

Miraculous Multiplication

FOCUS THOUGHT

God can take what we have and miraculously multiply it to bless us.

▶▶ FOCUS VERSE

II Kings 4:7

Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.

▶▶ LESSON TEXT

II Kings 4:1-7

1 Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead, and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.

2 And Elisha said unto her, What shall I do for thee? tell me, what hast thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil.

3 Then he said, Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbours, even empty vessels; borrow not a few.

4 And when thou art come in, thou shalt shut the door upon thee and upon thy sons, and shalt pour out into all those vessels, and thou shalt set aside that which is full.

5 So she went from him, and shut the door upon her and upon her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured out.

6 And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed.

7 Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest.



MIRACULOUS HARVEST

It was time for harvest, but the rain came in torrents for an entire month. Kendall and LaVonne looked out at their fields of soybeans. Two hundred acres were completely under water and would be a total loss. Other fields were partially under water, and as the water drained, lines appeared high on the plants where the water had stayed for two weeks. This could bankrupt the entire farm.

Farms for miles around were suffering the same damage. Plants were 50 percent to 100 percent mold in the pods, which meant no one would buy them. Kendall and LaVonne had prayed and begged God to stop the rain, but it seemed there was no response. Now they had to harvest beans they knew would be worthless. Why had God not stopped the storm?

They soberly harvested the beans and sent them to the grain elevator to be evaluated. The phone rang, and Kendall braced for the news. The voice on the other end said, “Where did you get these beans? They only have 3 percent to 5 percent damage. Send us all you’ve got.”

Other than the two hundred acres that were a total loss, all their other fields brought in a bumper crop and sold for more money than most other years.

While some of the farms did go bankrupt and others struggled terribly, God multiplied Kendall and LaVonne’s crop miraculously. He did not stop the storm, but He used what they had and multiplied it in spite of the storm.



OUTLINE

I. THE WIDOW WAS LEFT WITH INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT

- A. Creditors Were Coming
- B. The Threat of Losing Her Sons
- C. At Times We Will Face Difficult Challenges

II. THE WIDOW CRIED OUT TO ELISHA

- A. What Do You Have in Your House?
- B. God Will Always Start with What We Have in the House

III. BORROWED VESSELS

- A. They Filled All the Vessels
- B. The Widow Paid Her Debts
- C. God Will Multiply What We Have in the House

IV. GOD CAN USE WHATEVER WE HAVE

- A. What You Have Is Enough
- B. Trust God to Multiply and Bless



CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

The woman in II Kings 4:1 is identified as one of the “wives of the sons of the prophets.” She came to Elisha, apparently in great distress: “Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the LORD: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.”

The prophet Elisha responded, “Tell me, what hast thou in the house?” (II Kings 4:2). In effect the prophet was telling the widow that she already possessed the resources to meet the emergency.

All crises are not equal. Every problem needs evaluating, and the answer to everything starts from where we are. When Elisha asked what she had in her house, the woman immediately answered, “Not any thing.” Then she added, “Save a pot of oil” (literally, “except for an anointing of oil”). Elisha took this one small hint of a solution—one anointing of oil—and proceeded from there.

I. THE WIDOW WAS LEFT WITH INSURMOUNTABLE DEBT

Who was this widow, and who was her deceased husband? Scripture explains that the husband was a member of the “sons of the prophets.” The narrative contains several references to these groups located at various places, including Bethel (II Kings 2:3); Jericho (2:5); and Gilgal (4:38). Each group was led by the same prophet, and when he died (or was taken, as with Elijah), another guild member took his place (as did Elisha). These groups had their roots as far back as the time of Samuel, who wrote about a “company of prophets” (I Samuel 10:5, 10; 19:20), and were apparently equivalent to modern-day Bible colleges where young adults aspiring to ministry are taught and mentored by more experienced ministers.

The narrative in II Kings seems to indicate some of these men had homes, spouses, and children. Although the deceased husband is not named in the biblical text, at least two historical sources identify him as the Obadiah of I Kings 18:3–16. Josephus, a Jewish historian, stated that this Obadiah was one of King Ahab’s stewards who borrowed money to buy food for the prophets, which may explain why his widow went to Elisha with the problem. She approached Elisha with language that seems to imply he had some accountability for the debt: “Thy servant is dead, and you know he did fear the Lord” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*).

The Targum, an Aramaic interpretive rendering of Hebrew Scriptures, also identifies the deceased husband as the Obadiah mentioned in I Kings 18:3–16. There is scholarly debate about these identifiers, as Scripture mentions at least twelve men named Obadiah (Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of the Bible*).

A. Creditors Were Coming

While we are not certain whose wife the widow had been, we are certain that she was the wife of a prophet who had died, leaving her strapped with debt. She sold everything of value and still lacked enough to pay the creditors. When she came to Elisha with the problem, he did not offer immediate help. Instead, he wanted to determine if the widow had any available resources.

B. The Threat of Losing Her Sons

All debt is a wager that all conditions will remain constant; therefore, all debt carries a hidden risk, because situations are subject to change at any moment. The devil is a merciless creditor; he will not settle for one son if he can get two.

The love of money smothers mercy and propagates cruelty. The creditors in our story were demanding the remaining balance of the debt be paid by the involuntary servitude of the widow’s sons. What a dilemma! Money borrowed during better financial times, however righteous the reason, became an impossible responsibility to meet. The parents had no idea it would come to this.

This was all legal under Jewish law, but legality is often different than morality. Men could borrow on their personal credit, and primary security for debt was first considered to be their own persons—the value of their labor and that of their dependents.

Hebrew law stipulated two things: (1) the service rendered could not be severe (Leviticus 25:43, 46) and (2) the time of service was limited until the next year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:40). There is nothing in our narrative to indicate the distance to the year of Jubilee, but the creditor apparently had been unable to enforce the law against the boys' father before he died, and now the law was on the creditor's side.

Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible indicates the Hebrew word *ārubbāh* ("surety," Proverbs 17:18) means "to take in pledge, in the sense of bargain or exchange; something given as security—a bondsman." *Nāshak* ("usury," Deuteronomy 23:19) was also used in financial situations. It means "to strike with a sting (as a serpent); to oppress with interest on a loan; to take a bite," which is a fitting description because debt sometimes comes back to "bite" us.

» ***What are some of the consequences of debt? How can this affect us spiritually?***

C. At Times We Will Face Difficult Challenges

To calm the widow's desperation, Elisha simply asked a question that prefaced a course of action: "What do you have in the house?" In other words, he was suggesting a resource evaluation.

Panic in the face of a dilemma can skew the results of resource evaluation. *Always* and *never* (as in "it will never work out" or "everything always goes wrong") are not conducive to positive solutions. Most often we want and expect instantaneous help from the Lord from resources other than our own, and we will suggest several different solutions. How much better it is to survey our resources: What do we have to work with? Perhaps we already have in our possession the elements of our own deliverance.

The man in our story may have left his wife and sons deep in debt, but he left them something far more valuable than gold: a testimony and a legacy that he feared God and was faithful. Poverty of things can be endured if one has an anointing of oil.

The narrative of the desperate widow reveals to us that the Lord helps unnamed, ordinary, everyday people. The Bible documents numerous stories of God's deliverance of ordinary people. It shows them in their homes, in their businesses, in their joy, in their grief, at their marriage feasts, and at their funerals.

We learn lessons, both positive and negative, from kings and prophets. We also learn lessons, both positive and negative, from unidentified people like the widow in today's story. To us, she may look like a nobody, but to God, she was somebody. And her only resource was a teaspoonful of oil.

There was no mineral oil or petroleum oil in Bible times, but there was olive oil. The olives were picked before they were ripe and then pressed by foot (Micah 6:15), pestle and mortar (Exodus 27:20; 29:40), or by a stone press (Joel 2:24). One tree could

yield up to a half ton of oil, which was then used for commerce, light, anointing rituals and consecrations, tithing, and, of course, cooking. Oil was not to be used for a sin offering (Leviticus 5:11), nor was it to be used as a jealousy offering (Numbers 5:15).

In the Scriptures, oil was a universal spiritual type or symbol of the Holy Spirit and was inextricably ingrained in the culture of biblical times.

» *Discuss the significance of oil in a variety of biblical events (e.g., the Tabernacle, the anointing of kings and prophets, and New Testament anointings [James 5:14–15]).*

II. THE WIDOW CRIED OUT TO ELISHA

A. What Do You Have in Your House?

A pot of oil was not much. It may have been a very small pot, and it may not have been full—it was only an “anointing” of oil. Her resources were severely limited, surely not enough to settle an insurmountable debt to save her sons from slavery. But we already know what God can do with a small amount of oil: Elijah and his benefactor were sustained throughout a famine with a small cruse of oil and a handful of meal (I Kings 17), and Elisha in today’s story saved the widow’s sons from slavery with even less oil. In the New Testament, Jesus miraculously multiplied five common barley loaves and two fishes. In none of these and other miraculous instances did the Lord change the substance He was multiplying; He merely replicated the original common substance into miraculous amounts. (See Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–39.)

“Sister Obadiah” was willing to give all she had. She also was willing to obey, despite the doubts she may have had about the seemingly foolish command to gather empty pots, pans, jars, and jugs from the neighbors. Not only was she quick to seek godly counsel, but also she was quick to obey godly advice.

» *Have you had an experience in your own life when limited resources lasted far beyond what would have been expected?*

B. God Will Always Start with What We Have in the House

The Lord can multiply our ordinary commonalities into extraordinary results if we willingly put our resources into His miraculous, multiplying hands. Consider the staff in the hands of Moses, the small amount of blood on the doorposts in Egypt, a small boy with five loaves and two fish, and Paul the apostle who considered himself the least of all his peers.

III. BORROWED VESSELS

A. They Filled All the Vessels

After determining the widow had something to work with, Elisha next charged her with a curious task: “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors—empty vessels; do not gather just a few” (II Kings 4:3, NKJV). Elisha did not explain

how the miracle was going to be performed, so the exercise was an act of faith. The widow vigorously collected her neighbors' empty vessels—from "all" her neighbors, and not "just a few" vessels. Faith's endeavors should be pursued to utmost levels.

To some, it would make more sense for the widow to borrow full vessels, but the command was to borrow *empty* vessels and not *just a few*. The Lord will not get us out of debt by obligating us to more debt.

When the widow's house was full of empty, borrowed vessels, she "shut the door upon her and upon her sons" (II Kings 4:5). What she was about to do was not for public display. (Every widow in the neighborhood would have formed a double line in front of Elisha's door if they had witnessed the miracle.) The widow did not yet know it, but the amount of oil she received would be determined by two things: how many neighbors she had visited and how many empty vessels she had compelled them to loan her. The more neighbors she visited, the more vessels she accumulated. The more vessels she accumulated, the more oil she could pour out. The more oil she could pour out, the more money she could gain to pay off the debt, thus saving her sons from the creditors.

We can imagine the scene: empty pots, pans, jars, and jugs sitting on every surface—tables, benches, chairs, counters, and in the sink. Even the water pot was emptied out and waiting. The widow looked at the empty vessels and then at her teaspoonful of oil in the cruse; she set her doubt aside, took a deep breath, and started to pour.

The first kettle was the hardest. She tipped the little cruse of oil on its side above the kettle, and the oil began to flow—and kept on flowing. Once the first vessel was full, her faith began to build. She was afraid to tip up the little cruse lest the oil stop flowing, so her sons kept changing the containers while she held the miraculous cruse of oil on its side.

"Hurry," she admonished her son, "bring another empty vessel."

He replied, "There are no more empty vessels," and before she could react, the oil stopped—not because the oil ran out, but because the empty vessels ran out. The oil was good to the last drop. No doubt the widow at some point wished she had gone to a few more houses and begged for just a few more empty vessels. God's miraculous multiplication could have filled many more.

B. The Widow Paid Her Debts

This story ends on a positive note: the widow sold the oil, paid the debt, saved her sons from bondage, and lived day to day on the rest. It is interesting that she did not consider the abundance of oil was hers to do with as she liked; instead, she went to Elisha, told him what had happened, and obeyed his advice. We should not feel possessive of God's blessings. The men and women of God in our lives can advise us of what the Scriptures teach about good stewardship of our blessings.

C. God Will Multiply What We Have in the House

The widow's story teaches us what to do in a crisis: seek godly counsel and obey godly advice; use what resources we already have, no matter how small they may seem, and keep the faith. The Lord has unlimited resources; our task is to provide a place for His miraculous multiplication to work. Our Savior's miraculous infilling has kept the creditor from our door, delivered our children from bondage, and supplied enough left over to live day to day until Jesus comes.

» *Jesus paid a debt He did not owe because we owed a debt we could not pay. Discuss how this well-known adage pertains to today's lesson.*

IV. GOD CAN USE WHATEVER WE HAVE

A. What You Have Is Enough

God's miraculous multiplication is equal to any need. The problem might be our lack of providing a place for Him to work. What if the widow had collected only five empty vessels? Or what if she had collected twice as many? The more empty the situation, the more space the Lord has to work.

B. Trust God to Multiply and Bless

Look at Creation: all was "without form, and void" (Genesis 1:2). But when ultimate creativity met ultimate potential, ultimate change took place. The Creator came in contact with the ultimate empty place in which to create. The more empty space we give God to work His miraculous multiplication, the more creative He can be with His solutions. Yet we tend to give God ideas and supply Him with multiple solutions as to how He could cleverly (we think) solve our dilemmas. This story of a weeping widow suggests that we should apply what oil we have to faith and let the Lord handle the "how to" part. If God's power is unlimited, why would we want to limit Him to our ideas of how He should answer the dilemma?

» *How can we limit God?*

»» INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Is the widow's dilemma just another positive Old Testament narrative, or are there some lessons we can apply to our contemporary dilemmas? Situations sometimes develop that bring overwhelming pressure to our hearts and minds. Life sometimes seems more than we can bear, and we do not know what to do. Consider discussing the predicament with a godly counselor for possible solutions. Consider what resources you might already possess and pray about it. God may use what you already have to solve your problem, no matter how insignificant your resources may seem to you. Listen to godly wisdom and obey with faith and purpose. Trust that God will supply until all the potential for blessing is filled up . . . and do not forget to return what you borrowed.