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YOU DON’T NEED THE TOOTH FAIRY

2 Kings 4:1-7

When David Letterman had a late night TV show one of the segments they featured was called Stupid Human Tricks. Typically it featured people doing bizarre things. Today I’m going to start a brief, 3 sermon series I am calling “Funny Prophet Tricks.” I will be looking at 3 incidents from the life of the prophet Elisha. The incidents are not actually tricks, nor were they intended to be funny, but they were done by a prophet. I chose that name because all 3 of these are kind of quirky, unusual events that almost have a humorous element to them.

All 3 of these incidents were miracles. Elisha is not quite as well known as Elijah, but the account of his life includes twice as many miracles as does that of Elijah. Some of them were downright bizarre. They can seem almost like legendary tales or fairy tales. Critics will say these things were impossible, but that’s kind of the point of a miracle. Miracles are intended to display the power of God. It doesn’t really display the power of God when I mow the lawn. Doing the routine, the ordinary, doesn’t exactly show that God is present in a special and powerful way. These incidents were intended for that purpose. In the Old Testament there were brief bursts of miracles during the time of Moses and Joshua, then again in the days of Elijah. But the rest of the time there was little to no evidence of miracles. In the New Testament there is that burst of miracles in the life of Christ and in the works of the apostles after him, but then they began to disappear.

The story we are going to look at today speaks to a question of great concern to all of us. Do I matter? Does anyone care about me? Is there any help for me as I go through the tumult and stress of life? Let’s look at 2 Kings 4:1-7.

THE WIDOW WAS IN DIRE STRAITS

This incident takes us back to the 9th century before Christ. God’s chosen people have divided into 2 nations, called Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern group got off to a bad start and went down hill from there. In order to assert their independence from the southern tribes they set up their own religious practices in disobedience to the Law of Moses. That included having an idol to worship. Things went from bad to worse as King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, promoted the worship of false gods.

In the 9th century God raised up the great prophet Elijah to call the people back to the worship of the true God. In the middle of that century Elijah aged out, and passed his prophetic mantle to Elisha. Elisha tried to combat the rampant idolatry by working with groups called “the sons of the prophets.” A sort of analogy in history might be the “Sons of Liberty” in Massachusetts in the 18th century. They banded together to stand against England and fight for liberty for the American colonies. The sons of the prophets in ancient Israel were not working for a political revolution, but a spiritual one. They were committed to faithfully serving and worshiping the God of Israel. They followed the lead of prophets like Elisha and called people to return to their God.

One of those sons of the prophets died and left a widow with two sons. His widow said of him in verse 1, “You know that he revered the Lord.” She had great respect for her husband, but now he was gone, and he had left her in a very difficult situation. Women were basically discounted in that ancient society. They were not allowed to own property, which was bad because wealth was based on property. That would be like today a woman not being able to have a bank account or a credit card. Furthermore, job opportunities for women were non-existent. A woman back then was totally dependent upon a man to support her. She went from a father who supported her to a husband who supported her. She had no other options. If her father died, then her husband died, her only hope was she had a son who was old enough to support her.

This woman’s sons were not old enough to support their mother. My guess is that her husband did not leave any property. Even if he had, she couldn’t own it, and her sons were likely not of sufficient age yet to legally take possession of it. What her husband did leave her, unfortunately, was debt. In verse 1 the woman said, “Now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.” She had no way to pay off debts. She was literally destitute. She didn’t have a way to support herself and her two boys, much less pay off debts that her husband had incurred. Perhaps the worst was that in that culture creditors had the right to take away her boys and make them slaves. They would have to work as slaves to pay off the family debt.

The woman apparently had no family that could help her. She had no resources to tap into to enable her to avoid a catastrophe. The only thing she could think to do as to talk to Elisha about the problem and ask if he could help her.

ELISHA HAD AN UNUSUAL SOLUTION

I imagined myself in Elisha’s sandals. It’s a good thing I wasn’t, because I wouldn’t have had any idea about how to help her. Maybe I could have come up with some plan to talk to every one she knew and try to raise money to pay off her debts. Maybe I could set up a Go Fund Me campaign, but I’m pretty sure that didn’t exist back then. Even if it did, I have no confidence that I could have done nearly enough.

When I first got out of college I worked for a ministry to college students that required that I “raise support.” That meant I had to ask people to give money to support me so I could do that job. I can’t even begin to tell you how bad I was at that. Even if I could have somehow helped the woman raise enough money to pay off what must have been a considerable debt, that wouldn’t have dealt with the long term problem. How was she going to support herself and her sons with no means of producing income?

Elisha started at a reasonable point. He said, “Let’s see what resources you do have in your house. Let’s inventory that and we’ll go from there.” The woman’s response is tragic. “Your servant has nothing there at all, except a small jar of olive oil.” That’s it? One small jar of olive oil? I don’t know what happened to her husband. I don’t want to be too harsh on the guy, because I’m not exactly Warren Buffet, the financial wizard, myself. I’m a total idiot when it comes to financial matters. I’m of the “Hear no evil, see no evil” school of financial management. Maybe if I just close my eyes everything will be fine. So I absolutely have no grounds for throwing any stones. However, though it was good that the poor woman’s husband revered God, leaving his wife with a big debt and just one jar of olive oil looks to me like a colossal failure.

This situation was hopeless. Except Elisha had a plan. A divine plan. Elisha told her to go to her neighbors and ask for empty jars. The plan was to get as many empty jars as she could. Oh, great, so she’s going to start Widow’s Jar Emporium? Jars R Us? She’s going to make money begging jars off her friends and neighbors and then selling them? No, that wasn’t the plan.

Elisha told her to take all the jars into her house and close the door. Then he said one of the most absurdly optimistic things in all the Bible. “Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.” So what, she’s going to pour two drops of oil into each jar? Wait, as each is filled? Hey, Elisha, maybe we need to review the concept of one small jar. How are you going to fill up many larger jars from the contents of one small jar?

Did Elisha not understand the concept of a small jar and a larger jar? You can’t pour the little in a small jar and have it fill up the larger jar. Did he not understand the concept of one versus many? You can’t fill up many jars with the contents of just one. I tested this at home. I filled up one small cup with water. Then I took out 6 large glasses. I poured the water from the small cup into the first glass. It didn’t even fill it up, to say nothing of the other 5 glasses. Elisha’s instruction to the widow looked like a ludicrous waste of time and energy.

I admire this woman. Maybe she was desperate and had no other option but to do what Elisha said. Whatever the case, the amazing thing is that she did what Elisha told her to do. That’s when the astounding thing happened. She poured her few ounces of oil into the first jar, and somehow filled the whole thing! Huh, that’s weird. Then she got a second jar, and the same thing happened. So it went with the third and the fourth and the fifth until all those jars were filled with oil.

Verse 7 says when told Elisha what had happened, he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.” Oil back then was used in cooking, as a source of illumination in lamps, for medicinal purposes and even cosmetic purposes. There was no automated machinery to produce olive oil. The process involved picking the olives, washing them, mashing them until the oil could be extracted. It was time-consuming and laborious, so oil was very expensive. At times oil was used as payment for tribute or even to pay taxes. It was kept in royal storehouses along with gold and silver. So this widow’s new supply of oil was worth a lot of money. It was enough to pay off all of her debts, and enough for her and her sons to live on until they were old enough to support the family.

IMPLICATIONS

What I want this story to mean is that whatever need I might have, God will take care of it in a miraculous way. But we have to be careful about drawing lessons from historical events in the Bible. There are tons of things that happened in the Bible that we can’t assume have direct application to our circumstances. For instance, when Delilah cut Samson’s hair, he lost his great strength. The lesson clearly is if you get your hair cut you will lose your strength. So if I never get my hair cut and become like one of those old guys with a gray pony tail I’ll be super strong. Obviously, that’s not great interpretation of Scripture. Just because something happened to someone in the Bible one time, that does not mean we can assume the same thing ought to happen to us.

To interpret historical events in the Bible we need to see them as illustrations or examples that teach us something about God and how he works. How do we know what the lesson actually is and how it should apply to us, if at all? The best way is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. The way we do that is to look for a principle or truth that is clearly stated in the Bible and that is illustrated by the event we are considering. So we should ask, “What principle from the Bible does this incident illustrate?” I see a couple of important principles.

GOD CARES FOR US

Our hearts go out to this poor woman. She has suffered a devastating loss, and that was followed by her being in an impossible situation with no way out. But then through Elisha God comes to her rescue. God cared for her and helped with her need. He was not uninvolved, uninterested in this poor widow’s plight. He acted to help her when her need was desperate.

Is this something we can expect God to do for us? Yes, it is, though it might look different than how God acted in this instance. We know that because 1 Peter 5:7 says, “Cast all your anxiety on him (God), because he cares for you.” That is a promise and a command. God cares for you, so give him your anxiety.

What does it mean when someone cares for another person? The dictionary says care means, “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance and protection of someone or something. Serious attention or consideration given to something…to avoid damage or risk.” So care involves both paying attention to a person and then providing what that individual needs. Truly caring about someone involves both of those aspects. There is the internal aspect of paying attention to a person, to knowing what is happening in their lives and having it matter. Then there is the external aspect of actually acting to provide what that person needs. If either of those elements is missing then a person is not actually caring for another individual. If you say you really care for someone, but you don’t pay attention to them, or you don’t do what you can to help them with what they need, you’re not really caring for them.

Finally, more than 2 months after my doctor did a biopsy on a spot on my head that he feared was melanoma, a dermatologist excised that thing this week. Excise is such an antiseptic word for dug it out of my scalp. They still haven’t made a final determination of what that thing is. I’m pretty sure it’s not an alien that was trying to eat me, but we’re waiting for certain identification. Laurie cared for me in the sense that she was very concerned about what I was going through and cared greatly that I get restored to full health. She had that emotional, empathetic component of caring, to be sure.

But there was another component of caring. It was the active, external part of it. It meant actually doing what was needed to help me. One part of that was the day after the “excision” she needed to change the bandage on my head. She didn’t really want to do it. She first suggested that we could go up to see Toby and have him do it. She did text him that she was apprehensive about doing it. He was a big help. He texted that it would likely be rather yucky. I think that was the medical term he used. Because she cares for me, Laurie gritted her teeth and dove in to the task. She had to gingerly pull the tape holding the old bandage in place off, trying not to rip my hair out and not pull on the wound itself. She said she actually did get a little lightheaded as she was doing all this. But she gently got the old bandage off like a medical pro. Once she got to the wound itself she was very encouraging. She said, “Well, the good news is you’re already all set for Halloween.” Very encouraging. Great to know I have a ready made way to scare my grandchildren now. Anyway, my point is caring for me meant feeling for me, wanting to help, and doing what was necessary to meet my need.

When Peter tells us that God cares for us he means that God is paying attention to us, what happens to us matters to him. He knows us and he knows what we are dealing with. But it doesn’t stop there. He will act to help us with what is going on in our lives. He cares for us actively, making a difference in our lives. He both pays attention, and acts. Does that mean, then, that nothing bad or hard will ever happen to us? We need to pay attention to the larger context of 1 Peter 5:7.

This verse is at the end of Peter’s letter. Consider a few things he has said earlier in the letter. In 1:6 speaking of the joy that awaits us in God’s kingdom he said, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” Suffering grief in all kinds of trials does not sound like nothing bad ever happened to those people. In 2:20 Peter wrote that it was a good thing to “suffer for doing good.” In 3:14 he said, “Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.” In 3:17 he said, “It is better if it is God’s will to suffer for doing good.” Three times he talked about suffering for doing good. In 4:1 Peter wrote, “Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude.” Then in 4:12 he said, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering.”

What picture do those verses paint for you? Grief, trials, and suffering, even when you are doing good, is not living without anything bad ever happening to us. Somehow, Peter could say that God cared for them even when their circumstances were filled with suffering and grief.

In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus said that God even knows when a sparrow falls to the ground. He is watching over sparrows! Sparrows only live 3 to 5 years. They don’t have names. They eat bugs and worms. They are the most common bird on the planet. There is nothing special or about them. A single sparrow is not important, not significant in the world. You and I never notice them. We can’t tell one from another, and basically we don’t care about them. But God knows every one of them and cares about each one. And according to Jesus, you and I matter way more than some nameless sparrow. Jesus didn’t come into this world to save sparrows. Sorry animal lovers. He came to save us. God knows us and cares about us. Psalm 139 says God knows when you sit and when you get up. He knows your thoughts even. Before you even think about saying a word, God knows what you are going to say.

I find this to be a conundrum. Peter says we can cast all our worries on God because he cares for us. Psalm 139 says he knows all about us and Jesus said he watches over us. The story of the widow in 2 Kings 4 is an example that God did watch out for that poor woman and took care of her in her time of need. But the book of 1 Peter makes it abundantly clear that the people God cared for experienced a lot of suffering. In John 16:33 Jesus said in this world we will have trouble. What good is God caring for us if he doesn’t keep us from all this trouble and suffering? How is he caring for us? Sure, God helped the poor widow, but he also could have kept her husband from dying and creating the difficult situation in the first place. So how does this work?

Recently I’ve been wondering about how we let some of the perks of childhood get away from us. Last week Michael and Carissa held potty boot camp for our grandson, Wesley. They thought he was ready for potty training, so they set aside a couple of days to focus on getting him out of diapers. Part of the process involved him getting a treat, an M&M candy, every time he had potty success. He’s a pretty sharp kid. It didn’t take him long to figure out going to the potty as often as possible meant more M&Ms. This is where I see one of the perks of childhood. He’s getting a reward for just accomplishing a basic bodily function. Not long ago 6 year old Ella lost her first tooth. You know what that means. The tooth fairy visited and Ella was rewarded financially for the feat of having a tooth fall out. This week a doctor carved a chunk out of my head. It was not fun. It hurt. And I didn’t get any reward at all! It was way worse than going potty or losing a tooth, but I got nothing. How did we let that get away from us?

We let it get away from us because growing up means we should get past those things. How pitiful would you be as an adult if someone had to bribe you with some sort of treat to keep you from wetting your pants? Losing that perk is simply a function of becoming a mature person who can actually navigate through life without causing himself or herself abundant embarrassment and inconvenience. Parents wean children away from such things to enable them to experience the best life they possibly can as grown ups. If someone has to give us bribes and treats to get us to do what is good for us, we will never do what is good for us and life will be a mess.

I submit to you that though we don’t understand how it all works and we never will, what we can trust is that when God allows trouble in our lives, somehow he is weaning us away from immaturity, from childish, worldly obsessions, that in the long run actually inhibit us from experiencing life as he intended for us to have it, the life that we actually long for.

Can we really believe that? Recently in addition to the problem of the alien on my head, I’ve been having constant weird headaches. I’ve never had anything like these. It went on for a couple of months. Then it got worse. I decided to get it checked out. They did a CT scan of my head. As I sat in the hospital awaiting the results I faced the fact that I could be about to receive very bad news. What if this was a brain tumor? It’s one thing to preach about how God cares for us. It’s another to believe that if you get news like that. How can we believe that when the news is really bad? By the way, to quote a movie line, “It’s not a tumor.” It’s idiopathic trigeminal neuralgia. Oh, no, the dreaded ITN disease. Actually that just means pain in the trigeminal nerve and we don’t know why.

We trust God when we don’t understand how it all works, when trouble comes and it feels bad. We live by faith, we trust what God says, we don’t demand that he have the Tooth Fairy show up to reward us for persevering when things don’t go as we wish. Jesus made a promise we need to remember. He said it to people who were in the middle of great pain and felt like God didn’t care. He said ***if we will live by faith, we will see the glory of God in our lives***.

This story reminds us of this. God cares about us. He knows us. He will never abandon us. We put our faith in these truths when we can’t see why things are happening to us, and this give us hope and strength.

GOD WILL SUPPLY WHAT WE NEED

In the story of the widow, God gave her what she needed to survive in a startling, unexpected, miraculous way. We can’t point to a verse that says God will work miracles in our lives, but we do know that God tells us he will give us what we need. Philippians 4:19 says, “My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. He will meet all our needs!

Psalm 34:9-10 says, “Fear the Lord, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but ***those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.***” That’s one we have trouble believing, isn’t it? If we seek the Lord we will not lack any good thing. What about the widow? Yes, the Lord provided her with what she needed to live, but isn’t having her husband alive a good thing? He didn’t give her that.

I once read an article in World Vision’s magazine that described a day in the life of a woman named Sabina Riwo. She is a believer in Jesus who lives with her husband, 3 daughters and a nephew in a village in the northern rift valley of Kenya. The 6 of them live in a small hut with dirt floors and no furniture. Her husband works their little farm. Her day entails making the hour long hike to a river. There she spends 20 minutes digging to get clean water. She fills up her water containers and straps them on her back. That water weighs 70 pounds. She then makes the hour trek back home with that on her back. She has to make that 2.5 hour round trip twice a day. The author of the article spent an entire 24 hour day with Sabina. She said other than at night when they were sleeping she saw Sabina rest for a total of 12 minutes. That is her life every day. She has no weekends, no days off, no vacations, and no hope of it ever changing. Her great hope is that some day her village might have a clean water source in the village.

Doesn’t it sound like she’s lacking a few good things? Honestly, there have been some things that seem good to me that I have lacked at times. Does this mean I’m not seeking the Lord, otherwise I would have those good things? Does this mean Sabina Riwo is not seeking the Lord or she’d have the good that she lacks?

Yet God insists he supplies us what we need. You’ve heard it from me many times. God says what he supplies will be enough for us. This is the message of the new covenant. God supplies what we need. If that’s the case, how should we think about the times when it doesn’t feel like he is?

Is it possible that God brings those times into our lives to give us something greater than the good thing we think we are missing? God sometimes let’s us go through hardship and lack in order to show us that what matters is his kingdom. He wants us to know that life is about his kingdom. Parallel to that, he wants us to know that it is possible to experience life, to have joy and peace, to be fulfilled, even in the hard times of life. ***Life doesn’t come from having it easy and comfortable, but from knowing God and living in him in the middle of all the ups and downs of life.***

Early last year I got fed up. Literally. I wasn’t huge. I wasn’t a whale. Most people would have said I was fine. But I weighed more than I ever had and I couldn’t wear many of my pants because they didn’t fit anymore. It wasn’t because they had shrunk. I saw a picture of myself at the beach and did not like what I saw. I decided I needed to lose some weight. Laurie was feeling the same, so we set out to do just that. We knew crash diets don’t work. So we chose to cut a few things out of our diet and to watch our portions. One of the things that had to go was pizza. I have a history with pizza. I once thought pizza was appalling and wanted nothing to do with it. That was mostly because I hadn’t tried it. Then I finally tried some, and wondered where it had been all my life. I love pizza. What a sacrifice to give up pizza. I found out an interesting thing over the last 18 months. I don’t really miss pizza. I don’t need it. I’ve had it a couple of times during that time, but I’ve found that pizza wasn’t the source of life and nutrition. God wants to do something like that with us. He gives us what we need, not what we want, so that we learn that what we really need is him.

After Paul’s prayers had not been answered the way he wanted, God said to him in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” How does God’s power become real and get manifested in our lives? He says, “My power is made perfect in weakness.” It becomes complete, full, when we are weak, sick, struggling, suffering.

How is God’s power only completed when we are weak? The answer to that question is one the church in our country today badly needs to grasp. Today the church is in love with power. We like big, awesome, impressive. We love leaders who are dynamic and make things happen. And God says his power is perfected when we are weak. Uh oh. God’s power is completed when we are weak because we quit doing things in our human ability. We stop relying on human cleverness and strength, and we let God do what he’s going to do.

In Philippians 3:10 Paul said he wanted to, “know Christ, yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” In his excellent commentary on Philippians Gordon Fee said that God’s power and suffering are inextricably linked. You can’t have the power without the suffering.

In his book, *Authentic Power*, John Avant wrote, “This is why God calls you to share in his suffering. Because it will transform your life and fill you with his power.” Wouldn’t you like to experience the power that raised Jesus from the dead? Of course, who wouldn’t? But we only experience that in weakness and suffering.

Years ago my son, Toby, told me about something that illustrated this. At the time he was working as an EMT, a job that gave him the inspiration to become a doctor. Being on an ambulance crew they dealt with many emergencies, but they also took care of numerous people who were sick, but not in immediate danger. They often transported dialysis patients, for instance. Many of the people they dealt with were difficult. They felt bad and were grumpy and complaining. But Toby told me about one woman who stood out. They saw her several times a week. She was often in pain or feeling bad. She had a difficult life. She was also a follower of Jesus. Despite her hardships, she was invariably cheerful. She knew the names of all the EMT’s and took interest in them. She knew what was going on in their lives and would ask them about the events in their lives. She would often ask how she could pray for them. Toby said everyone who dealt with this woman saw her as remarkable. They were deeply impressed with her concern for others, her joy and her love, her encouragement of others despite her serious difficulties. She was not stuffing her faith down anyone’s throat. She was displaying the power of the resurrection, and it was apparent to everyone who knew her.

When we struggle with understanding why God seems not to be giving us what we think we need, that’s when we need to remember that it is in our weakness, our suffering, that we will experience God’s power. Remember the story of the widow in 2 Kings 4. We only know of her story, we are only encouraged by it some 2800 years later, because she suffered, and in her suffering saw the power of God.

CONCLUSION

What do we take away from this story? I want to review so we won’t forget. Here’s what you need to tell yourself every day, truth this story illustrates.

GOD TRULY CARES ABOUT ME

I mentioned my recent visit at the ER. When I went there to most everyone there I looked like just another human with a problem. Monday is the wrong day to go there because it is their busiest day. But I really wasn’t treated like just another human. My son works there. He called and told a colleague to look out for me. He did. I received quick attention because of my relation to my son. It was comforting to know someone was paying attention and caring for me. I heard several people complaining that they were not being given attention. I didn’t have to worry about that. Someone was treating me as special.

That is how we need to see ourselves. God knows you. He knows what you’re going to say before you even say it. He knows you that well. And you matter to him. When you feel insignificant, alone, discouraged, you need to remind yourself, “Maybe no one else cares, but God cares. I matter to him.” And his caring isn’t just empty words. He will act to take care of me, no matter what’s happening.

GOD GIVES ME WHAT I NEED

Yeah, you’ve heard it a million times. What God supplies is enough. Say to yourself, “Today I have what God thinks I need.” So thank him and trust him. Remember, if it doesn’t feel like that’s true, it may be because God is helping you see that what you need is him and his promises, or it may be because God wants you to experience his resurrection power.