

When Your Hands Are Tied

Part II

II Kings 4

Introduction

Chuck Swindoll, in his booklet entitled *Attitudes*, records the story of an American prisoner of war (POW) who was held captive by the Viet Cong. He writes,

In the POW camp was a tough young marine, twenty-four years old, who had already survived two years of prison-camp life in relatively good health. Part of the reason for this was that the camp commander had promised to release the man if he cooperated. Since this had been done before with others, the marine turned into a model POW and the leader of the camp's thought-reform group.

As time passed, he gradually realized that his captors had lied to him. When the full realization of this took hold, he became a zombie. He refused to do all work, rejected all offers of food and encouragement, and simply lay on his cot sucking his thumb. In a matter of weeks, he was dead.

Swindoll adds,

Caught in the vice grip of lost hope, life became too much for the once-tough marine to handle. When the last string snapped, there was nothing left.

Compare that story with a discovery made near the end of World War II. Members of the Allied forces were often found searching farms and houses for snipers. At one abandoned house, which had been

reduced largely to rubble, searchers found their way into the basement. There, on a crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a star of David. Beneath it was written the words,

I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine;

I believe in God, even when He does not speak.

Two implications of biblical faith

In these two stories are two implications of biblical faith. Let me give them to you.

1. First, faith is believing without seeing any evidence.
2. Secondly, faith is obeying without feeling any emotion.

Faith is walking into a dark room and believing that at the right time, God will turn on the light.

You might say, "I don't live like that. It's unfair of God to ask me to do anything or exercise something that seems blind."

The truth is however, you do it all the time. During cold and flu season, you probably went to a doctor whose name you could not pronounce and whose degrees you had never verified. He gave you a prescription that you could not read. You took it to a pharmacist that you had never seen before, who gave you a chemical compound you could not understand. And, you paid for it! You then, took it home and, without even testing it on the neighbor's cat first, you

took it. The point is, the objects of your faith; that is, the doctor, the pharmacist, the medicine, allowed you to act in faith.

So it is in the Christian's experience throughout life. As long as the object of our faith; that is, God Himself, remains clearly in our vision, we will be able to operate in faith; in a lifestyle that honors Him.

Now, this truth is easily said and learned in the classroom where the seats are comfortable. However, what about in the laboratory; on the field trip where truths are put to the test? What about times when faith is tested; when your hands are tied and the room is dark and you do not see or sense that God is moving in to turn on the light? What about times when you have an urge to retreat to your cot, curl up like a baby, and wish the world would go away? What about those times?

We began our last discussion with a series of impossible situations. We looked at several impossibilities that confronted Elisha, God's prophet for his generation, and discovered a couple of truths to be true.

Truths when facing impossible situations

Let us review these truths for times of facing impossible situations; for times when your hands are tied.

When God is in charge, plans should not degenerate into panic

1. First, when God is in charge, plans should not degenerate into panic.

You may have heard the old adage, "Don't just stand there, do something!" Sometimes the memo from heaven is, "Don't do anything, just stand there . . . just wait!"

In other words, depending on the Lord means trusting in His timing.

When God is in control, trust should not dissolve into blame

2. Secondly, when God is in control, trust should not dissolve into blame.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, and to us, that the story of the Old Testament, and in particular, the history of the Israelite nation, was written for our

instruction, so that we would not repeat their sin of unbelief.

Paul also wrote in Romans, chapter 15, verse 4, *For whatever was written in earlier times was written . . . so that . . . through . . . the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

One translation reads,

These things that were written in the Scriptures so long ago are to teach us patience and to encourage us, that we might have hope.

The problem with that POW was that he had attached his faith to the unreliable word of a lying, deceitful commandant. And, as a result, he had lost hope. Our faith, as believers, is attached to the word of a reliable God who is alive and real. And, as a result, we have hope!

Impossible Situations In the Ministry of Elisha

Now, I want to go back into the laboratory of life and observe the principles of faith, not through a lecture, but through the lives of God's people who were thrust into dark rooms with no light. We have previously discussed three impossible situations in the ministry of Elisha. These were situations that:

1. revealed the need for cleansing in the nation Israel through divine intervention;
2. emphasized the rebellion of the nation Israel in spite of the word of God;
3. told of a prophet's widow in dire need of help.

We will continue with that discussion today, beginning with the fourth impossibility. Turn to II Kings, chapter 4.

Impossibility #4 – Reveals bareness and death and an unfulfilled desire

4. The fourth impossible situation that Elisha encounters reveals bareness and death and an unfulfilled desire.

Look at verses 8 through 10.

Now there came a day when Elisha passed over to Shunem, where there was a prominent woman, and she persuaded him to eat food. And so it was, as often as he passed by, he turned in there to eat food.

She said to her husband, “Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God passing by us continually. Please, let us make a little walled upper chamber and let us set a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; and it shall be, when he comes to us, that he can turn in there.

Stop for a moment. The text informs us that this Shunammite woman was a prominent woman. The word is often translated “wealthy”.

As Elisha passed by the estate of this woman and her husband, she would personally greet him and “persuade” him to eat with them. He soon became a regular guest in their home. What a wonderful retreat it must have been for this prophet to be welcomed from his tiring journeys into a home that loved him and cared for him.

Eventually, the woman talked it over with her husband and they agreed to build an addition to their home. The typical home of that time had a flat roof, which provided a wonderful place to sit and enjoy the cool eastern nights. It would have been enough to invite Elisha to roll out his sleeping bag on the roof whenever he passed through. That would have been nice of them, and typical of near eastern hospitality. But they, according to verse 10, built an extra bedroom, complete with walls and furnishings. The Bible is careful to give details in verse 10b, that it included a bed, a table and chair, and a lampstand.

Now we know Elisha ate his meals with them, so the table and chair upstairs probably served more as a desk than a dining room table. The lampstand was more than a common candle. It was, from the Hebrew, a “menorah,” and was state of the art lighting. And, there was not just a space on the floor for a cot, there was a custom built bed. This was, I believe, a personal, warm, custom designed, private chamber, study, and retreat for Elisha.

Ladies and gentlemen, this couple provided for Elisha upstairs, what they enjoyed downstairs. They gave him the best.

Now, does the Bible give us those details because it needs to fill up some more space in chapter 4? No, it provides every believer with an example of, what we will call, “Shunammite hospitality”!

The question to us, as individuals and as a church, is simply, “How do we treat those who are called into vocational ministry? How do we treat pastors, missionaries and mission agencies, non-profit ministry

leaders, and others in the field? Do we have any Shunammite blood in us?”

Our church had a missionary family come through a short time ago and they wrote a note of thanks to me. In their note, they included how much their daughter enjoyed the indoor Jacuzzi. The Jacuzzi? Where did they stay? The Marriott Courtyard. The Marriott Courtyard? For half that price we could have put them up at the Trucker’s Paradise! But, where would we want to stay?

I grew up as a missionary kid, along with my three brothers. In the summertime, my family would travel to many of the states where supporting churches and individuals were. When we drove through Iowa, we stayed at the home of an older couple who were faithfully supporting my parents. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Peeper. We used to snicker over their name and it still makes me smile. They did not have any kids, but lavished their love on us.

As soon as we walked into the Peeper’s modest home, we knew what was coming. Mrs. Peeper would make them just for us – homemade cinnamon rolls. She had the gift! It seemed that, no matter what time we arrived, it was always the perfect time for an extra icing cinnamon roll. Then, we would eventually sit in the living room, where all four kids would be encouraged to sing. They always had us sing, “Why worry when you pray, trust Jesus, He’ll be your stay; don’t be a doubting Thomas, rest fully on His promise; why worry, worry, worry, worry, when you can pray?!”

I called my mother to make sure I had the details right and she reminded me of another song we would sing for them. The words were, “Cheer up ye saints of God, there’s nothing to worry about; nothing to make you feel afraid, nothing to make you doubt; remember Jesus in His word says, why not trust Him and shout, you’ll be sorry you worried at all tomorrow morning.”

They were stuffing us with cinnamon rolls, while also stuffing us with good theology. Our family was a young couple with four young children who were thousands of miles from home and had every reason to worry.

One time, while traveling through Iowa, our car broke down. It was this couple who came and got us and took us back to their home while the car was repaired. They were Shunammites that no one knew much about. They were not full time ministers, but

former farmers. Both of them are in heaven now, receiving their full reward.

Jesus Christ said in Matthew, chapter 10, verse 41,

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward.

For the New Testament Christian, the full reward of hospitality and care given to God's servants will come at the Bema seat. In the Old Testament this reward was often immediate.

For the couple who cared for Elisha, in fact, their life-long longing for a child, which at this point in their lives was physically impossible, was about to be granted to them. Notice verses 15 and 16 of II Kings, chapter 4.

He said, "Call her." When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. Then he said, "At this season next year you shall embrace a son." And she said, "No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant."

That is like saying today, "You've got to be kidding! Stop trying to fool me with what is really too good to be true."

Continue to verse 17.

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season the next year, as Elisha had said to her.

Now all that you and I have just learned about this dear woman and her husband and the joy of their son's birth prepares us to feel the remorse and anguish that comes next. Look at verses 18 through 20.

When the child was grown, the day came that he went out to his father to the reapers. He said to his father, "My head, my head." . . .

(the boy, about twelve years old, evidently suffered from a severe heat stroke),

. . . And he said to his servant, "Carry him to his mother." When he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her lap until noon, and then died.

Can you feel that? The son of her hopes and dreams, the miracle child is dead. There is nothing in life that makes you feel more helpless than to stare into the face of death.

This woman immediately saddled up and headed off for Elisha. Notice verse 28 as she meets with him.

Then she said, "Did I ask for a son from my lord? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me?'"

In other words, "I didn't ask for this boy, you promised him. I didn't ask for this grief, God's gift, by means of your prophecy, provided him."

So, Elisha sends Gehazi, his servant, to place Elisha's staff (which represents Elisha's office), upon the boy's body. For some reason that we are not told, that effort failed. It is likely that the God wanted to closely associate his prophet with the raising of this boy. So, when Elisha arrives, what occurs is nothing short of a resurrection from the dead. Look at verses 35 and 36.

Then he returned and walked in the house once back and forth, and went up and stretched himself on him; and the lad sneezed seven times and the lad opened his eyes. He called Gehazi and said, "Call this Shunammite." So he called her. And when she came in to him, he said, "Take up your son."

Imagine that! Continue to verse 37.

Then she went in and fell at his feet and bowed herself to the ground, and she took up her son and went out.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a wonderful foreshadowing of Christ's physical presence in the air, as the church is raptured and the dead in Christ are resurrected. That is an event that could occur before I finish this sermon.

Impossibility #5 – Revolves around poisonous food

5. The fifth and sixth impossibilities that Elisha encounters occur in quick succession and both have to do with food. The fifth situation revolves around poisonous food.

Look at verse 38 of II Kings, chapter 4.

When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and boil stew for the sons of the prophets."

You may remember that the prophets lived in a community set up. Gilgal was the place where a seminary or school for young prophets had been

established and developed. It was first established by Samuel and then, by Elijah.

Now there is a famine in the land and the righteous servants of God are suffering from a lack of food. Elisha says, “Let’s put a pot on the fire and boil some stew.”

Perhaps this stew was nothing more than flavored water. So, one young seminarian decided to go out into a nearby field and gather some wild vegetables. Unfortunately, these vegetables turned out to be poisonous. This young seminarian should have stayed next to the fire. Look at verse 39.

Then one went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine and gathered from it his lap full of wild gourds, . . .

(the Hebrew word indicates that these were wild cucumbers),

. . . and came and sliced them into the pot of stew, for they did not know what they were.

This sounds like the way only a group of men would cook! We have no idea what we are doing! We would think, “They look like cucumbers, and besides, the water is boiling, so it’ll burn off anything dangerous, right? Sure, I’ll go ahead and slice these gourds into the stew.”

I think this must be the first biblical reference to a “pot luck supper” – you put something in the pot and hope you get lucky and live! Look at verse 40 to see what happens.

So they poured it out for the men to eat. And as they were eating of the stew, they cried out and said, “O man of God, there is death in the pot.” . . .

(I do not want to ruin your lunch, but obviously, men around this table immediately began to lose theirs),

. . . And they were unable to eat.

(which is one of the greatest understatements in the Hebrew Bible).

Continue to verse 41.

But he said, “Now bring meal.” He threw it into the pot and said, “Pour it out for the people that they may eat.” Then there was no harm in the pot.

This is one miracle that is easy to pass by. The miracle was not in the meal. If the meal had naturally drawn the poison, without a miracle occurring, then

they should have strained the stew to separate the meal. They did not do that, however. In fact, Elisha commands them to *NOW* feed the stew to everyone.

If you were at this potluck, and you had just seen Simeon and Jedidiah turn green with nausea, do you think you would ask for a bowl? You would say, “Elisha, I’ve lost my appetite,” or “Elisha, you can’t be serious! Eat that?”

Ladies and gentlemen, for this miracle to be experienced, that group of people had to operate by faith in the word of God. If Elisha had taken a poll, “How many of you believe I’ve dissolved the poison in the stew, by the word of the Lord?” every hand would go up, “Hooray, Elisha!”

Then, Elisha would have said, “Okay, now dig in!”

He would probably have gotten a response like, “‘Scuze me?”

God intends to develop our faith, just as He developed their faith. Not simply by memorizing the fact of faith, but by choosing to operate by faith. During impossible times, God wants to move us from crisis faith to confident faith; from confident faith to confirmed faith; from confirmed faith to contagious faith. Contagious faith says, “You’ve got to have some of this – you can’t live without it.”

Where are we in this spectrum of faith?

Now, if you have ever eaten delicious stew, which this “pot luck” turned out to be, the meal really needs some good bread. You kind of dip it in your bowl, unless you have company, then you take that last bit of bread and sort of wipe the bottom of the bowl clean for one more delicious bite. I have actually never done that before! However, that is what happens in the next situation Elisha faces.

Impossibility #6 – Revolves around the lack of enough food

6. The sixth impossible situation that Elisha encounters revolves around the lack of enough food.

The story begins in verse 42 of II Kings, chapter 4. Look at that verse through verse 44.

Now a man came from Baal-shalisha, and brought the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And he said, “Give them to the people that they may eat.” His

attendant said, "What, will I set this before a hundred men?" . . .

(that is, "Will I set this little sack with twenty loaves of bread, each one the size of the palm of your hand, in front of a hundred men?"),

. . . But he said, "Give them to the people that they may eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left over.' So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.

This is again, a foreshadowing of Christ who fed the multitude by means of a miracle. There is a famine going on in the land, but there is feasting going on in this small school of the prophets. It is enjoyed by the servants of God who are willing to operate on the basis of the word of God alone, not evidences nor emotion.

Application

Let me give several applications that can be drawn from Elisha's faith in impossible situations.

When your voice is silent and God works in you, there is little difficulty in recognizing His power

1. First, when your voice is silent and God works in you, there is little difficulty in recognizing His power.

You may have heard of George Mueller who ran an orphanage in England. He often sat at a table with his orphans and blessed the food, when no food sat upon their table, until God miraculously provided through others. He once wrote,

God delights to develop the faith of His children. We ought, instead of wanting no trials before victory, no exercise for patience, to be willing to take them from God's hand as a means. I say, and say it deliberately, trials, obstacles, difficulties, and sometimes defeats, are the very food of faith.

When your strength is broken and God works through you, there is no question who receives the credit

2. Secondly, when your strength is broken and God works through you, there is no question who receives the credit.

We have a terrible tendency to obscure God's glory. We have a horrible habit of stealing praise. But when your hands are tied and you cannot do anything but depend on Him, then, when it is all finished, to Him belongs all the glory!

While God's solution may be temporary, the lessons learned can last a lifetime

3. Thirdly, while God's solution may be temporary, the lessons learned can last a lifetime.

If you look back at the ending of chapter 4 of II Kings, you will notice that it does not mention that the famine has lifted. There is no promise that the stomachs of the young prophets will not growl with hunger the next day. There is no promise given to the Shunammite couple that their son is going to outlive them. There are no guarantees. There will be hunger again. There will be funerals in the Shunammite household.

The lessons that are learned from such situations, however, help when the next hunger arrives; when the next funeral occurs. The lessons help us move from crisis faith to contagious faith. It helps us tell our family, our friends, and our world that even though there are such situations, we have this faith and they must have it too; they do not want to live without it.

That is the story of Israel. That is what God wants us to learn. He is showing us how they walked through their difficult times. He is giving us the biography of Elisha, so we can learn how God works and be able persevere for another hour and be encouraged for another day. He is giving us hope that when our hands are tied and the room is dark, God's hands are at work.

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