

Widows and Infertility
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In the turbulent times surrounding our readings from 2 Kings, chapters 3 and 4, there was much making of widows—God displays His special concern for women, the poor and the desperate women. We are reminded that poverty, being caught up in social isolation and lack of relationships, frequently keeps company with widowhood. **Warfare and violence contribute to the making of widows (and widowers).** Caring for widows and widowers is something universal that children face in the declining years of their parents naturally. When we touched on “chronic grieving” last week—you may remember, it was about Jacob’s season of some twenty-two years for the loss of his son. What may have flown by, under the radar, perhaps, was that Jacob was a widower. With regard to the loss of Rachel, Jacob’s *chronic grief*, despite the presence of other wives (three of them actually), coincided with the birth of Benjamin as Rachel died in giving birth to him. In 2 Kings, the state of warfare in Israel entailed the creation of many widows—and, in the king of Moab’s life, we know nothing of his wife only that he performed the horrendous act of sacrificing his heir apparent on the wall as an act of desperation, human sacrifice, to invoke the aid of Chemosh, the local pagan deity, in lifting the siege. Frankly, Chemosh, did nothing as a result of that awful action (a burnt offering of the first prince) but the horror of human sacrifice caused the Israelites to lift the siege—unlike the Romans in their savage overthrow of Jerusalem(!) and departed before the total annihilation of Moab was achieved.

And, as we segued into the next chapter, the desolations and dislocations of warfare had consequences elsewhere. The wife of one of the prophets, **a servant of Elisha**, dies leaving his wife with a mountain of debt—debt she could not pay! So his widow appeals to Elisha: **Your servant feared the Lord. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves.** (v. 1) Her helplessness before this social expedient for the resolution of debt (selling one’s children!) has not ended. Child trafficking continues unabated in the impoverished nations today—the poor parents can’t afford to keep their children, and sell them to live. You can buy someone! Depending on the amount of the debt, her sons could be slaves for a season, or slaves for life. Either way, involuntary servitude was the financial remedy for unpaid debt. When we pray, **forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, our prayer** is subtly aimed at this social dilemma. The expedience of enslavement has no racial tinge to it but is an indication of the oppression that results from incurring debt and countenancing slavery. *So, just as the grieving are exhorted to carry their grief to Jesus—to admit their loss and (to seek consolation from Him—this widow makes her appeal to **the man of God**.*

Apparently the woman doesn’t have much if she has been *reduced to selling her sons to pay her debt!* **Those sons represent the miracle of increase already present in her life!** I note that babies, children are a blessing, a miracle of

increase and divine provision¹—both. But listen to what Elisha asks next; **Tell me what** (else?) **do you have in the house?** He asks her to reach *into her poverty*! She only has **a jar of oil**. Elisha then takes what little she has and, utilizing that, brings redemption out of her poverty! *It will cost her all she has*. **God will bring prosperity out of her lack of means**—when she gives up that jar of oil, there is nothing else. And, the deliverance from the creditor comes through the relationship Elisha held with her deceased husband.

Go, says the prophet, **borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors** (v. 3) We should acknowledge what this directive accomplishes: *the engagement the entire community in the poor widow's plight (or in the good works of kingdom building)!* *It stimulates communal life*. **Empty vessels**, he directs, **do not gather just a few. And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones.** (v. 4) The miracle, and it is one, is performed behind closed doors; it is discrete, a divine intervention, not to be exploited as “a publicity stunt!” This is the first time that “Miracle Oil” hits the shelves—I think!

She does just as she is instructed and all the available vessels are filled. **All filled**, the miraculous supply ceases. Now what? She is to market, sell the oil, **pay your debt and you and yours sons live on the rest.** (v. 7) As a supplier of oil, she is lifted out of her poverty. Ransomed by God, just as we are ransomed by Christ. Deut. 15 has some guidance (Word) for the handling of debt within the fair of God, the faith community. Here is what it says:

“At the end of every seven years you shall [*make a release*] grant a remission of debts 2 .This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord s’remission has been proclaimed. 3 From a foreigner you may exact it , but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. 4 However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, 5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.

This provision, in the Law, had implications for how to do business with a brother, or sister; it reigns in debt, set limits so as to avert insolvency. It guides our social interactions in-house, so to speak.

Now, in view of that, we may conclude that the prophet’s widow had a *foreign creditor* because a Jewish one wouldn’t proceed in this manner! The world is not bound by the constraints laid out here for God’s people. In the same manner, we

¹ Our challenge is rightly appraise the value, and purpose of childbearing and rearing! When having a baby is translated, perversely, into a burden, a hindrance to one’s success in life. Family is God’s idea and where His pattern and plan for family prevail, His people prosper.

may view the exhortations to be truthful, to be forgiving—they are boundaries that set God's people apart from the rest of the world. A Christian may expect *better* of another Christian because we are family, heirs with Christ. This “exclusivity” is in alignment with God's will for God's people. If we are obedient in this, we are positioned to be effective in our witness and dealing with outsiders, the world at large. We do not think, act or decide things as those who have no guidance, and no hope.

The widow's debt is not absolved; it is paid off in full. So *remarkable, wonderful*, we say. And yet, our “sin debt” is paid off in like remarkable manner. Jesus picked up the tab for our sin debt. *Some question how this can be done—signaling their unbelief!* All of our sin debt entirely paid and the deal is sealed and done. **Live on the rest** remains for us, too(!) as it did for her—as *forgiven* sinners, we live on the grace Christ has extended to us—beyond that act of forgiveness. Enough for the debts and enough for life on going! Our life as forgiven sinners has been purchased in full—we are no longer in bondage to sin and, additionally, live free.

So much for the poor widow and our indebtedness, spiritually speaking.

How about the infertile, and *desperate*, Shunammite woman? The well-heeled woman whose life is constrained by her barrenness. No heir, no family, no social security (by God's provision), no future. Her life is a dead end, inescapable depletion lies ahead—all her assets to be dissipated in death and her supply of life cut off. *She lives a life of quiet desperation—hidden, unacknowledged—especially if there is no miracle of increase*. She is, socially, the *polar opposite for now* of the destitute widow we just discussed. Each woman actually has a desperation of her own. *Things are out of alignment!* Yet this woman, filled with generosity and given to hospitality—she appears to have everything (!) and to need nothing. **What then is to be done for her? (4:14) *Her divine right to a family has been abrogated—temporarily!***

Look ahead to Matthew 10:41-42, Jesus speaking:

41Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. 42'And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward."

What indeed? She is practicing contentment: **I dwell among my own people.** (v. 13) She isn't looking ahead, planning ahead, ***being hopeless in that dimension of life***, so Elisha does this for her: **About this time next year you shall embrace a son. *Her hopelessness is suddenly and unexpectedly undone!*** I love, applaud, her response to this prophetic word, she is so undone by the *wonder* of it all: **No, my lord. Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant.** (v.16) What

candor! What a genuine response to a deep, unacknowledged longing! *She didn't ask for a son—God gave one to her.* God is that good, that kind, that presentient. God loves women. I can assure you that her heart was aflutter, singing a new song!

God loves barren rich women, and poor widows!

The depth of this love is further displayed in the rest of 2 Kings 4 where we learn that the child dies. (v. 20) The boy's mother was bereaved of her son regardless, regardless of military outcomes—social turmoil, by disease it would appear. It is impossible to describe the torrent of grief that must have descended on this woman, losing the divinely gifted son — the reward of her generosity and hospitality to the prophet Elisha! But, consider her course of action. She carries the corpse of her son to the prophet's chamber and lays him on the bed. We are not told if she informs her husband of the death—perhaps she, believing the best though faced with the worst, heroically hid it from him. Frantic with grief, she ran to Elisha, just as we are urged to run to Jesus! **Please send me one of the young men and one of the donkeys, that I may run to the man of God and come back.** (v.22) Her husband asks why? **It is neither the New Moon, or the Sabbath.** By which we gather that they were observant Israelites in Israel—for there, lacking the priesthood and the temple, people resorted to the prophets at Mt. Carmel for instruction and devotions on those occasions. **And she said, "It is well."** She actually says, ***Shalom***—a single word fraught with several meanings. It could mean, I don't have time to talk. I can't discuss things now. Or it could be an expression of faith (my preference) signifying that she knew if only she could get to Elisha, things would break differently . . . that the son who died might live again. Keep your eye on that ball!

Certainly it is impossible to get beyond the repetition of this **shalom** without pondering it. Elisha asks three times: **Is it well** with you . . . with your husband . . . with your son? No, it is not. It is not apparently well, but to the eyes of faith what might be ill on one level may be blest on another. That is the case here. This woman discusses nothing with anyone except with the man of God, ***the source of her help and hope***. She rightly trusts in their relationship, and in her confidence in his authority as God's prophet. She falls to the ground at Elisha's feet and grasps hold of them—like Mary breathless at the sight of her risen Lord . . . like Jacob struggling for his life at Jabbok. She cries out to the Lord: **Help me, save me, deliver my son**—just like the Psalmist!

Gehazi seeks to prevent this indignity, but her gesture is so expressive of anguish. Elisha says, **Let her alone; for her soul is in deep distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me.** Now I believe that this passionate moment is fairly reported and *unfolds as written*—she imparts none of the details until after she cries out: **Did I ask a son of my lord?** No, she did not. The son was a divine blessing, an unsought reward—and a great joy, deep

satisfaction, the fulfillment of her most personal longings and unexpressed needs. We can feel her distress, her bewilderment. Was all this blessing, all this fulfillment just a cruel hoax? Were her hopes raised up only to be dashed down? **“Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me?’”** Was she set up?

It is then that (I suggest) she made full disclosure of her young son’s sudden death. Her eloquent plea for help is left unexpressed. As for Elisha, without a moment’s hesitation, he dispatches Gehazi to take his staff and lay it on the face of the child’s face *to work the miracle of his presence in his absence*. *Although this represents the instantaneous nature of God’s response to the cries of His sheep, this woman is determined to have Elisha’s help in person.* **As the Lord lives and as your soul lives, I will not leave you**, meaning, I need you . . . you, come in person with me . . . you are all I need now. As we know, he acquiesces: **So he arose and followed her.** (v. 30)

To the observant reader I want to point out the multiple and uncanny parallels between Elisha’s activity in the text and the later ministry of the Lord: the flow of oil with the wine at the feast in Cana; the raising of the dead (this dead boy and Jairus’ dead daughter); the multiplication of the loaves (the man from Baal Shalisha with twenty loaves of bread—**shall I set this before a hundred men?** (v. 43)-the feeding of the multitude of worshippers). Study this catalogue of precedent—there are lessons to be drawn from it! It is also worthy of note that Shunam and Nain (the location of Jesus’ resurrection of another widow’s only son) are apparently the very same place!

Picture Jesus, following Jairus, the synagogue leader to his home, where his deceased daughter lies on her bed. And, as Elisha performed the miracle of resurrection, so Jesus shuts the door behind him and raises the dead daughter: ***Talitha cumi—little girl, I say to you, arise!***—to life. What Jesus accomplishes with a word replicates what Elisha did with considerably more physical interaction with the child’s corpse! **Call this Shumannite woman.** And for the second time, Gehazi summons the woman to Elisha—reminiscent of the original promised of blessing! **Pick up your son.** After she enters and falls at his feet again, she does as she was bidden and exits with her precious child alive.

So, we have the desperation of the widow (her engagement with the world had gone poorly!)—**the creditor is coming to enslave my sons**—and we have the soul distress of the Shunammite woman—**have my hopes been crossed and I deceived?** Bondage and death having crossed their threshold, not just being at the door, have invaded their, our homes. There has been too much “making of widows,” and “widowers” in America these days—too many arms emptied by violent deaths. The merchants of war are working our streets, our cities and our suburbs. Plunderers and looters act with impunity, thievery as reparations unjustly extracted from people innocent of offense. Who else have we to turn but you, Lord? Have mercy on us. Too many mothers rendered childless. Too much

hatred, and tolerance of raw incitations to destroy and harm . . . ***as if justice can be obtained by unjust means, when we know it cannot.*** We are bleeding from self-inflicted wounds and some are dying. We lift the shipwreck of our day to you, Lord. Hear our anguish. Save us!

From *The Tempest shipwreck*, which represents a day of reckoning recall these poignant lines:

Now I'm afraid we've lost your son forever. Our shipwreck has made more women widows in Milan and Naples than there are survivors to comfort them. And it's all your fault. (Sebastian to Alonso, King of Naples)
(Act 1, Sc. 1, ll. 109-110)

Shakespeare hits the mark, though Sebastian's arrows flies by misdirection—like the shaft that found the chink in Ahab's armor! Alonso's fault is deeper than this shipwreck. It lies with the treasonous ambition of Antonio, his co-conspirator against the rightful Duke of Milan, and he's a murderer! Now Prospero is a widower—the widows projected here are present by their absence. They are in Milan and Naples—there are bereaved fathers inhabiting this island.

Now the divine remedy for this heart-wrenching circumstance—stretched out between the forgiveness of Prospero, murderous ambition and the bereavement of Alonso (which incidentally mirrors the loss of James I's son, and heir apparent) is the forging of a family through the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda, heirs to this broken state, on the ashes of lust and ambition. Murder is pre-empted by marriage (the conspiracy of traitors is nullified). Hope and forgiveness and the promise of progeny usher in “a brave new world.” Such was the divine provision for the widow with two sons, and for the Shunammite woman. Both narratives are morality plays!

Again, a widow speaks, In *Richard III*, Anne, giving voice to her outrage over recent political assassination:

O, when, I say, I looked on Richard's face,
This was my wish: be thou, quoth I, accursed
For making me, so young, so old a widow;
And, when thou wedd'st, let sorrow haunt thy bed;
And be thy wife—if any be so mad—
More miserable made by the life of thee
Than thou hast made me by my dear lord's death.

(Richard III, Act 4, Sc. 1, ll 72-77) (Lady Anne, Prince Edward's widow)

Anne does well to keep her grief so personal. Murder is ever as personal as it is wrong. Before George Floyd was a black man, he surely was our brother! And Breonna, our sister, and all the slain police officers as well. All souls matter! Our losses are too grievous. And George's wife, no fictive creation, is a living Anne for us to harken to! There is too much making of widows, and widowers. The blood running in our streets is our blood. Let's pray and call for a moratorium on murder!

May we, Lord, by your grace, recover the respect for life embedded in the our brotherhood, in our shared blood, in the image of God which we all are framed in. There is no race to blood; it is red everywhere and always the same. It's bloodletting that cries out from the ground, beginning with Cain.

Lord, we bleed, heal us now.

Amen.