

GOD PORTRAYS WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

II Kings 4 II Kings 8

IN THE CENTRAL PART of the Land of Promise was a very fertile section that might be called a garden of Eden. Here a wealthy old farmer lived who had married late in life and settled in the town of Shunem. His wife was much younger than he. He admired her brilliant mind, poise, kindness and her genuine godliness. Though they were not blest with children, she was a friendly soul who mothered all that needed a bit of understanding care. The latch was always on the outside of the door, and their home was noted for its generous hospitality.

Elisha came regularly to this town on his circuit from Carmel to minister the Word and do pastoral work. Like his blessed Lord, he had an eye and a heart for the individual. Elisha was a perfect gentleman, and in a former lesson we learned about his care for the prophet's widow in her poverty. Here in this one he was solicitous for his generous hostess. It was no wonder the little maid who was carried captive to Syria could never forget what she learned from Elisha (II Kings 5:2-3).

“And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread” (4:8).

This woman's eyes were open for opportunities to do good. Her kindnesses and benevolences were unsolicited. She was like the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:20, **“She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.”**

Elisha had often feasted at this hospitable board and every time left a feast of spiritual things in the hearts of his host and hostess. They received instructions from the Word that their less cordial brethren had missed because they failed to share their fare and home with the Lord's servants. They missed much and their children were robbed of the influence and personal instruction of men of God. **“He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward”** (Matthew 10:41).

The private ministry of the Word after breakfast we enjoyed from the Lord's servants whom we entertained proved of great value. Many children of the Lord's people have been blessed through the presence and prayers of these guests.

At first Elisha came for meals but one day our great lady said to her husband, **“Behold, now I perceive that this is a holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick; and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither”** (4:9-10).

It was her thought, but she would not act independently of her husband and repeated, **“Let us.”** She coveted his fellowship and sanction in the things she would do for God. He respected her wishes and her good judgment. He desired to please the Lord and readily agreed to the project of enlarging the house by adding and furnishing a room for the Lord’s servant. This is the original **“prophet’s chamber.”** It was a wonderful boon to Elisha to have a bit of privacy and a place for quiet meditation and prayer.

Elisha looked around the carefully prepared new quarters with deep gratitude. He was like our gracious Lord who **“came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many”** (Matthew 20:28).

As Elisha looked around the room he asked Gehazi, his servant, to call their hostess. I think Elisha was too full for words and he told Gehazi to say to her, **“Behold, thou hast been careful for us with all this care; what is to be done for thee? Wouldst thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host?”** (4:13).

Sometimes there is very little gratitude expressed for kindness. *Thank you’s* are indexes of character. In Scripture the unthankful and the unholy are linked together. But genuine gratitude and the expression of it were not lacking in our gentleman prophet.

It may have been the way Gehazi said it, in condescension or patronizingly, that she thought they meant she had made these pleasant arrangements for reward and publicity. She felt deeply hurt. What she had done was a service for the Lord. She was not looking for reward. She had no desire for a court life under the patronage of Ahab and Jezebel.

Neither did she crave recognition from the military branch nor a post for her husband in the army. With all her native dignity she quietly said, **“I dwell among mine own people,”** and left the guest room and went downstairs. She was great indeed in her contentment, she desired only to glorify God in the place where the Lord had put her. Someone has said, “Peace of mind can transform a cottage into a manor hall, the want of it can make a regal residence an imprisoning shell.”

After she left the room, Elisha was still anxious to show her his gratitude in some tangible way.

It is very encouraging to receive from the Lord’s servants, who might be our guests, some acknowledgment of the sacrifices made to contribute to their comfort. Paul wrote to the Philippians in 4:18, **“I have received the things from you . . . a sacrifice,”** and he compares it to sweet perfume— **“an odor of a sweet smell.”** In II Corinthians 8:2 he tells us that the Macedonians gave to him joyfully and liberally out of their deep poverty.

Elisha seemed to be talking out loud to himself, saying, **“What then is to be done for her? And Gehazi answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old. And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door. And he said, About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son. And she said, Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid”** (4:14-16).

Elisha had touched a very sensitive spot in her heart, for her childlessness had been quite a reproach among her people. She had learned to be content if it were the Lord’s will that she be childless. Elisha’s prophecy was fulfilled and she received her child as a special gift.

Every time Elisha came to Shunem he was greeted with special welcome by our great lady and her little son. This child became very dear to their visitor.

One day when the boy was perhaps eight or nine years old he pleaded with his mother to let him go to the fields with his father to watch the reapers. It was a very hot day and he had likely thrown off his hat. Suddenly he became very sick and cried out to his father, **“My head, my head!”**

They were all so busy the father called a boy and said, **“Carry him to his mother”** (4:19).

Mothers, no matter how busy, are always able to stop and attend to the distressed child. The other things can wait. It is a mother’s business to comfort. **“As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you”** (Isaiah 66:13).

“And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died” (4:20).

Those were hours of anguish and fervent prayer for that dear mother. Everything was done that she could think of doing. She gave him the comfort of her affection and presence until the last minute. She was not like the undisciplined Hagar who put Ishmael under a bush and sat at a distance away that she might not see the death of her child.

As the Shunammite sat holding her child, did she remember what Elisha had told them about Elijah? When the son of the widow of Zarephath took sick and died, Elijah prayed and the Lord answered his prayer and the child revived. She must have known about it for she carried her own son up **“and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door upon him and went out”** (4:21).

“And she called unto her husband, and said, Send me, I pray thee, one of the young men, and one of the asses, that I may run to the man of God, and come again. And he said, Wherefore wilt thou go to him today? It is neither new moon, nor sabbath. And she said, It shall be well” (4:22-23).

Thank God! we do not need to go on a journey to reach the ear of God.

“Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). Your simplest prayer will reach His listening ear.

Her special message to her husband was **“It shall be well.”** It would be a great blessing if every Christian woman could inspire her husband to fully trust God in times of distress and sorrow even when it is so difficult to understand His ways.

Her husband sent the ass and when it was saddled she said to her servant, **“Drive and go forward: slack not thy riding for me, except I bid thee. So she went and came unto the man of God to Mount Carmel. And it came to pass, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to Gehazi his servant, Behold yonder is that Shunammite. Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband? is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well”** (4:24-26).

Elisha sent his servant to meet her, but in the New Testament when the father saw his returning prodigal son afar off he did not send a servant. He himself ran to meet him. The tenderest servant of the Lord can never have the same concern that God has for every one of His children. We admire this woman of Shunem for her dignified answer to Gehazi, **“It is well.”** She had rested her soul on God and had confidence in Him for herself, her husband and her child. We all need to remember that the Lord is as sufficient for our children as He has been for us.

“And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught him by the feet: but Gehazi came near to thrust her away. And the man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her: and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me” (4:27).

Elisha did not presume to know everything and confessed his insufficiency. **“Then she said, Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me?”** (4:28). She had not questioned God’s wisdom in ordering her family life. Why would He give the child to take him away again? These torturing Why’s There are questions the most devout cannot answer. But if we have patience to wait we find that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy (James 5:11).

Elisha acted without consulting God; he felt that he must do something. He dispatched Gehazi to the Shunnamite’s home warning him not to visit with anyone on the way. He gave him his own staff and commanded him to lay it on the face of the child. But this discerning lady was not satisfied with a substitute or a dead staff even though it belonged to the prophet. It is impossible to delegate the power of God to others. Outward symbols or rites will never work a miracle.

“And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee” (4:30). She reminded Elisha that **“The Lord liveth.”** He is still Lord and is able to give life. He is a life-giving Spirit. And he arose and followed her.

When an appeal comes to us do we say, “Send somebody else”? Do we try to use old methods that worked before, or do we get living water from God’s fresh springs? **“All my springs are in thee”** (Psalm 87:7).

Gehazi laid the prophet's staff on the face of the dead child. But there was no bending of the knee in prayer, no agonizing of soul before God, no vital contact with the child, so nothing happened. A great deal of Christian effort is fruitless. One may go through the motions, use the same text, preach on the same subject but without any contact with God, therefore souls will not be reached.

“And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead and laid upon his bed” (4:32).

This was a challenge to the prophet. **“He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord” (4:33).**

There are crises in one's life where even a mother may not intrude. His entry was a great contrast to Gehazi's. Elisha realized that only God could help him then. Failures are good for us when we learn that we are only earthen vessels—and that power belongs to God. Natural means are in our power, the supernatural is in God's hands.

“And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and opened his eyes” (4:34-35).

Paul said, concerning some brought to Christ through his ministry, **“I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).** It costs something to lead a soul to the Lord, to bring him from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, from death unto life.

The Sunday school teacher must indeed stretch herself for the individual child. She must bring her warmth of devotion to Christ and let the child feel that warmth, not only once but repeatedly. It means not just ministering to the crowd or preaching a sermon, but agonizing intercession with God for her pupils. Sometimes they show a little interest, but one must keep at it until there is a real, living desire for more. The Lord allowed Himself to be stretched upon a cross to give life unto the world. When the woman touched the hem of His garment He said, **“Virtue is gone out of me” (Luke 8:46).** In lesser measure, it will take it out of us as we deal with souls for Christ. The spiritually dead need the embrace of the living.

When Gehazi called the mother, Elisha said, **“Take up thy son. Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed herself to the ground, and took up her son and went out” (4:36-37).**

She gave thanks before she accepted the gift. The Shunammite could fully understand Abraham's rejoicing when he returned from the mountain with Isaac after he had put him on the altar in obedience to God's command. She would surely ask God for wisdom to train him aright.

The wickedness of the people increased so much that God called for a famine to last seven years. Elisha came to the Shunammite, who was now a widow, and advised her to seek refuge elsewhere.

“And the woman arose, and did after the saying of the man of God: and she went with her household, and sojourned in the land of the Philistines seven years” (8:2).

When she returned to her home she found that her property had been confiscated. She determined that her son should not lose his inheritance, so she took him with her and went directly to the king for help. **“The steps of a good man [or woman] are ordered of the Lord”** (Psalm 37: 23).

This narrative is an excellent example of the way God makes all things work together for good to them that love Him. His timing is perfect.

When she arrived, the king was talking to Gehazi saying, **“Tell me, I pray thee, all the great things Elisha hath done. And it came to pass as he was telling the king how he had restored a dead body to life, that, behold, the woman, whose son he had restored to life, cried to the king for her house and her land. And Gehazi said, My lord, O king, this is the woman and this is her son whom Elisha restored to life. And when the king asked the woman, she told him. So the king appointed unto her a certain officer saying, Restore all that was hers, and all the fruits of the field since the day that she left the land, even until now”** (8:4-6).

Surely God is the Judge of the widows! He understands their cause and handsomely undertakes for them. She was very thankful for the property, but God added the **“much more”**—all the profits of the land that the confiscator had enjoyed for those seven years which was much more than she asked or thought of asking.

Truly, godliness is profitable in the life that now is as well as that which is to come. Let us serve the Lord with gladness and come before His presence with singing.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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