

Mother's Day

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APPRECIATING GODLY MOTHERHOOD

2 KINGS 4:8-37

INTRODUCTION

It's great to see all of you cars here today. If you have a mom in your car today, put on your headlights (windshield wipers). ... If you have the mom of an adult in your car with you today, put on your headlights. ... If you have a grandmother in your car today, put on your headlights. ... If you have a mom in your car who is ninety or older, put on your headlights. ...

This is a strange and unusual Mother's Day. Some of us have the habit of going to church with our mother on Mother's Day. This year this is the best that we can do. Some of us visit our mother on Mother's Day. This year we have to consider whether we are endangering the health of our mom if we go to visit her. My mother-in-law is in the Veterans' Home here in town. As you know, we are prohibited from visiting our mothers in most nursing homes this year. Hopefully we can connect with our mothers today in some fashion.

I would like to look at an Old Testament passage this morning which describes a godly mother and woman and human being who models characteristics that are worthy of emulation by all of us. So if you have a Bible and would like to find 2 Kings, we are going to look at #4. Some of you have cell phones or tablets by which you may wish to connect with our Bible passage. If you would like to follow along with the outline that I am using, you can find that on our church website--- bcbethany.com. We are going to consider the qualities exhibited by the unnamed woman described in this passage--- 2 Kings #4--- and lessons that we can learn from her.

The setting for our story is roughly 850 BC. It was during the time in Israel's history in which the nation was divided into the northern kingdom, which was still called Israel, and the southern kingdom, which was called Judah. The prophet Elijah had a prominent role in the Book of 1 Kings. Many of you remember the dramatic confrontation that he had with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elisha was his assistant during that time.

Now in 2 Kings Elisha has replaced Elijah as the major prophet of God. The focus of his ministry is the northern kingdom of Israel, which is governed by kings during its 250 year history who are all labeled as evil.

Elisha seems to have been an itinerant preacher. He had a circuit which he traveled. According to v. 25 in our passage he had a home base on Mt. Carmel. But his travels also took him past the home of the woman who is the focus of attention in the passage before us.

I.

From vv. 8-10 of 2 Kings #4 we are going to notice that GODLY MOTHERS (and men and other women) HAVE HOSPITALITY. According to vv. 8-10, **“One day Elisha went on to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food. So whenever he passed that way, he would turn in there to eat food. And she said to her husband, ‘Behold now, I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way. Let us make a small room on the roof with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there.’”**

In his circuit travels Elisha passed through this small town in north central Israel. The unnamed woman in Shunem took the lead in exercising hospitality toward this prophet of God. The ESV translation which I am using describes her as “wealthy.” The original Hebrew word literally means “great.” The idea conveyed in this context is that she was from the upper class. She was a prominent woman. This prominent woman convinced her husband to build a guest room that this prophet of God could use when he passed through the town. She was exercising hospitality toward Elijah.

I have known churches which have done that kind of thing with missionaries. Usually they are larger churches. I knew a large church in Connecticut that bought a duplex and fixed it up. They used that place to house missionaries from the church when they were home on furlough. The woman in our story had a sense of individual responsibility to exercise that same kind of hospitality.

The apostles of Jesus depended upon such hospitality in their own itinerant ministries. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter #4 v. 9 encouraged his readers, **“Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”** In 1 Timothy #3 and Titus #1 exercising hospitality is listed as a requirement for one who would be considered as an elder. The original Greek word for “hospitality” literally means “love of strangers.” The Old Testament has a number of passages which encourage the Jewish people to show love toward aliens

and strangers. The basis that the Lord gives for this exhortation is that they were once strangers and aliens when they lived in Egypt.

The prophet Elisha was not a foreigner or a Gentile, but he was a stranger to this community and to this family. The woman saw that he was a prophet of God, and she saw an opportunity and a responsibility to exercise hospitality toward him.

In our Connecticut church we had a large parsonage. At one point we became involved with a single mother and her daughter who came from an Orthodox Jewish family. They embraced Jesus as their Messiah and became involved with our congregation. This was almost too much for her family to take. Mom and daughter were living with them, and life became very difficult for them in that Jewish home. How could their daughter go over to the Gentiles, to the Christians? This mom also had some financial challenges. So we took mom and daughter into our home for several months. As is often the case in such situations, the blessing extends both ways. One of the blessings for us was that we learned a lot more about Jewish culture and Orthodox Judaism.

II.

Not only do godly mothers have hospitality but also **GODLY MOTHERS** (and men and other women) **HAVE HEARTACHES**. The story continues in vv. 11-14: **“One day he came there, and he turned into the chamber and rested there. And he said to Gehazi his servant, ‘Call this Shunammite.’ When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, ‘Say now to her, “See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?”’ She answered, ‘I dwell among my own people.’ And he said, ‘What then is to be done for her?’ Gehazi answered, ‘Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.’”**

We don’t know if the couple had daughters. Childlessness had an especially bad stigma for mothers in this ancient culture. It was desirable to have a son in the family. A son could carry on the family name and inherit the family estate.

We see this kind of value placed upon sons today in India and China. Those two countries have tried to limit population growth by limiting family size. In India there are financial penalties for larger families. In China there have been forced abortions and sterilizations. In both countries there is greater value placed upon having sons. Often when moms discover that they are pregnant with girls, they are aborted.

China has eased up on these restrictions in the last couple of years because the Communist leaders have begun to realize that they are going to have a problem with a decreasing population size. Their own Chinese Academy of Social Sciences issued a report in January that the country is going to be facing a serious problem with fewer workers having to support an enormous and aging population. (*NY Times*, 1/17/2020)

In our story the couple, primarily the father, is regarded as being beyond childbearing age. This lack of a son was a heartache, especially to the woman. We see similar sadness in the Old Testament with Abraham and Sarah and with Elkanah and Hannah, the eventual parents of Samuel. Not having children is heartache to some women in our midst today. Elisha promises this hospitable woman that she will be rewarded in the next year with a son.

In vv. 15-17 we learn what happens: **“He [Elisha] said, ‘Call her.’ And when he had called her, she stood in the doorway. And he said, ‘At this season, about this time next year, you shall embrace a son.’ And she said, ‘No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant.’ But the woman conceived, and she bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha had said to her.”**

Life apparently goes along well for a while, but this is not the end of the heartache for this godly woman. In vv. 18-20 we learn about the tragedy which comes to her: **“When the child had grown, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. And he said to his father, ‘Oh, my head, my head!’ The father said to his servant, ‘Carry him to his mother.’ And when he had lifted him and brought him to his mother, the child sat on her lap till noon, and then he died.”**

What a terrible sadness! This source of joy and hope for the future is suddenly gone. What a heartache this must have been to this poor mother, and to his father. The reality is that sometimes godly mothers and women and men have heartaches. Having a close relationship with the God who is there does not immunize us from sadnesses in life.

Each of my family members have had health challenges which at times have been debilitating. Most of us by now know someone who has been affected by the coronavirus. We probably know more people who have been laid off from their jobs. High school and college seniors are not able to have normal graduations. High school seniors have missed out on senior proms. I led a funeral service on Friday, and the attendance was limited by the virus pandemic. Other family members and friends were not allowed to come. We had a church member die a few weeks ago in a nursing home. With the virus lockdown, family members were not present. All of these things are great sadnesses.

Susannah Spurgeon was the wife of the famous evangelical London preacher in the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon. Early in their marriage she began to have significant health problems. She was bedridden. It looked like she would have a limited ministry. But she developed an interest in sharing her husband's books with pastors who couldn't afford them. She began a book fund that over the years provided thousands of pastors with much needed ministry helps. She supervised that fund from her home and her bed.

Husband Charles Spurgeon noted, **"We cannot be established except by suffering. It is of no use our hoping that we shall be well-rooted if no March winds have passed over us. The young oak cannot be expected to strike its roots so deep as the old one. Those old gnarlings on the roots, and those strange twistings of the branches, all tell of many storms that have swept over the aged tree. But they are also indicators of the depths into which the roots have dived."** Godly mothers (and men and other women) have heartaches.

III.

At the same time GODLY MOTHERS (and men and other women) HAVE CONTENTMENT. Notice, again, v. 13, which we read a moment ago: **"And he [Elisha] said to him [Gehazi, his servant], 'Say now to her, 'See, you have taken all this trouble for us; what is to be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?'"** She answered, **'I dwell among my own people.'**"

We know that this woman has a certain sadness at being childless, or at least, sonless. But at the same time she appears to have a certain contentment. Elisha had influence in the palace. He was seemingly offering to use his connections to provide some benefit for her and her family. Perhaps he was thinking of a tax break. Perhaps he had some other intervention in mind.

The woman's response is a bit unclear to us. Older commentators Keil and Delitzsch interpret that response in this way: **"I live quietly and peaceably among my countrymen, so that I have no need for any intercession with the king and great men of the kingdom."** This was a great opportunity for this woman to gain some favor, some benefit from the government, perhaps some money from the Payroll Protection Act. But she declined. She had a certain contentment in her life.

The Apostle Paul experienced both material abundance and poverty. In Philippians #4 v. 11 he wrote, “... **I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.**” It is challenging to experience that kind of contentment when we live in a culture that encourages us to be discontent.

Christianity Today editor Rodney Clapp writes, “**The consumer is schooled in insatiability. He or she is never to be satisfied--- at least, not for long. The consumer is tutored that people basically consist of unmet needs that can be appeased by commodified goods and experiences. Accordingly, the consumer should think first and foremost of himself or herself and meeting his or her felt needs.**” (*CT*, October, 1996)

A Puritan writer by the name of Jeremiah Burroughs gives us this insight: “**You worship God more by [contentment] than when you come to hear a sermon, or spend half an hour, or an hour, in prayer, or when you come to receive a sacrament. These are acts of God’s worship, but they are only external acts of worship, to hear and pray and receive sacraments. But [contentment] is the soul’s worship, to subject itself thus to God... in active obedience we worship God by doing what pleases God, but by passive obedience we do as well worship God by being pleased with what God does.**” (*The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, p. 131) Godly mothers (and men and other women) have contentment.

IV.

In vv. 21-37 we find evidence from the example of the Shunammite woman that GODLY MOTHERS (and men and other women) HAVE FAITH IN GOD. According to vv. 21-23, “**And she went up and laid him [the deceased son] on the bed of the man of God and shut the door behind him and went out. Then she called to her husband and said, ‘Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.’ And he said, ‘Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.’ She said, ‘All is well.’”** Why does she not tell her husband what she has in mind? Perhaps she fears that he might keep her from going. The woman seems to have some kind of plan in mind.

Verses 24-28: “**Then she saddled the donkey, and she said to her servant, ‘Urge the animal on; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you.’ So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, ‘Look, there is the Shunammite. Run at once to meet her and say to her, “Is all well with you? Is all well with your husband? Is all well with the child?”’ And she answered, ‘All is well.’ And when she came to the mountain to the man of God, she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came to push her away. But the**

man of God said, 'Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me.' Then she said, 'Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, "Do not deceive me?"'"

It makes no sense to this woman. God miraculously provided this son. Then He took him away. What could be the purpose in that? It was similar to what happened to Abraham when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac. It made no sense to Abraham. The only thing that he could figure out was that God was going to raise him from the dead.

The Shunammite woman seems to think--- to hope--- that Elisha might raise her son. What was the basis for that hope? Besides the miraculous circumstances of her son's birth, the woman may have heard about the story of Elisha's mentor. She may have heard about it directly from Elisha, or the story may have already become part of the culture's religious heritage.

For those of you who don't know the story, Elisha's predecessor Elijah had been sent to a widow in Zarephath, north of Israel, in the midst of a drought that had been brought about because of God's judgment on wayward Israel. Elijah saved the widow and her son from starvation by an appeal to God's miraculous power.

Sometime later the son got sick and died. According to 1 Kings #17 v. 19, **"And he [Elijah] said to her, 'Give me your son.' And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed."** The Shunammite's knowledge of this story may have been the basis for her actions in laying her son in Elisha's room.

Elijah had laid upon the son of the widow, and the child revived. This is what happens in our story, beginning with v. 29: **"He [Elisha] said to Gehazi, 'Tie up your garment and take my staff in your hand and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him, and if anyone greets you, do not reply. And lay my staff on the face of the child.'** Then the mother of the child said, **'As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.'** So he arose and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. Therefore he returned to meet him and told him, **'The child has not awakened.'**

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and shut the door behind the two of them and prayed to the Lord. Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And as he stretched himself upon him, the flesh of the child became warm. Then he got up again and walked once back and forth

in the house, and went up and stretched himself upon him. The child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.” Thus the son comes back from the dead. I am clueless as to the significance of sneezing seven times, other than that this detail lends support to the idea that this is an eyewitness account.

The story concludes in vv. 36 & 37: **“Then he summoned Gehazi and said, ‘Call this Shunammite.’ So he called her. And when she came to him, he said, ‘Pick up your son.’ She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground. Then she picked up her son and went out.”**

The faith of this woman is rewarded when her son is restored to her. Her faith stands out in the midst of a culture that had largely turned away from worship of the true God. Many in that culture had turned to worship of the god Baal, the supposed god of life and fertility. This woman’s faith in YHWH, the God of Israel, and His prophet, shows the source of true life.

Godly mothers--- and men and other women--- have faith in God. Monica came from an upper middle class family. Her parents were not Christians, but she trusted in Christ as her Savior as a young woman. Unfortunately she was drawn into marrying a man who was not a Christian. At age 23 she gave birth to her first child, a son. She sought to raise him as a Christian. But her husband was not supportive of that, and there were many negative influences in the culture.

Monica’s husband became gravely ill, and he finally listened to his wife’s patient, but persistent, presentation of the gospel. He, too, became a follower of Jesus. He died shortly afterward. Their son was seventeen at the time. This son went on to study in college. He was a brilliant young man. But he led a wild life and indulged in the temptations that are available to many in college life. He moved in with a young woman and got her pregnant. They had a son.

Monica prayed for her son and grandson. When the son moved away to another city to accept a teaching position, Monica came along with them to help out. Her son was still trying to figure out the meaning of life. He was finally befriended by a pastor who had an intellectual bent and who pointed this man toward Jesus. Finally, he embraced the gospel. This mother who had such faith in God rejoiced and told her son that her work was done. One week later Monica died. She was only 56. Her son was 33.

The young man’s name was Augustine. He was to become a towering figure in the Christian church. A history professor by the name of Gerald Bray describes his conversion: **“He had to be brought face to**

face with his sinfulness and complete inability to save himself. He was forced to recognize that he had no hope other than to put his trust in Jesus Christ, who had died to pay the price of his sin. He had to learn that to be a Christian was to be in fellowship with the Son of God, to be united with him in a deeply individual union that rested on personal conviction, not on outward support or tradition.”

(Crossway, 11/16/2015)

That is likewise how we can come to faith in Christ. We must simply recognize that we are sinners. We must believe that Jesus was God who became a man, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, and that He rose from the dead. When we put our trust in this Jesus, we have the promise that we have eternal life and the forgiveness of sins.

Augustine went on to call the church back to the heart of this gospel. His writings were influential in the spiritual development of Martin Luther and John Calvin, who lived a thousand years later, and who were leaders in the Protestant Reformation. Behind the spiritual development of Augustine was a mother who had great faith in God.

One of Augustine’s most famous writings was his *Confessions*, which took the form of prayers addressed to God. In one of these Confessions, he wrote, **“My mother, Your faithful servant, wept to You for me, shedding more tears for my spiritual death than others shed for the bodily death of a son. You heard her.”** He also wrote, **“[She is] now gone from my sight, who for years had wept over me, that I might live in your sight.”**

Monica died a happy woman. For she saw her prayers answered. But she little realized the tremendous spiritual impact that her son would have. At the heart of the story is a godly mother who had great faith in God.

Monica and the Shunammite woman stand as models for all of us. For godly mothers (and men and other women) have hospitality. They have heartaches. They have contentment. Most of all, they have faith in God. May their tribe increase. May we learn from their example.