



## Day 2: One Miraculous Provider

**Bible Passage:** 2 Kings 4:1-44

**Central Bible Truth:** The one true God is the Provider who meets our needs.

**Teaching Aim:** To lead adults to depend on God to meet their needs and to share what He provides with others

How do you know God is involved personally in your life? One way you can know of God's involvement is through His provision to meet your needs.

Second Kings 4 describes four miracles in which God supernaturally intervened through the prophet Elisha to provide something His people needed. In everyday circumstances, God showed He is interested in individuals' lives and is at work where they hurt. Just as these people leaned on God for His provision, adults today can depend on Him to meet their needs. In turn, they receive opportunities to share with others what God provides.

### Helping the Impoverished (2 Kings 4:1-7)

God worked through Elisha in a unique way. This prophet served God in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the latter half of the ninth century B.C. following the prophet Elijah. Like the great prophet before him, Elisha was blessed of God with the authority to perform miraculous acts and often did so among the ordinary people of his day.

The miracles recorded in this chapter show that God bestows spiritual insight and authority on chosen people. Each of these passages reveals important truths about God and His work among His people. Each presents a problem and then shows how God solved it through a miraculous event.

In the first incident, a widow came to Elisha. Her husband, a faithful servant of God, had died owing some money. If she didn't find a way to pay the debt, her two sons could be forced to become slaves of the creditor. Can her deceased husband be identified? Probably not. Some think he was Obadiah, a royal servant of King Ahab. Obadiah, a God-fearing man, sought to protect 100 prophets from Jezebel, the wicked wife of Ahab (1 Kings 18:3-4). A Jewish tradition holds that Jehoram, Ahab's son, lent Obadiah money to provide security for the prophets of God. If this tradition is factual, Jehoram became the creditor. This tradition, however, cannot be confirmed.

The widow's husband probably belonged to a small prophetic community that followed a great prophet like Elijah or Elisha. Only a few things can be known about these communities. The students lived with their families. Apparently they held sparse economic resources. Possibly they were training to be prophets.

When this woman's husband died, she found herself in a precarious position. In that ancient world a woman and two fatherless children were of little concern to society. Remember, the Israelites of this time had turned to pagan gods. God's people had negligible interest in showing mercy to those in need. Out of this hopeless circumstance, the widow turned to God's man for help. One statement in her plea set the stage for God's provision. Her husband had honored God and had lived faithfully for Him. Would God now take care of His own?

Elisha appeared ready to assist the widow if he could. He asked how he could help her. The solution she likely wanted was for him to pay her debt. Being a prophet, however, probably meant Elisha had few material resources. He asked another question that pointed to an obvious source of help, "What do you have in the house?"

As God's man, Elisha's response showed God's interest in the woman's situation. The widow replied to Elisha's question with an explanation of her helplessness. She had nothing at all. At least she thought the

little oil she had was nothing. Certainly this oil held slight material value. The language here indicates a small jar of oil. Possibly it contained enough for a single anointing. While the widow thought the little oil amounted to nothing, Elijah knew that God could do much with little.

Note that preparation preceded the miracle. Elisha instructed the woman to collect empty jars from her neighbors. Elisha specifically told her not to ask for just a few. Thus he commanded her to collect a large number of jars. The meaning of this will become clear later. Although the widow lived in a society seemingly bereft of justice for needy people, as we shall see, she also lived among neighbors willing to help in an emergency. Sometimes God uses other people to provide for human needs.

Next, Elisha told the woman to go inside her house and shut the door. The miracle about to take place would be done in private. All the neighbors knew she had collected the jars. They would not see what happened to them. Certainly they later became aware of the result when the woman completed her assignment. Why was the miracle done in private? Perhaps to show, since Elisha was not there, that God could work through him at a distance. In this way God got the credit completely. The miracle also drew attention to God's personal care for the widow and to His dynamic power.

Behind the closed doors of her house the woman began to pour oil out of the little jar into the jars collected from her neighbors. Elisha had ordered that the filled containers be set aside. In the company of her family the woman followed the instructions. She kept pouring until she filled all the jars. The biblical language emphasizes her continuous action up to the point that all the jars were full. Why did she stop? All of the jars were full. She didn't run out of oil until she ran out of containers. The only restriction to the provision of God was the one she placed on God by the number of vessels she had accumulated.

The woman then reported the result to Elisha. The designation "man of God" indicates Elisha carried authority to act on God's behalf. The prophet charged the widow to sell the oil and pay her debts. In this way she redeemed or purchased the freedom of her sons. After payment of the debt, the family could live on the remainder. How long could they live on the excess? The implication is that the family could survive well into the future on the remainder of oil.

God used His power to provide for this woman. No person is so impoverished that God does not care about him or her. He will provide for you as well. Like the widow, however, you need empty vessels. In other words, you need to believe in God's ability to sustain you and to give Him the opportunity. Sometimes God chooses to work through other people in meeting your needs. Conversely, God may use you in providing for others who stand in need. In this way you can show you care about those for whom society shows little mercy.

## **Healing the Ill** *(2 Kings 4:8-37)*

This chapter records a second miracle involving Elisha (vs. 8-37). A family in Shunem had acted hospitably toward Elisha. To show his gratitude, Elisha promised a son to this childless woman. The woman did have a son, but later the boy became ill. Miraculously, Elisha provided healing for the child. This miracle also shows the provision and care of God.

## Encouraging the Fearful *(2 Kings 4:38-41)*

The third miracle of the chapter emphasizes the care of God for those who are afraid or face danger. The incident took place at Gilgal. Disagreement exists as to which Gilgal is meant. The Gilgal most prominent in the Old Testament is located between Jericho and the Jordan River. Joshua and the Israelites camped there after they crossed the Jordan to claim the promised land. They erected a memorial of 12 stones there to honor God.

The famine in the land and the people's hunger set the stage for this miracle through Elisha. He was meeting with the company of the prophets, possibly in a time of training. The group was united by a common purpose. They desired to be of service to God. Perhaps Elisha was the leader of this group or simply had come to fellowship with them. Certainly he took a leadership role in this circumstance.

Apparently the men were hungry. Elisha ordered his servant to put a pot on the fire and to prepare food for the group. In large gatherings such as this, stew was common fare. It could be stretched to feed many. But the servant needed something to cook. Someone, presumably the servant, went to the fields to gather herbs. He found a wild vine, with which he was not familiar, that had gourds growing on it.

What were these gourds? We cannot be certain. Some commentators believe they were small, greenish-yellow melons about the size of an orange. The technical name was *citrullus colocynthus*. It grew in the region near the Dead Sea. This gourd had a bitter taste and held laxative qualities. Ingesting it in large quantities could be lethal.

Unaware of the dangers of eating this gourd, the servant gathered a large number to use in the stew. He pulled his outer garment up toward his waist to form a sort of pocket to transport the gourds. When he returned, he cut up the gourds and put them in the stew. Then the stew was served to the men.

At the first taste the men knew something was wrong. They addressed Elisha as "man of God" and exclaimed that there was death in the pot. Although they didn't know what they were eating, they knew something was not right with the food. They associated the bad taste with poison. Thus they declared the pot of stew would kill them if they ate it. Besides making them sick, the gourds in the stew presented another problem. They had contaminated the good food in the pot. The prophets remained hungry with no edible food available.

The man of God took charge. Elisha requested flour, which he threw into the pot. Miraculously something happened in the pot to make the stew edible. When the servant accidentally poisoned the stew, God used His prophet Elisha as an instrument to preserve life. Elisha commanded that the stew be served after it was purified.

The company of prophets faced danger, but God cared enough to act favorably to rescue them. He chose to use Elisha to do that. Often God delivers His people from dangerous situations. When you encounter things that make you fearful, God wants to be an encouragement to you. He will be present with you at all times.

## Feeding the Hungry *(2 Kings 4:42-44)*

The final miracle recorded in this chapter also relates to food. The man in the account came from Baal-shalishah. This is the only reference to such a place in the Bible. The exact location is not known. The man came from there to Elisha's location, possibly Gilgal.

The man, probably a farmer, brought loaves of barley bread and new grain to Elisha. What prompted this action? He might have been offering a present to the revered prophet. Since the farmer brought firstfruits (from the first ripe grain), another meaning could be taken. The law required the firstfruits of the harvest to be brought as an offering to God and presented to the priests at the sanctuary (Lev. 23:17). Possibly, this individual presented his offering to Elisha as the respected man of God. If so, this gift of the heads of new grain indicates something else. Although most of the people of Israel had followed pagan gods, some—including this farmer—had remained faithful to God.

The 20 loaves of barley bread were probably small, flattened loaves, the kind usually eaten by the average people of the day. Elisha ordered this food be given to the people to eat. The people probably were the company of prophets with whom Elisha associated. Certainly they welcomed the fresh food, especially if the famine conditions described in the last miracle story continued to exist. Again, human need and the power of God were brought face-to-face through the prophet. And God responded with help.

One of Elisha's servants protested the prophet's order on the basis of the amount of the offering. Apparently the 100 men comprised the company of prophets. How could so little food nourish so many? As with the death in the pot, the servant exerted no authority to change the dire circumstances. But the prophet could. Elisha simply repeated his command to give the grain to the people to eat. God prepared to do something out of the ordinary. In fact, Elisha credited God with saying the men would have enough to eat and there would be some food left over. God said it; then the miracle happened. God multiplied the food when it was set before the people. After all had eaten, food was left over. Elisha made clear in this circumstance that he served only as God's instrument. God actually performed the miracle.

Note the similarity of this miracle to occasions in the New Testament when Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes (Matt. 14:13-21). In those instances Jesus worked a miracle to provide food for the hungry. Some was left after everyone ate. Jesus' demonstration of His compassion revealed the same care God showed in this miracle involving Elisha.

God cares about people with needs such as hunger. Sometimes He chooses to use people like the farmer and Elisha to provide for those in need. How can you show that you depend on a caring God to provide for you? One way is to acknowledge God's goodness by sharing with those around you who are hungry.

## Day 2: Discussion Points

1. Discuss ways God used each of the following in the miracle of the oil—Elisha, the widow, and the neighbors.
2. To experience the miracle of God's provision, the widow needed empty vessels and faith in God's ability to provide what she needed. In other words, she had to give God an opportunity. What examples of these truths have you seen in Christians' lives?
3. What obstacles sometimes hinder you from depending on God to provide for your needs?
4. Recount the events in the two food miracles. How did God use Elisha in each of the two events to provide for those who were hungry?
5. In the miracles in today's Bible study, God used Elisha to provide for the needs of people. In what circumstances has God used another person or persons to provide for your needs?
6. In what ways has God used you to help meet the needs of others?
7. Are you aware that you are God's instrument as you help meet the needs of others? What prevents you from giving credit to God as the Provider when you help others?
8. In what ways does your church family work together to provide food for the hungry in your community?
9. In his haste to be obedient, the servant who picked the gourds and put them in the stew made the stew inedible. To serve effectively, what are some preparations that would be necessary before trying to help the hungry in your area?
10. As you ask God to help you become more aware of those in need, what challenges can occur? Ask God for discernment in knowing which needs you can help provide for personally, which ones your church family can meet, and which might need to be referred to other individuals or organizations.

# Day 2: Case Study

## Miracle on 78<sup>th</sup> Street

John and Saundra Andersen have had a good marriage for 15 years. Like most couples, they had their rough times, but overall, they count their years together as happy ones. John is an accountant, and Saundra is the assistant principal of an elementary school. Their pace of life has definitely increased because of their children's activities. Jennifer, 13, has weekly gymnastic lessons and plays on the girls' volleyball team in her school. Jason, age 8, has become active in Cub Scouts and enjoys playing soccer.

John and Saundra have been members of a nearby Baptist church for the last 10 years. They attended at least a couple of times each month until the last 2 years. That's when John's kidney disease worsened and he began dialysis three times a week.

The couple has tried to maintain a lifestyle that is as normal as possible, especially for the sake of their children. They don't want Jennifer and Jason to feel robbed of a "normal childhood" because of John's disease. Saundra juggles her schedule around her job, John's dialysis, household chores, and driving her children to activities.

Saundra is aware that each time she attends her church's worship services she seems to be rejuvenated and strengthened, especially for the next few days. But in the last year, she and John seldom have attended worship services or Bible study. Usually Saundra is so exhausted by the weekend that the best she can do is to drop the kids off at church for Sunday School. After two years of juggling, John and Saundra are feeling overwhelmed—emotionally physically, financially, and spiritually.

Though still in their 20s and younger than the Andersens by at least 10 years, Bill and Linda Wilson had met John and Saundra through their Sunday School class. They became friends and continued to stay in touch. During a recent visit, Bill and Linda sat on the Andersens' deck and listened to John and Saundra talk about their hectic schedule and how their world continues to seem upside down. As the friends talked, Bill's eye noticed some rotting timbers along the north side of the deck. Obviously, the Andersens' mounting medical bills and time spent on health care and with the children's activities had resulted in delaying needed home maintenance.

In Sunday School the next Sunday, Bill requested prayer for John and Saundra. He briefly told about their visit and mentioned the problems with the wood deck. Within a few minutes, class members realized they could help meet a practical need by rebuilding the deck. Even though it was a huge project, class members were willing to commit several Saturdays to the construction project.

But God had even bigger plans for meeting the needs of the Andersens. Word spread through the congregation that a work party was planned for the next Saturday. Several church members gave money to finance the deck project. When Saturday arrived, an army (it seemed like) of volunteers converged at the Andersens' home. Some women in the class prepared lunch and snacks for the workers. Others tackled several cleaning and minor fix-up projects inside the house.

Bill, a construction foreman, oversaw the ripping out of the old deck and the hauling off of the debris. The new deck was begun, and the work was completed the following Saturday. John and Saundra were overwhelmed that so many people from their church were willing to give up their Saturdays to help them. Their expressions of thanks were heartfelt but seemed inadequate to express their gratitude.

The Sunday after the first work day, a spirit of excitement and unity was evident throughout the congregation. Bill and others noticed it and commented on it. Members of the work group knew they had been used by God to help meet the needs of a family. Though they helped the Andersens, they had received even more blessings themselves.

Because of the relationships built among the Andersons and the congregation, the church family continued to reach out to the Andersons and to help them in a variety of ways. Some members provided a couple of meals and cleaned the Andersens' house once a month. Others occasionally took the children to activities and mowed the Andersens' yard. The church members as well as the Andersens received many

blessings because of the efforts, compassion, and obedience of God's people.

Is there a family (or families) in your church or community that has needs? What ways can you personally and your church as a body minister and help provide for those needs?