

Ian Macrae: 2 Kings 4

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Oh friends, it's interesting God to help us. We'd like to turn back to the portion of scripture that we read, 2 Kings chapter 4.

And we'd like to look at this part of this passage, particularly the end part of the chapter with a particular focus on verse 40.

2 Kings 4 verse 40, and they poured out some for the men to eat, but while they were eating off the stew, they cried out, O man of God, there is death in the pot, and they could not eat it.

O man of God, there is death in the pot. Have you ever seen someone, maybe you've done it yourself, making a pattern with dominoes?

I remember when I was younger, some of you will remember as well, a game called Domino Rally, where you'd set up lots of dominoes and align, maybe they would go across wee bridges and round bends, and when you had them all set up, you'd flick the first one and it would knock each successive one down, one by one.

[1 : 17] Maybe you've seen people making patterns with dominoes, they'll spend maybe hours setting up hundreds or thousands of dominoes, and then again they'll start by flicking the first one, and they'll fall down one by one by one, and it looks while it's happening like it's chaos, it looks like there's no sense to what is going on.

It looks like all the time they've taken to make sure these dominoes are sitting up vertical and just the right distance from each other is just wasted as all of them fall down, but then when the last one falls, you see that a pattern has been created and you understand what it was all about.

Well, you know, we can look back in history, and that's through whether it's the history of the world or whether it's our own personal history, and we can see a domino effect, and many domino effects of events right across history, and that's what we have here.

We have a domino effect in the experience of Elisha and the sons of the prophets from verse 38 down to the end of the chapter.

Now, actually, the first part of what we read tonight about the Shunamite woman and her son, there's actually a lot of parallels, and you may notice that as we go through this, and in the same way as there's a domino effect, and what we're going to look at tonight, there's a domino effect in the experience of this woman and her family as well, and there are similarities in the way things happen.

[3 : 00] There's a visit, there's an emphasis on entertaining, on food, there's death, there's life, there's despair, there's hope, there's joy.

All of these things are paralleled in both events in this chapter. Well we want to think tonight about four steps in this domino effect, this domino rally that takes place here, and maybe as we look at them, in and of themselves, it seems like there's no sense to what's going on, but in the end when the last step has been taken, when the last domino falls, there's something amazing and important for us all to see.

Well the first thing we see is that there's famine in the land. There's famine in the land.

And here we are in Israel and the country's in the grip of famine. Now from time to time in the Bible, we read about a famine affecting the land of Israel, and in a way that's no surprise is it?

Israel is a hot, dry country. You'd expect there to be famines there from time to time over the years. But a famine in Israel in the Old Testament is different to a famine in any other part of the world at any other time in history.

[4 : 25] How? What makes these famines in the Bible completely unique? Well friends, a famine in Israel during the Old Testament times is a sign of God being angry and punishing the people.

In Leviticus 26, God is speaking to the children of Israel through Moses, and he's talking about how they'll be blessed if they're obedient, and then he goes to the flip side and he tells them about the judgments that are going to come on them.

The judgments they'll suffer if they're disobedient. And this is one of the things God says will happen if Israel disobey him. He says your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.

He's also making it clear to Israel that he's going to use famine as a punishment, as a judgment on the land, if they are disobedient, if they turn their backs on him.

And then in Deuteronomy 28 we've got the same sort of thing where God's talking about blessings and curses, and he says this, if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God, or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.

[5 : 54] Cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.

The Lord will strike you with wasting disease and with fever, inflammation and fiery heat, and with drought the Lord will make the rain of your land powder.

From heaven dust shall come down on you until you are destroyed. This is an awful picture that God is painting of what the land's going to experience if they displease him, if they disobey him.

And think about these awful things God is saying is going to happen if they disobey him and wouldn't you think friends that any country, any people, any community who heard this, who knew that this is what was going to happen if they were disobedient, that they would do everything possible to avoid disobeying God, to avoid making him angry.

But what we see in Israel time after time after time is the country turning away from God, disobeying him, ignoring what he's told them to do.

[7 : 16] And what happens as a result? Well God sticks to his word and they're punished and they're punished with famine and all the horrors that result from that.

But you know before you criticise the people of Israel too much, before you start saying well how stupid, when they know that's coming how stupid, are you not exactly the same as them?

Because how often do you or how often do I make the same mistake, commit to the same sin time after time after time, even when you know what the destination is for this road because you've travelled it again and again and again.

And you know friends that's true if you're a Christian tonight, it's true if you're not a Christian tonight, it's true of us as individuals, it's true of you as a congregation, as a community, it's true of us as a country, it's true of us even as a church in the widest sense.

We look back over history and we see the same mistakes again and again and instead of running away from them, we make the same ones that our forefathers made.

[8 : 51] Isn't that ignorance, isn't that reckless? No different than what Israel was doing in the time of Elijah.

Well it's not clear what exactly Israel has done at this time to be under God's judgment, but we can be certain that they've done something, we can be certain that whatever it is deserves judgment because God is fair and really we can say that in some way they've turned their back on him because this judgment, this particular judgment is a consequence of disobedience.

And in a way it doesn't matter what they've done because the important thing for us is that we know they have done something, we know they've forsaken him and we know that as a result they're suffering.

Now we've got to be careful when we talk about people suffering because of what they've done because it's far too easy to point to somebody and say well God's punishing him because of this one thing that he did or even friends to look at your own life and to say oh why is this happening to me, well it must be because I've done this thing or that thing or the next thing.

But we should be very careful about doing that because you can't say that God is going to punish someone for every single sin they commit.

[10 : 19] That is not consistent with the message of the Bible. But if that's the case tonight, how are the people of Israel being punished for what they've done in Elisha's day for a particular sin that they've committed?

Well you know we've got to remember that there's a special relationship between God and Israel because he had chosen the children of Israel to be his own people.

And as happens when there's a special bond, when there's a close bond between people, each party has high expectations of the other.

For example, a doctor who's trying to find a cure for a patient has a right to expect the patient to be honest with her about how they're feeling.

And the patient has the right to expect the doctor to do her best for the patient. Or if you have a friend who shares something that is bothering them with you, then he or she, your friend, has got a right to expect you to keep it to yourself.

[11 : 32] And as a Christian, they have a right to expect you to pray for them and to support them and help them. And that's the sort of situation we have here between God and Israel.

There are high expectations on each side because of the special relationship they have. Well in the same way we can't say that every famine in the world is a judgment from God.

We can't say every soon as being judged, we can't say that every famine is a judgment either because of the special circumstances of the famines in Israel in the Old Testament.

Maybe the specific rules and the specific consequences that God set were only relevant for Israel in their detail.

Or rather the detail of them was only relevant for Israel. But the principles of what God has set are still relevant for us today.

[12 : 41] So how does this affect us? Well surely when we look around us, it doesn't take much to see that there's a famine in our own land today.

There's a spiritual famine. There's a moral famine in Scotland, in the UK and well further beyond.

Even in the church at large there's a famine. In far too many cases friends, people are going to church services and they're not hearing the true Gospel being preached.

They aren't being fed, they're not being nourished and the results are clear for anyone to see. Far too often the Gospel is being watered down, the Gospel is being quitted away so that what's left barely resembles what we have in the Bible.

And if that's the case in the church in many instances, is it any surprise that there's a spiritual famine in the country?

[13 : 56] And of course friends you and I have to take personal responsibility as well. Because I'm sure you, like me, do plenty to starve your own soul.

Famine in the land, famine in the church, famine in a multitude of souls. Famine in the land.

The second thing we have here is hunger in the house. Now where there's a famine in this hunger? That's not enough, it's obvious enough.

And where there's famine everyone is affected. So here we are in this chapter, we're in Gilgall, we're in the house where the sons of the prophets live. There's more than one Gilgall mentioned in the Bible, this one apparently is close to Bethel and the prophets are gathered there.

Now most people seem to think that this is a sort of training college for prophets and here we have Elisha visiting the prophets in Gilgall.

[15 : 00] So what of these prophets who are gathered here together in Gilgall done wrong that they are suffering this famine? Well that's what so many Christians ask when they have difficulties or challenges in their lives isn't it?

What have I done wrong? Why is God unhappy with me? Well sometimes that's the right question to ask and sometimes it's not.

Because here there's nothing to suggest that the prophets have done anything specific themselves to deserve God's judgment. Remember famine, a judgment for the nation turning its back on God.

And I don't think that these prophets have turned their back on God at all so they aren't being judged personally although they're being judged as part of the nation of Israel.

It's not always about what you or I have done wrong as individuals. Often problems can arise, they can come into a country or a community or even into a congregation because of a few people or even because of one person and it affects everyone.

[16 : 14] And usually when this happens in the Bible it's because the leaders of the country and kings especially have done something wrong. And the reason for this is because they represent the whole nation before God.

They set the standard, they set the tone for how the nation is behaving. Imagine if Britain was experiencing a specific judgment from God, of course we can say in many ways that we are under God's judgment as a country.

But if there was a very obvious specific judgment on Britain from God because of a law that had been passed by Parliament.

The whole of the country, all 60 odd million people would be under God's judgment, would be affected by the judgment despite the fact that the final decision was made by just a few hundred people.

Because our politicians are our representatives elected by us to represent us. And the country they represent the whole country.

[17 : 29] The reason for the judgment is the responsibility for a few but we are all affected. Now the same is true the other way, that when Israel's kings follow God and honour God, the whole nation generally follows God and honours God and experiences God's blessing.

It's so important friends to be remembering those who lead us as a nation, whether that's the royal family and their role or politicians at whatever level it might be.

Because we have no idea when you or I, when our communities will suffer as a result of what's going on in our parliaments or in our council, we should remember them, we should pray for them and we should encourage Christians to be involved at these levels as well.

It affects us all, can't pass the buck because we're not the ones making the decisions. And these are the principles that God set down in the Old Testament when he was dealing with Israel, so much depended on how they were being led and how they were being ruled by the king.

Well notice especially here that God's own people are suffering. Christ says time and time again doesn't he that the Christians life won't be an easy one and that there's no guarantee that the Christian won't suffer because of the sins of others.

[19 : 18] There's a situation here in Gilgall and because the sons of the prophets are affected by the famine, because they're being affected by God's judgment on the country, they go out to look for food.

And then as a result of that, thirdly, there's death in the pot. Eulusha and his servant, it might be Gehazi, it might be somebody else, they're here in the prophets house in Gilgall and the sons of the prophets, these young men who are training to be prophets are starving.

Now notice a few things as we go through this. Notice that it's Eulusha who says to them, set on the large pot in verse 38. Well he's only a guest, he's only a visitor in the house but the young prophets obviously respect him when he tells them what to do.

And what's happening here I think fits in with this idea that this is a training college that we have here in Gilgall because Eulusha is the main prophet in the land and if this is a college it's very likely that he would have visited them to teach them from time to time and they would have had respect for him as the main prophet in the country.

But whatever the situation, Eulusha takes charge. And then notice the detail of what he says, set on the large pot.

[20 : 47] Your friends nothing in the Bible is there by accident so why does Eulusha tell them to put the large pot on? Doesn't he know that there's no food in the house?

Doesn't he know that there's no way in the world they're going to fill that pot? The sons of the prophets, they're hearing him and they're probably shocked by this. Maybe they think oh fantastic he's going to perform a miracle and fill the pot with food.

Or maybe even they're thinking oh the old man's losing it. There's not enough food in here to fill a plate. Never mind that large pot that he wants us to put on the fire.

But whatever they think about it Eulusha asks for the large pot to be put on and that's what happens. It surely friends this is reminding us of the immensity of God's mercy.

That even in the midst of a famine he is willing, he is able to fill this large pot with food and enough food to feed them all.

[21 : 48] It's not just that he's willing to provide it, he's able to provide it as well. And isn't there a massive difference between God and us?

There are plenty things that we would be willing to do. We would be willing to help perhaps these refugees we see fleeing places like Syria. We'd be willing to help the persecuted Christians throughout the world.

We would be willing to help the homeless we see on the streets of our cities. We are willing but we are powerless to do anything about it. We aren't able but friends God is willing and God is able.

Do you believe that for yourself tonight? Do you believe that he is willing and he's able to help you whatever your situation might be?

You might feel that you're in the middle of a spiritual famine. But do you believe that God can feed you even in that famine? You might feel like you're in a place where God can't hear you, where God can't come near you, when God won't come near you.

[22 : 56] He won't help you, he has no interest in you. But friend you need to be willing, you need to believe that he is willing and he is able to help you whatever your situation is.

The God of the Bible, the God that we're talking about, the God who you as Christians hear worship.

He's a God who's able to make rags, make riches from rags. He's a God who can create something from nothing. He's a God who can give life to the dead.

We're not talking about the idols done that we sang about at the start, but the amazing powerful God who can help in any situation to anybody who asks for it.

Well the pot goes on the fire and one person goes out to gather herbs for their dinner. Why do only one person go out? It looks like it was a young man, either one of the sons of the prophets or with a title like that you would think he was fairly young or a Yelusha servant.

[24 : 23] The Hebrew word used here it means boy or young man, maybe a teenager and it's the same word that's used to describe the youths who are mocking Yelusha at the end of chapter 2 of 2 Kings.

The ESV translates it young boys and children in the AV. So we can't be sure about this person's age but he's certainly young, maybe late teens, early twenties, something like that.

So we've got one young man going out to gather food for everyone in the house in the middle of this famine and as we read the herbs he gathers are cooked in the pot, the prophets begin to eat the stew and this awful desperate shout goes up, oh man of God there's death in the pot.

You know often when we read accounts of what happens in the Bible we read them as if they're stories.

We sometimes forget that these are real events that happen to real people and imagine just now this room full of men desperate for food they've seen God's chosen, God's anointed prophet coming in, they're following his instructions, it looks like they've miraculously been provided with food, it's been cooked, they're eating and then all of a sudden every single one of them doesn't feel well and it's not just not feeling well, they must feel pain, they must feel terror because they're shouting out this isn't food, we're dying here, there's panic, there's horror, there's about to be a mass death, we need to make sure we're not sanitising these stories, there's not just some fairy story to be told, these are people in a desperate, desperate situation, they're in agony, they're scared, what's going to happen?

[26 : 45] Why is there death in the pot? How are they all at risk just for tasting the stew that's been cooked? Well what we're doing to the pot, the young man collected some sort of herbs or vegetables that's what they used to make this stew and I know it can be dangerous to spiritualise some things but I think if this is going to be relevant to us we have to spiritualise a little and I think that the message for the church down through the ages and tonight for us is this, don't swallow just anything, be careful what you take in, not in a literal way of course but in terms of spiritual food.

One of the young trainee prophet has gone out to gather food, he's hungry himself, he knows that everyone he's left behind in the house is hungry as well, he knows it's not going to be easy to find food for them all and he comes across this plant and he sees this berry or whatever it is growing on it and it looks ripe, it looks tasty, it looks full of flavour and he gathers them and he takes them in but there's three things wrong with what's going on here.

The first problem is that it's a young man who goes out looking for food in the middle of this troubled time of famine. How is that a problem? Well it's a problem because he doesn't have enough experience and sometimes friends a lack of experience can be a dangerous thing.

Now be clear here, I'm not suggesting for a second that a young Christian can't be useful to God and to the church, of course he or she can be and many young Christians are put to great use by God in his service.

But I think the principle we have here is this, that God's people and even those of you who aren't yet saved who come to church regularly shouldn't rely on a spiritual youngster to feed them in general terms in an ongoing way.

[28 : 46] And Paul deals with both sides of this, he tells Timothy, let no one despise you for your youth and surely there he's telling him that nobody should look down on him because of his age or because of his youth as a Christian.

But in the same letter he's giving Timothy advice about choosing men to lead the church, especially in a spiritual sense and one of the qualities that a leader in the church should have according to Paul is that he must not be a recent convert.

There's a real balancing act going on here, we have to be careful how we approach it. Well, the Bible tells us that it's a young man who's put all of the sons of the prophets in a danger because he doesn't know what is feeding them.

Now maybe the same thing would have happened if an older man had gone out. But maybe that older man would have had more knowledge and more experience and been more careful.

And although we have a young man here, surely as a principal we need to see him as representing a young Christian, someone who is to use Paul's phrase a recent convert.

[29 : 51] And what we need to see here friends is the importance between, the important difference between knowledge and ignorance.

Let's be careful as well. Those of you and those of us who have been Christians may be a long time, not to fall into the trap of thinking that this couldn't possibly happen to me because I've been a Christian for many years.

Because friends even when you have knowledge and experience and understanding, ignorance and sins can still get in and wreak havoc in your life and in the life of your congregation and community.

Then the second problem is that he goes out alone. Now there are times of course in the Christian life when you might need to find your own spiritual food as it were, when you have to be alone but that's not how the Christians should be ordinarily.

Each and every Christian is as the Bible tells us a member of the body of Christ, we should be living and worshiping and serving together, feeding on Christ together.

[30 : 58] But if two or three are going out looking for food this day instead of this one man, maybe this near disaster might have been averted. Because we see that when he finds his plant he doesn't recognise the fruit growing on it but maybe others would have.

Or maybe others would have said well it's not sensible to pick something we're not familiar with. And it's not healthy friends for any Christian to be on his own or her own for an extended period of time and certainly not all of the time.

Remember the advice in the letter to the Hebrews, let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another.

And doesn't Christ himself promise to be where two or three are gathered together in his name. Being with other Christians is important and it is safer.

And the third problem we have here is that the young man goes out when he's hungry. And he probably isn't just hungry in the way that you and I would be at the end of the day but he's probably starving, he's desperate for food.

[32 : 13] Now why is this important? Well it's important because when someone is hungry they'll eat just about anything. Easterbeg speaks about Christians who accept and believe wrong teaching, especially when they aren't being fed, when they aren't experiencing good teaching.

And he compares it to going to doing your shopping in the supermarket when you're hungry. Because as he puts it when you're hungry and you're in the supermarket who knows what you might put in the trolley.

And that's true because when you go to do your shopping and if you're there and you're hungry your mind plays tricks on you and your eyes is drawn to something that maybe you don't actually like or maybe you don't need, something you've never tried, something that's not good for you.

You never know where you might go and what you might take on. And the same is true spiritually. If your soul is starving there's every chance that you'll swallow anything that you're offered.

Any doctrine, any heresy. And that's especially true friend when you're presented with something that's appealing to your eye, that's appealing to your ear, that makes your conscience, that appeases your conscience or when it's something that makes you feel better about yourself.

[33 : 32] It's dangerous to go looking for something to eat when you're hungry because who knows what you might swallow. So if you shouldn't go looking for food when you're hungry, when should you?

Well you do it when you're satisfied. How does that make sense? Well back to Begg's example. If you go to do your shopping when you're satisfied there's less chance of something unhealthy and harmful grabbing your attention.

And if you and I feed on Christ in the Gospel as we ought then your tastes will be so used to the sweet and nourishing and fulfilling experience of feasting on Him that you'll have no desire whatsoever to take any rubbish on board.

How are you going to be satisfied by the food God provides to such an extent that you won't want to taste anything else? Well listen to what Isaiah says. On this mount and the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

Well who would want to eat anything else after tasting that? What you have here is the difference between spiritual fine dining and spiritual junk food.

[34 : 51] And you know I don't think this is just a warning about what we take in either because surely it's also a warning about things we might add to our faith.

Remember it was something about the herbes, something about this fruit that attracted the young man. They seemed good, they looked tasty, maybe they looked familiar.

And because of that he thinks they'll be fine to eat. But there's a danger that we sometimes put things that are of no use, maybe even things that are harmful into our Christianity.

After practices or traditions, maybe our expectations, like thinking that we ought to get a special blessing at a time of communion for example, there's something wrong if we don't.

Maybe these things are doing more harm than good. And you need to use the Bible as a recipe book as it were, to think about the ingredients you're putting into your life, into your Christian life maybe, and to see if they are in God's recipe for his people, and if not friends get rid of them.

[35 : 57] Because if your faith is mixed with something unhelpful, some harmful belief, there could be death in your experience. Not as a Christian thankfully spiritual death, but a lack of being useful, a lack of being lively, and a deadness in your own life of faith.

But there's famine in the land, hunger in the house, death in the pot, and then finally, healing in the flour. Despite everything that happens, despite the chaos and panic and terror that's going on around him, Elisha keeps calm and he takes charge once again.

And he asks someone to bring him flour to put into the stew in the pot. The flour goes into the pot, the sons of the prophets eat more of the stew, and the poison or whatever is in the food is taken out.

Instead of death being in the pot, there's life in the pot. Why does Elisha put flour into the mixture in the pot? Well the flour must have acted as some kind of medicine, acting against, working against whatever was making the men whole.

I don't know if itself that's interesting, but what's particularly interesting for us tonight is in what the flour represents. Because this refers back to the meal offering.

[37 : 20] The Hebrew word for meal offering is min shan. Apparently it means an offering that's given to someone who's more noble or more honourable than yourself, like to a king or a queen.

It's an offering that shows thankfulness and humility from a lower person to a higher. And it's also an offering that was made in different ways depending on the offeror's circumstances.

So somebody could use raw flour or they could use unleavened cakes made with the flour or they could use roasted flour. It was the poorest people in Israel who used the raw flour in this offering, and that's what Elisha uses here.

And isn't that appropriate? Because these people in this house in Gilgal, they are poor because there's famine in the land, they don't have food, and they're poor in terms of their desperate situation.

They don't have time to roast flour or to bake something with it. Well every offering as you know, every sacrifice represents Christ.

[38 : 22] And this one is no different. C.W. Slemming says this about the meal offering. In the meal offering Christ is seen as the corn of wheat which fell into the ground and died that he might bring forth much fruit.

He was also the corn of wheat which went through the crushing mill of Gethsemane and the fiershoven of Calvary to become the bread of life. And that's the answer friend to all of your questions, whatever they may be as a Christian or as a non-Christian.

How can you be healthy as a Christian you feed on the bread of life? How can you avoid making spiritual errors and swallowing the wrong thing?

You feed on Christ as he's found in his word. How can you put right what is wrong? You go back to his word. There's death in the pot for the sons of the prophets but they find healing in the flour that represents Christ and his word.

But notice just two more things quickly. First of all, it's not enough for them to have the flour in the house. They have to use it. And that's a challenge for you.

[39 : 35] It's all very well to have a Bible or many Bibles in your house. But what uses that if they're just sitting on a shelf or lying beside your bed and never opened?

You have to put it to use. But not only do they have to use the flour, they have to eat it. You see if Elisha had just put the flour in the pot and they hadn't eaten any more of this stew, they would still have died.

And imagine how they felt when they were told, come and eat more of this stuff that's killing you. They must have been horrified.

They must have been scared but they were desperate. And they also had faith in some way. They had faith in some measure to trust Elisha as God's messenger and they do us, he says.

There might be death in the pot in terms of death and difficulty and hardship in your experience as a Christian from time to time.

[40 : 41] When you might feel cut off from God, when you might feel that you're feeding on junk instead of feeding on Christ, when what you're thinking or believing is harming your Christian life, is harming your effectiveness, is robbing you of any peace.

But friend if you're ever in that situation, the answer to all your problems, the only possible answer to all your problems is right here in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But if you're not a Christian tonight, there's death in the pot, not just sometimes but all the time, and not just for life but also for eternity.

Because unless you take this flower, unless you take this precious bread of life for yourself, there's nothing but death ahead in a spiritual sense.

There's life and salvation and healing in Christ. On the scene of these sons of the prophets had said, no, I'm not eating any more of that stuff.

[41 : 58] You'd have a room full of death, a room full of young men cut down on their prime because they didn't listen to God's servant who pointed them towards what was representing God's Son, and don't be like that.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, Christ says, if anyone eats of this bread he will live forever.

What a message, and what a saviour and what an offer and what an opportunity for you tonight to come and accept him and feed on him this bread of life that will last for eternity.

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