

## Bible Study for Epiphany B 5: 2Ki.4:11-35 – Why the growth of faith is never painless



*Elisha and the Shunammite*  
William Brassey Hole (Scottish, 1846-1917)

### Questions for Discussion

1. Read this passage from 2 Kings Chapter 4. Compare it to Elijah's miracle in 1 Ki.17:7-24.
2. Are there parallels between Elijah's miracle at Zarephath, and Elisha's miracle at Shunem?
3. What's different about these two accounts?
4. What happened just before both miracles occurred? (Read 1Ki.17:2-16; 2Ki.4:1-7).
5. Why was the threat that these two women faced so very severe? Now read Lev.20:19-21, and Deut.25:5. Any thoughts?
6. Why do you think these two miracles are so very central to the history of Christian Redemption?

2Ki.4:11 One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. <sup>12</sup>He said to his servant Gehazi, 'Call the Shunammite woman.' When he had called her, she stood before him. <sup>13</sup>He said to him, 'Say to her, Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?' She answered, 'I live among my own people.' <sup>14</sup>He said, 'What then may be done for her?' Gehazi answered, 'Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.' <sup>15</sup>He said, 'Call her.' When he had called her, she stood at the door. <sup>16</sup>He said, 'At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.' She replied, 'No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.' <sup>17</sup> The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.

<sup>18</sup> When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. <sup>19</sup>He complained to his father, 'Oh, my head, my head!' The father said to his servant, 'Carry him to his mother.' <sup>20</sup>He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. <sup>21</sup>She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. <sup>22</sup>Then she called to her husband, and said, 'Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.' <sup>23</sup>He said, 'Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath.' She said, 'It will be all right.'

<sup>24</sup>Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, 'Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.'<sup>25</sup> So she set out, and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel. When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, 'Look, there is the Shunammite woman;<sup>26</sup> run at once to meet her, and say to her, Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?' She answered, 'It is all right.'<sup>27</sup> When she came to the man of God at the mountain, she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away. But the man of God said, 'Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me.'<sup>28</sup> Then she said, 'Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not mislead me?'<sup>29</sup> He said to Gehazi, 'Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer; and lay my staff on the face of the child.'<sup>30</sup> Then the mother of the child said, 'As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you.' So he rose up and followed her.<sup>31</sup> Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, 'The child has not awakened.'

<sup>32</sup> When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed.<sup>33</sup> So he went in and closed the door on the two of them, and prayed to the LORD.<sup>34</sup> Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm.<sup>35</sup> He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.<sup>36</sup> Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, 'Call the Shunammite woman.' So he called her. When she came to him, he said, 'Take your son.'<sup>37</sup> She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

**Reflections:** The interesting thing about the account of Elijah raising the widow of Zerephath's son in Ki.17:7-24, and his successor Elisha's raising of the Shunammite's son in 2Ki.4:11-35 is how very similar these two miracles are. Bible scholars will tell you that similarities such as these never happen in Scripture by accident. Repetition is one of the most common literary devices used in the Bible to bring special attention to a particular passage.

One of the important points this repetition brings to the surface is that these miracles were performed for people who were foreigners. In Elijah's case, God had sent His prophet to a woman who lived in a town in the region of Sidon, a country ruled by Ethbal who was the wicked queen Jezebel's father (see NIV Study Bible footnote, p. 510, 17.9). The residents of this region were of Phoenician descent, and were Baal worshipers. This woman therefore lived in a country of people who were considered enemies and outcasts by the Jewish society of that day.

In Elisha's case, God has brought about a meeting between the prophet and a woman of the Shunnamites. She would have been a descendant of the original tribe of Issachar, though it is very probable that intermarriage had taken place between those Jews and the pagan Canaanites who

lived in that area to the southwest of the Sea of Kinnereth – also known to us as the Sea of Galilee (see <http://www.thisisyourbible.com/media.asp?id=115>). At any rate, the woman’s remark, “I live among my own people” (see 2Ki.4:16) would once again indicate that she was a person viewed as a foreigner by the orthodox Jewish society of her day.

I think the message here is one where God is clearly speaking to his concern not just for the descendents of Israel. The Lord God also watches over those who may be considered foreigners and outcasts. We can find confirmation of this love God extends to those living “on the other side of the tracks” with Christ’s comments in the synagogue of his own home town (see Lk.4:24-30).



Church Sanctuary in Nazareth, thought to be the site of the synagogue in Luk 4:24-30

The similarities between Elijah’s work and the work of Elisha continues in the accounts we read about in 1Ki.17:2-16, and 2Ki.4:1-7. You will have noticed that both of these miracles regarding foodstuffs (oil and flour) took place in the homes of widows. Widows, particularly those widows who were childless were among the most vulnerable and wretched of Jewish society. Only orphans were more vulnerable than childless widows.

That’s why God made special provision for the protection of those women who were left childless and widowed in this life. God clearly stipulated that any man of Israel was not to marry his brother’s wife (see Lev.20:19-21). This was the reason why John the Baptist incited the people against Herod Antipas, because Herod had chosen to marry Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife. John’s outspoken criticism of Herod Antipas (who was Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea)

eventually lead to John’s execution, after which Herod famously presented the Baptizer’s head on a silver platter to Salome, his step-daughter (see Mk.6:14-26). According to Josephus, Salome herself would continue this sin of incestuous intermarriage, since she would eventually wed her uncle, Philip II who was Tetrarch of the northern territories of Iturea and Trachonitis (see NIV Study Bible footnote, p. 1492, 14.3). This would seem to give additional insight to how certain sin is multigenerational, as described in Ex. 20:5, 34:6-7; Deut.5:9.

Yet, God made special concessions for those widows who were left childless. Not only could the childless widow remarry into the family of her late husband, but additionally that family’s males had a special duty to see that such a woman was integrated into the family unit (see Deut.25:5).

For me, the significance of these last two accounts of the miraculous supply of foodstuffs for these two widows furnished by God through his prophets Elijah and Elisha, is twofold. First, God has a special place in His heart for the most vulnerable of our world. Secondly, these two miracles would seem to indicate how we ought to be praying to God not only for relief from the catastrophes of this life, such as a deadly disease, the unexpected loss of a job, or the breakup of a marriage. We should also bring to God our concerns about the daily needs of this life such as food and shelter. And of course, we should also be continually thanking Him for the abundant and ceaseless supply of the daily blessings of His grace, things which we are so very prone to take for granted if we don’t discipline ourselves to a regular and sincere prayer life.

James Barnhill, 02-09-12