled!

End Scene 2.

SCENE 3: Providing Rescue (v 7)

Following the filling of the borrowed jars, the widow makes no assumption about what she should do with the blessing. She doesn’t speculate at all or try to figure it out for herself. She returns to the prophet once again. Elisha instructed the woman to go and sell the oil. This much needed commodity gave life not only to her but her whole community. This provision gave life. What was empty has been filled! Where there was death, now there was life.

God has always been in the business of setting captives free.

This recurring theme of rescue and redemption is clearly evident when we look at stories in the Scriptures. Sometimes, we however miss the direct one-on-one stories of God intervening in people's lives and we fail to see the role of all the players. We often have a tendency to read the Biblical books of history as the recounting of stories from long ago and skip over any significance they may have for us in the here and now. It is easy to glaze over this story of Elisha and the widow because it contains a lesson we don't necessarily want to hear.

Even though trafficking seems to be the 'it' social issue of the day, we want to think of this dangerous and scary injustice as only happening in the lives of others in big cities and foreign lands. But the truth is, the lesson is here for all of us to learn and to share. This seven-verse narrative has a lot more to share than just the one time miracle for this family. It is a story that teaches us much about the role God has called us to in preventing and intervening in the lives of those who are most vulnerable.

In this story we have Elisha serving as the voice of God to provide rescue for the widow and her orphaned sons. Looking back on the three scenes, at the opening and the closing scenes we see Elisha's words getting both the potential victims and their community involved in the process of preventing these children from being taken into slavery.

- Scene 1: Elisha instructs the widow to ask her neighbours not for money to pay her debt, but to give to her from what they had – empty jars.
- Scene 2: The community provides their throw away, empty jars and the widow and her sons witness the miraculous filling.
- Scene 3: The community buys oils from the widow and the boys that not only covers the debt but also provides for their future.

Where there was emptiness now there is fullness. Where there was imminent death now there is life. God rescues by giving hope, filling what is empty and providing a future. He involves and calls on everyone to play a part.

God is asking the same of our community today. You may be wondering what place any of this has in the pulpit. What place does Anti-Trafficking have in the church? Why do we have Sundays set aside like today? It is precisely because the Bible has passages like this one – passages that are more than a story.

We are not all called to be an Elisha – 'endowed with supernatural powers which he used to work miraculous rescues of individuals and communities.' We aren't all going to go into red-light districts and brothels. But we are all members of a community, and as believers in community, we are called to care for the vulnerable among us – the widows and orphans, the poor, the grieving, the destitute, the foreigner, the weak. And we are all called to speak life and give what we have – even if it seems like nothing!

It is important to remember this story is set amidst a time of war and struggle – resources were scarce and riches were few. The rescue came not in big donations of financial contributions but in the giving of the community's emptiness, to which God showed his fullness.

It's in the little things God has called us to do that brings life – when we speak a word of kindness to that child who seems to feel defeated or just plain awkward. It is sharing a meal with a widow or the recent divorcée. It is helping a mother or father when they seem to be struggling to meet their families basic needs. It is, simply put, being attentive to the Spirit and following through when asked to do something.

Hug each other, share with each other, speak life to the marginalised and simply be kind. These are preventative measures that cost us nothing. You don't have to be bold to rescue a victim from exploitation (sexual or labour), you just have to be willing to tell her that she is beautiful and special to God and that she has worth because he made her his precious treasure. You don't have to donate millions of dollars to rescue organisations (although I'm sure they'd welcome it!), you just need to give that pair of shoes that doesn't fit but still are good, to a single mom who needs shoes for her son. The old adage 'an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure' comes to mind and when the weak and wounded soul walks through our doors our first thought should not be, I wonder what they want, but 'Lord, how can I help?'

Are you willing to commit to opening the door and giving your empty jar? Are you willing to buy something from someone who will benefit from it? Are you willing to commit to praying for the poor, the hurting, the widow, the orphan, and the abused? Are you willing to speak life into the life of a child? Are you willing to stand 'in the gap'? Are you willing to replace judgements with encouragement? Are you willing to be that empty jar? Are you willing to be filled with the hope and promise of God to rescue the perishing and to set captives free?

James 1:27 says: 'Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'

Are you pure? Are you willing? Do you need a fresh start? Will you make that commitment?

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