

Sermon 39, The God of the Nameless and Helpless,³ 2 Kings 4:1-7

Proposition: God demonstrates that He cares for the unnamed, societally unimportant, helpless people who cry out to Him.

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Introduction

Brothers and sisters, we continue to look tonight at the career of Elisha the son of Shaphat. We have seen how his prophetic credentials were verified by parting the Jordan, by healing the water at Jericho, and by predicting God's power to bring water in the wilderness. As the story continues, we will see God's power over debt, death, disease and hunger, sickness and war — all exercised through Elisha. Remember, this segment is not here simply to tell us about the prophet. More than anything, it exists to tell us about the God of the prophet. You'll notice that Elisha is called a man of God over and over again in these stories. Why? Because what he does shows us what God is like. What we see tonight about our God is this: He is the God of the nameless and of the helpless. He cares about people's pain.

I. The Widow's Problem, v. 1

Our story opens with a widow. She had been the wife of one of the sons of the prophets, and now he is dead. Without evidence, the Septuagint translation identifies her late husband as Obadiah from 1 Kings 18, and Josephus tells us that he had contracted his sizeable debts by feeding the hundred prophets in two caves. But that's not what the text actually says. Indeed, comparing the true reading to the LXX fantasies underscores the truth that the characters throughout these chapters are unnamed. God doesn't tell us who they are exactly, but He tells us enough to show us that He cares deeply about each and every one of His people. Whether you're well-known or

³ Once again, I am deeply indebted to Dale Ralph Davis' commentary (*in loc.*) for the title and much of the content of this sermon.

not, whether you have a large platform or not, whether saints of later ages will remember your name or not, God cares for you if you belong to Him.

A. The Righteous Die

What can we learn from this first verse? That God understands the reality that the righteous die. People who have served God with and for their whole lives can be struck down by sickness, by drunk drivers, or by random accidents. To God, this is no new thing. It is something He understands well. He's seen it through the millennia. So if you have lost a parent, a child, another loved one — know that God understands your plight. He lost His own Son, His own Immortal Son! And He saw the distress and anguish of this widow, left with no income and no protection in a hard world.

B. The Fatherless and Widows Have no Recourse

God also understands how vulnerable the fatherless and widows are. We may lament the broken social safety net in our society, but at least we try to maintain one! Ancient Israel had some safety nets too, of course — and let's just say they were unpleasant. You wouldn't have to be homeless, for instance — but you might lose your children. Anyone could be sold into slavery for debts, their labor working off the amount they owed. That was the fate facing this woman. Who among us would want to see our children sold into slavery, no matter how kind and good their master?

II. God's Solution, vv. 2-7

Yet the story, like Naboth's, doesn't end there. Yes, God sees the plight of the righteous. Yes, that plight finds an answering pang in our own hearts, for those we've known and loved who have lost such righteous loved ones. Why do the righteous perish while the wicked survive indefinitely? Ultimately, the answer to that question is hidden in the mystery of God's plan for this world. We don't know that plan in its entirety, and our text tonight doesn't address it. Rather, it approaches things from a different angle — from an insistence that God cares for His people. This text isn't a promise that God will always provide. But it is a statement about what God is like, and an assurance that we can and should trust Him.

A. God's Solution Is for those with Nothing, v. 2

What do we see about how God solved this problem? Remember that this is not His only method of solving problems. At most, this solution shows us how He typically works, not how He uniformly works. But we should nevertheless milk this anecdote for meaning as hard as we can in order to discover as much as we can about the God it reveals.

We see first that God helps those with nothing. This woman had a jar of oil — perhaps a single anointing's worth, according to one lexicon. Those of you who use the little gel packs of laundry detergent might compare her words to that. "I have nothing in the house, except a single packet of laundry detergent." The fact that your "nothing" is capable of such an exception only highlights the desperation of your circumstances. This is frequently when and where God steps in.

Many of us in this rich land think we have “nothing” except an old car and a small house with electricity, automatic heating and air conditioning, and hot and cold running water. Maybe that’s why we don’t see God’s help when we imagine that we deserve it. But in reality, God’s help is most often given to those who really have no way to take care of themselves. This is preeminently true in the spiritual realm, of course — but it seems to be highlighted here. Yes, in the next chapter we see God helping a man who has everything. But that man had no way to help himself get better from his leprosy. God helped him in the area where he was helpless. And the same goes for this widow. She has no way to pay her debts in less than 24 hours, and that place of need is where God helped her.

Do you beg God for help in areas where you are needy? Or do you have so much of everything that you aren’t needy? If you aren’t needy, surely that explains why you feel that you see so little of His activity in your life — doesn’t it?

B. God’s Solution Involves Human Cooperation, vv. 3-6

Notice further that God’s solution was not simply to wire a million dollars into a trust fund for this widow. She and her sons participated actively in God’s plan for rescuing them. Yes, it was God’s plan. Yes, God was the one who provided the key part. But we as Calvinists affirm not that God lives the Christian life, but that we Christians live it! We talk about monergism, and we rightly rejoice in the truth that at the point of salvation God alone works to change the human heart and make it alive. But we are not monergists across the board. We believe in the absolute necessity of obedience to God, of cooperating with God, of doing everything that God asks us to do. We certainly affirm the possibility of such cooperation too! It is only at the point of initial salvation, when we are dead in trespasses and sins, that we affirm that God is the sole agent of our regeneration and justification. But as we work out our salvation, we are at work and God is at work. God helps us to new life without our cooperation, just as He created us the first time without our cooperation. But He does not live the Christian life and obey Himself for us. We live the Christian life; we obey Him; we cooperate with Him in pursuing a godly lifestyle.

Remember how we saw that this truth is contained in the Lord’s Prayer? Whenever we ask that God would give us our daily bread, we are asking for it as a gift from Him, but we are simultaneously claiming it as ours because it’s our job to work for it.

So what of Ben Franklin’s famous dictum that God helps those who help themselves? When it comes to salvation, such a statement is simply false. When He saves dead sinners, God is helping those who can’t help themselves. But when it comes to our efforts to obey God, to live a holy life, to be good parents and children and church members and employees, God does indeed help us as we seek to help ourselves. Conversely, He will not help those who exert no effort, those who say, “Well, God saved me and He promises to glorify me, so I’m going to sit back, relax, and binge on Netflix.”

May it never be! God saves us, and God sanctifies us — but good works are necessary for us. They are not the prerequisite for salvation, but they are the unavoidable response to salvation.

You may have heard this passage preached as “Make sure you’re ready for God’s blessing. Go in faith to get ready for way more blessing than you can possibly imagine.” Is that really what this text is saying? Not directly. I don’t think we are supposed to condemn the woman for borrowing too few vessels. I think the more important idea here is that God’s blessing is sufficient. God is not a wasteful God. When we ask for help, He helps. Imagine a needy family in the church today praying for transportation when their car quits. God is very likely to provide a car for them. I’ve seen this happen with my own eyes. But He’s not quite as likely to provide 5 cars for them. In the same way, this text tells us that God cares about us and manifests that care by giving us what we need. Indirectly, of course, it’s true that God was providing for this woman until such time as her sons were grown. She could have gotten more oil by borrowing more jars. But His provision is never to make us as rich as possible, or even as comfortable as possible. His provision is a signal that He cares.

C. God’s Solution Doesn’t Seek Human Applause, vv. 4-5

Another sign that shows how God’s provision is a manifestation of His care is the emphasis throughout the chapter on shutting the door. Why was this woman supposed to shut the door? Because God wasn’t doing this for the applause. He wasn’t doing it because He wanted the kudos. He was doing it because He actually cared about this particular woman and her two sons.

Now, is it good to see what God’s doing and glorify Him for it? Of course. But Solomon tells us that it is the glory of God to conceal something. God loves to hide what He’s doing, just as Jesus instructed us to do. Our charity is supposed to be private and hush-hush. Why? Not because it’s bad to be charitable, but rather because it is important to make sure that our charity is for the right reasons. Publicity can ruin a good thing. And so God practices what Christ preaches. He does His charitable work in secret. Make sure that you give freely, regularly, and copiously. The Christian life is a life of giving, according to Jesus (who though He was poor lived a life of astounding generosity, particularly with His time and energy). Do you want to be like Christ? Then give privately.

D. God’s Solution Is Long-Term, vv. 6-7

Finally, God’s solution to this problem is long-term. He made a way for the woman to pay down her debts — thus eliminating the present danger of slavery to the creditor. But His solution went beyond that. It provided for the family until her sons could grow up and provide for themselves and for her.

This is our God. His blessings aren’t cheap things that quickly wear out. His blessings last. Think of the blessing of salvation. It’s an eternal blessing from an eternal Father.

III. Application

So what do we do with this passage?

A. Recognize that God Cares

The main thing is to learn to think rightly about your heavenly Father. Yes, many Christians suffer and die. The righteous perish, as we saw at the beginning of our text, and sometimes they even starve to death. In this very church we have sick people, people grieving the loss of loved

ones. It is tempting to adopt the mindset of Richard Dawkins and say that at the heart of the universe is nothing more than “pitiless indifference.” But our text tonight tells a different story. God cares! He is interested in you. He feels your needs and your pain. We know He does, because His Son is a man like you, one who knows intimately what it is to live on Earth and to lose the ones He loved.

We saw tonight that God cares for the nameless and helpless. He showed that by providing for this widow’s needs. How much more did He show it at the cross of Jesus Christ, where He gave not a miraculous supply of oil (which cost Him nothing) but instead gave His only Son (which cost Him everything)! Brothers and sisters, we serve a God who cares, and cares deeply, about us and our needs. It may not always seem like it, and His priorities are certainly different from ours. But He is a God who cares.

B. Cry out to God for Help

So because He cares, you should cry out to Him for help. When this life is hard, when your burden are great, when you are sick or those you love are injured, cry out to God! He hasn’t promised to fix everything, but you can be certain that He hears you and that He cares what you have to say. Sometimes, a listening ear is all we need — and that’s what we have in Christ. By the way, that’s also why we have a prayer meeting in this church. It’s so that we can all together, formally, cry out to God for help. He will hear us!

C. Care Like God Does

Finally, learn to care like God does. You and I will quickly get burned out on this world. There is too much need, too much folly, too much self-destructive behavior out there. Those of you who work or have worked in law enforcement know this only too well. Yet God has not written off the world. God still cares for His world and for the people in it. The only way you can have His heart is by spending time with Him. Seek Him for refreshment. Commune with Him. Spend time with Christ, with the Spirit, with the Father, seeking to understand their heart for sinners and their love for people like you. Thus armed, thus strengthened, thus nourished by a refreshing relationship with your Creator and Redeemer, you will be enabled to care, at least a little bit, like God does.

God cares! He is the God of the helpless and nameless. Let’s live, cry out to Him, and care for the helpless and nameless like He does. Amen.