

When Your Hands Are Tied

Elisha: Living the Impossible Life – Part I

II Kings 2:19-25; 4:1-2

Introduction

A gentlemen that I read of recently, had taken a trip to Russia. He, and several other pastors, took the trip to silently assess the need for Christian radio. The time was before the Soviet iron curtain had come down.

One of their tour stops was a collective farm in Siberia. The local commissar met these American tourists and said that his city was actually very proud of their church. He even invited them to walk with him to see it. While the Commissar did not know that they were all pastors, he evidently wanted to deliver a message to these Americans.

As they neared the church, the pastors were surprised by the sight of a beautiful white building with its typical onion-shaped turrets. As they drew closer, they could see Communist slogans painted on the church walls, as well as signs posted on the red picket fence surrounding the building. As they stepped inside, they saw that the vestibule was similar to any church vestibule. However, when they stepped into the sanctuary, they were shocked. It had lost all semblance of its original purpose as a place of worship. From floor to ceiling, there were row after row of chicken coops filled with cackling hens. The commissar gestured proudly, “Our church is a chicken hatchery, the finest hatchery in Siberia!”

The Commissar then turned to his American guests, smiled broadly, and announced, “God isn’t real, chickens are real!”

The biography of Elisha opens with a flurry of events. There are six stories that take less than five minutes to read. They are brief sketches that do nothing less than communicate that God is real; that God is involved in the believer’s everyday struggles, trials, victories, and accomplishments; that God is alive and well.

I am even bold enough to say that every single believer can testify, in some way, to the power, intervention, and timing of God. This may be through an impossible situation, in an unplanned event, through a broken relationship, during a difficult assignment, or perhaps, through a doctor’s alarming report. Every believer can give a testimony to the wonderful fact that His hands were at work, even when their hands were tied.

Primary Truths From the Life of Elisha

While I usually give, at the end of our study, primary truths to tuck away in your mind as you face another week, I want to suggest some of them at the outset of our study on the life of Elisha.

Points to remember when facing impossible situations

When facing impossible situations; when your hands are tied, let me give a couple of points to remember.

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 not repeat their sin of unbelief.

Common responses when facing impossible situations – an example from Exodus

If the truth were known, when faced with a situation that seems impossible; where our hands are tied; perhaps a difficulty or a tragedy, our most common responses mirror exactly, the nation Israel.

Let me give an example. Turn to the book of Exodus, chapter 14. Would you believe that a chapter in the book of Exodus would be written for your benefit and instruction? God said it was.

Response #1 - Panic

In chapter 14, the Israelites have left Egypt. The Pharaoh then has a change of heart and sends his army to wipe the Israelites out, or, if they are willing, to return them to slavery. So, the Israelites are standing at the bank of the deep Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army is on its way.

Look at verse 10.

As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened . . .

1. The first response is panic!

Now, if we are honest with each other, had we been in that company of people who had nowhere to

run, with the mountains beside them, the sea in front of them, and one of the mightiest armies coming to get them, we would be saying, as my sons would say, “We’re toast! We’re history!”

This is the time to be afraid; to panic.

Response #2 - Blame

2. The second response, which builds on the first, is blame.

Look at verse 11.

Then they said to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?”

Response #3 - Despair

3. The third response then, is the verdict; the committee decision is despair!

Look at verse 12b.

. . . Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians. For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.

This is classic! The fact finding committee on human affairs put all the data into the program and it spit out two options: to live in Egypt as slaves or to die. So, they say, “Moses, our analysis is that we have only two options: slavery or death!”

It never crossed their minds that God might have a third option. How about the waters parting and you walk across on dry land and then the Egyptian army drowns behind you? Does anyone like the sound of that option?

Are your hands tied, my friend? Are you alternating between fear and blame and despair? Have you given God one or two optional ways around or out? Now, granted, the Lord might want you to swim across your Red Sea; to learn the backstroke or build a raft, but He has guaranteed that, when you arrive home, He will not have to apologize for something that caught Him by surprise.

Our trouble is that when our hands are tied, we say, “Lord, I’ve figured this thing out and this is the only way You could ever fix my situation.”

While this is much easier to say than to do, there is something in our lives, as believers, that displaces

fear with confidence; that dissolves blame and, as we grow older in our relationship with Jesus Christ, that keeps us from growing bitter against God and others, and that is, in coming to know and love and rest in our sovereign, gracious, wise God. He said, in Psalm, chapter 46, verse 10, in the King James Version,

Be still, and know that I am God . . .

As far as God is concerned, there is something stilling about knowing Him. Studying and worshipping God turns panic into quiet trust. So, rather than think of five ways in which He is disappointing you, think of five ways to get to know your powerful God better.

Impossible Situations In the Ministry of Elisha

Now, let us return to the story of Elisha in II Kings. We will begin in chapter 2. This is where Elisha has just picked up the mantle of Elijah, after Elijah is swept to heaven in a chariot of fire.

Elisha has just slipped into the role of God's chief spokesman and is immediately, confronted with an impossible situation. From a human perspective, his hands were tied. Let us see how God moves on his behalf.

Impossibility #1 – Reveals the need for cleansing in the nation Israel through divine intervention

1. The first impossible situation that Elisha faced reveals the need for cleansing in the nation Israel through divine intervention.

Look at verses 19 through 22 of II Kings, chapter 2.

Then the men of the city said to Elisha, "Behold now, the situation of this city [Jericho] is pleasant, as my lord sees; but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful." He said, "Bring me a new jar, and put salt in it." So they brought it to him. He went out to the spring of water and threw salt in it and said, "Thus says the Lord, 'I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer.'" So the waters have been purified to this day, according to the word of Elisha which he spoke.

Most biblical writers point to the only spring near ancient Jericho as the site of this miracle. It begins

near the foot of the mound of the old city and, to this day, spreads its waters out over the plain of Jericho.

Now, the miracle was not in the salt; it was not as a result of a chemical reaction. The salt was merely a symbol of preservation in the midst of corruption and decay.

Elisha is preaching a sermon in this miracle, of the need of divine cleansing. The people of Jericho, and of the nation, needed cleansing; needed God. It would only be through divine intervention that they would be preserved.

It is interesting that in II Chronicles, chapter 13, we are informed that the throne of David was established forever by a covenant of salt. Salt therefore, could have been used symbolically in this miracle as a reminder that the nation not only needed cleansing from God, but that it was still under the covenant responsibilities of God who was in control of the divided kingdom.

By the way, the only spring in Jericho still flows to this day. Its waters, I have read, are described as pleasant tasting and fresh. The spring has been aptly named, "The Spring of Elisha".

Impossibility #2 – Emphasizes the rebellion of the nation Israel in spite of the word of God

2. The second impossible situation that Elisha faced emphasizes the rebellion of the nation Israel in spite of the word of God.

Look at verses 23 and 24 of II Kings, chapter 2.

Then he went up from there to Bethel; and as he was going up by the way, young lads came out from the city and mocked him and said to him, "Go up, you baldhead; go up, you baldhead!" When he looked behind him and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two female bears came out of the woods and tore up forty-two lads of their number.

I cannot quite put my finger on it, but there is something about this passage that I really like! It just warms my heart! It is really obvious to me that this passage is teaching that, if you make fun of baldheaded prophets, then you need to watch out for bears.

I cannot remember who it was, but a man was in the office kidding me about this passage. He said, "Stephen, you ought to preach your whole sermon on

this passage. You could entitle your sermon, “The Bear Truth’!”

I told him to get lost!

Well, obviously, this passage is more serious than I am making it to be. Let me point out some clues that help explain just how serious it was.

First, it is important to recognize that this event occurred outside the city of Bethel. During Elijah’s and Elisha’s ministry, Bethel was the chief center of Baal worship.

Secondly, these “lads” were actually young men. The Hebrew word for lads, or “naar,” is used in the Old Testament for married young men. These young men were old enough to be responsible for their actions before God.

The reference of these young men to Elisha was, in their vernacular, nothing less than an insult. It was not referring particularly to the way in which he might have looked, but rather to his office. Look again at the first part of their insult, in verse 23, where they used the words, “Go up . . . go up . . .”.

Most commentators that I have researched, believe that this was a reference to the going up of Elijah, as Elijah had supposedly, gone up. The Baalites certainly thought that was good riddance. Now, they are telling Elisha to go up; to leave; to get out.

I believe the insults of these young men were more serious than idle jeers. Notice, in verse 24, that the two bears “tore up forty-two of their number.” In other words, there were many more than forty-two. There may have been as many as one hundred young men who came out, en masse, to insult the prophet of God. They are following him and are perhaps moving closer and screaming louder. This was a mob whose intended end action may very well have been to harm the prophet.

In one book that I read, the author suggested that it would take the bears to rescue Elisha from a lynching. The Bible tells us that two female bears came and, literally, “mauled” forty-two of them. It does not say that any of them were actually killed, but there were probably forty-two conversions to Judaism that afternoon.

While the salt in the water solidified Elisha’s leadership over the faithful, it would be the bears that would announce to the unbelieving idolaters that Elisha was God’s prophet for that hour.

Impossibility #3 – Tells of a prophet’s widow in dire need of help

3. Chapter 4 opens with yet another impossible situation that Elisha faced. A prophet’s widow tells him of her dire need of help.

Begin at verse 1.

Now a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”

Stop here for a moment. Imagine being Elisha. You do not have any money either. The way the system operated in Israel was that children and wives of indebted estates became indentured servants for as many as seven years to the one they owed money to.

By the way, the prophets usually lived together, or near one another, and helped each other with farming, clothing, etc. They were all dirt poor, especially living during a time when the prophets of God were an ignored minority. Even the other prophets could not help this woman.

Also, according to the *Targum*, which were Aramaic scrolls dated before the time of Christ, this woman was the wife of the prophet Obadiah. This is the same Obadiah who was the author of the book of Obadiah.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, records that she was the wife of Obadiah and that Obadiah had, before he died, borrowed money in order to feed the prophets he had hidden from Jezebel. We studied that event in a previous study of I Kings.

So, this is a godly wife of a godly prophet who has unexpectedly died. It had happened so suddenly that their financial affairs were not put in order. There was no mortgage insurance then, so her sons were in danger of being taken into slavery until the debt was paid.

The widow gushes out her story to Elisha. I would have expected Elisha to say, “I’m sorry, ma’am, there’s no way out; this is an impossibility.”

Two thoughts concerning impossible situations

I want to toss into our discussion, two thoughts concerning impossible situations before we look further.

Even the most committed Christians are sometimes exposed to the most trying times

1. First, even the most committed Christians are sometimes exposed to the most trying times.

One of the accusations of the underworld is, “If you were a better Christian, this wouldn’t have happened to you. If you were closer to God, this embarrassing, painful situation, which threatens your life and home, like it did hers, would never have occurred.”

The individual who thinks such thoughts or speaks such words, joins ranks with Job’s counselors. Make sure, dear friends, that you do not become a Job counselor for yourself.

Most often, the answers from God do not arrive until the darkest moments are experienced

2. Secondly, most often, the answers from God do not arrive until the darkest moments are experienced.

Psalm, chapter 46, verse 1, tells us that,

God is . . . a very present help in trouble.

This verse does not say, “*before* trouble occurs,” but “*in* trouble.”

Can you feel the urgency of this story? Look again at verse 1b, notice every detail, and climb into this scene.

“Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”

This verse gives the idea that the creditor is standing in the doorway, the children are crying, and she is beside herself, saying, “Elisha, do you have an answer from God?!!!!”

Look at verse 2a.

Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” . .

**Application –
Though Hands Are Tied,
Hearts Can Triumph!**

Let me close with several applications that let us know that, though hands are tied, hearts can triumph!

1. Predicaments are designed to develop trust.
2. Those willing to trust, eventually see God’s power revealed.
3. When God’s solution is revealed, our ultimate response is praise.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/14/1996 by Stephen Davey.

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