

“The Shunammite Woman – Friends in High Places”

2 Kings 4:8-37; 2 Kings 8:1-6

To gain a true understanding of the Shunammite woman, we must first learn a little about the prophet Elisha. Without him, we would not have her story.

Elisha had been chosen by God to succeed Elijah, considered to be the greatest prophet in the Old Testament. In Chapter 19 of 1 Kings is the account of how Elijah had thrown his mantle on Elisha, symbolizing the passing of the baton, so to speak. Elisha would now be his disciple, and from Elijah he would learn about the unique role of being a prophet. God would not take Elijah before leaving someone to replace him. In spite of how the people had turned away from Him, God still loved them. He knew they were headed for disaster with their idolatrous ways and He wanted someone to continue speaking to them for Him. This was during a very turbulent time in Israel. The kingdom had become divided, with Israel in the northern part and Judah, the southern. The people had rebelled against God and had become involved in idol worship. The prophet’s job was to point out to them the evil of their ways and try to get them to turn back to God. Prophets gained a reputation for not mincing words, and their messages from the Lord made many enemies for them. In the process of delivering unpopular prophecies, one of the things that gave them credibility and favor with the people were the miracles that God allowed them to perform. One of those miracles involved the prophet Elisha and the subject of today’s lesson: the Shunammite woman.

The town of Shunem was located between Mount Carmel and Samaria, and it was a route frequented by Elisha. On our map, we see Mount Carmel on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and the town of Shunem in the middle of the map. The land that was considered Samaria began in the north, around the town of Jezreel, and extended southward. As we can see, Elisha covered a lot of territory – most likely, on foot! The job of a prophet was hardly an enviable one. Their mode of transportation was usually walking everywhere God sent them; they didn’t always have the luxury of a comfortable place to rest; and they were not always well received. It was probably for these reasons that the Shunammite woman wanted to accommodate Elisha.



2 Kings 4:8-10. *“Now it happened one day that Elisha went to Shunem, where there was a notable woman, and she persuaded him to eat some food. So it was, as often as he passed by, he would turn in there to eat some food. And she said to her husband, ‘Look now, I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please let us make a small upper room on the*

wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.’”

Prophets were not known for their social graces; many times they were loners. This was not surprising, since they often had to be the bearers of bad news, something that did not win them any popularity contests. Many times, threats were made against them and they feared for their lives. It says in our scripture that Elisha was “*persuaded*” to eat some food, which tells us that he probably initially refused the offer. Once the Shunamite woman was able to persuade him to accept her goodwill gesture, he, no doubt, let his defenses down and became accustomed to accepting her hospitality.

I love that this woman, who obviously had a kind heart, sees the opportunity to do something good for a “*holy man of God.*” She recognized and respected his calling and wanted to do something special for him; something that might make the load he carried just a little lighter. Since he passed them on a regular basis, why not set up a permanent place where he could rest and be refreshed? By ministering to him in this way, since she knew he was a holy man, it would be as a sacrificial service to God at the same time. Philippians 2:3 (which Pastor Sean talked about in his sermon this weekend) says, “*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*”

We also see that not only is she kind and eager to serve, but she shows respect for her husband by asking him if they can set up these accommodations for Elisha. She is a woman of wisdom and order, honoring her husband as the head of their home. Even though the idea was hers, she did not act until first discussing it with her husband.

2 Kings 4:11-17. “And it happened one day that he came there, and he turned in to the upper room and lay down there. Then he said to Gehazi, his servant, ‘Call this Shunammite woman.’ When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, ‘Say now to her, ‘Look, you have been concerned for us with all this care. What can I do for you? Do you want me to speak on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?’” She answered, ‘I dwell among my own people.’ So he said, ‘What then is to be done for her?’ And Gehazi answered, ‘Actually, she has no son, and her husband is old.’ So he said, ‘Call her.’ When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. Then he said, ‘About this time next year you shall embrace a son.’ And she said, ‘No, my lord. Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant.’ But the woman conceived, and bore a son when the appointed time had come, of which Elisha had told her.”

Wow! Who would have thought that the kind act of a charitable woman would result in having her fondest wish come true? Could it be? Could she actually be embracing her own child in a year, as the man of God had said? After all, she had become accustomed to the fact that she was barren and had learned to be content with God’s will. “*I dwell among my own people,*” she had said. If this scenario sounds familiar, it’s because the same thing happened to Abraham and Sarah, when the Angel of the Lord tells them that Sarah would conceive a son, even at their advanced ages. God does not make empty promises. 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, “*For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.*” In other words, if God said it, it’s done!

2 Kings 4:18-25. “And the child grew. Now it happened one day that he went out to his father, to the reapers. And he said to his father, ‘My head, my head!’ So he said to a servant, ‘Carry him to his mother.’ When he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died. And she went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, shut the door upon him and went out. Then she called to her husband, and said, ‘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.’ So he said, ‘Why are you going to him today? It is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath.’ And she said, ‘It is well.’ Then she saddled a donkey, and said to her servant, ‘Drive, and go forward; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you.’ And so she departed, and went to the man of God at Mount Carmel.”

So, at this point in the story, we're thinking, "What? No, the child can't die; the Lord gave him to the Shunammite woman, and now he's being taken away? Why is this happening? But, notice that the woman does not panic. She also does not stop to mourn for the child. She knows that this child was a child of promise, and her faith kicks in! She lays him down on the bed of the prophet; the very one who brought her God's promise. It may be that she knew about the prophet Elijah having brought back to life the son of the widow at Zarephath, a story found in 1 Kings 17:8-24. When her husband asks why she's hurrying to the man of God, she simply tells him, "It is well." This is how much faith she had; she knew that Elisha carried the anointing of God and that all really would be well with her son! Even so, Mount Carmel was about 20 miles from Shunem, and she tells the servant who's driving her to get there as fast as possible!

2 Kings 4:25-31. "So it was, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to his servant Gehazi, 'Look, the Shunammite woman! Please run now to meet her, and say to her, 'Is it well with you? Is it well with your husband? Is it well with the child?' And she answered, 'It is well.' Now when she came to the man of God at the hill, she caught him by the feet, but Gehazi came near to push her away. But the man of God said, 'Let her alone; for her soul is in deep distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me.' So she said, 'Did I ask a son of my lord? Did I not say, 'Do not deceive me?'' Then he said to Gehazi, 'Get yourself ready, and take my staff in your hand, and be on your way. If you meet anyone, do not greet him; and if anyone greets you, do not answer him; but lay my staff on the face of the child.' And the mother of the child said, 'As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you.' So he arose and followed her. Now Gehazi went on ahead of them, and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was neither voice nor hearing. Therefore, he went back to meet him, and told him, saying, 'The child has not awakened.'"

Such favor had the Shunammite woman gained with Elisha, that when he sees her coming to him in haste, he immediately sends his servant to inquire of her if she is alright, if her husband is alright, and if her son is alright. Every single good deed this woman had performed for Elisha and his servant is now at the forefront as Elisha drops everything he is doing to come to her aid. The woman insists on affirming, even to the servant, that all is well. And yet, when she reaches Elisha, all bets are off, and she throws herself at his feet (actually hanging on to his feet). The servant tries to protect Elisha, can see that she's in real trouble and tells the servant to leave her alone. Then the woman cries out to him ... 'Weren't you the one who told me God would send me this child, even though I didn't ask? You knew I was barren and my husband was now old. I have this child because of you! You're a holy man, and you're the only one who can fix this, Elisha!' It is an act of total desperation on her part! At that moment, what the Lord had kept hidden from Elisha was made known to him – something was wrong with the child! Elisha springs into action and tells his servant to hurry on ahead of them and lay his staff on the child's face.

2 Kings 4:32-37. "When Elisha came into the house, there was the child, lying dead on his bed. He went in therefore, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. And he went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he stretched himself out on the child, and the flesh of the child became warm. He returned and walked back and forth in the house, and again went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. And he called Gehazi and said, 'Call this Shunammite woman.' So he called her. And when she came into him, he said, 'Pick up your son.' So she went in, fell at his feet, and bowed to the ground; then she picked up her son and went out."

In our past study on the life of Dorcas in Lesson 16, we're reminded of how Paul also raised her from the dead in the 9th Chapter of Acts. There's a similarity in today's story because just as Paul had everyone leave the room before raising Dorcas (Acts 9:40), here Elisha closes the door behind him, so that there is no one else in the room with him and the child. This is curious: is it because they didn't want interference from anyone? Were they afraid someone might ruin the spirit with unbelief? Or perhaps it was because sometimes there are unorthodox methods used in the healing of God's people. In the story of Elijah and the raising of the widow at Zarephath's son from the dead, Elijah used a similar method in that he also stretched himself out on the child (1 Kings 17:21). In any event, what Elisha did worked, and God brought the boy back to life. So thankful was the Shunammite

woman, that all she could do was fall at Elisha's feet and bow in humble respect. Psalm 30 says it best: *"You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, to the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever."* Psalm 30:11-12 Her son was alive again!

This is not the last we hear of the Shunammite woman. In Chapter 8 of 2 Kings, we read how, once again, she is favored by Elisha when he warns her of the seven-year famine that God is about to inflict on the land as punishment for the sins of the people. Because of Elisha's warning, she takes her family and goes to the land of the Philistines to live. After the seven years, she returns and tries to reclaim her land, which was still legally hers. Elisha's servant Gehazi, who had also benefited from the kindness this woman had extended to Elisha, is instrumental in going to the king to plead her case. The king had not been a fan of Elisha, but he knew of the miracles that he had performed. He takes the opportunity to ask Gehazi (maybe with some skepticism) about some of those miracles. Gehazi probably thinks to himself, "I'm glad you asked," and tells him here is a woman whose son Elisha raised from the dead, and here is her son! As a result, the king restores her land, instructing his officer to do the following: *"Restore all that was hers, and all the proceeds of the field from the day that she left the land until now."* (2 Kings 8:6) So not only was her house and land restored to her, but she was to be paid all proceeds from the land as though she had been there the whole time! Talk about the goodness of God!

Lessons to be learned from the Shunammite woman:

- Because she was free of bitterness, she was able to nurture a kind and loving heart
- Her consideration for others motivated her generosity
- She was not just a "hearer" of the word, but a "doer." Another passage quoted this weekend was from James 1:22: *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves."* V. 25: *"He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."* And she was!
- She recognized and respected the anointing of God on Elisha
- She had an unwavering faith in the power of God
- Perhaps the best lesson to be learned from the Shunammite woman is her gift of hospitality. The word "hospitality" comes from the Latin word "hospes", meaning visitor, or stranger. And, of course, Elisha certainly fell into this category. God wants us to show hospitality to the body of Christ. Just as God welcomed each one of us at birth into this world that He created because He loved us, when we welcome others, we are expressing and extending that love. That's why the job of our Greeters, for example, is so important. When visitors walk through the doors of our church, they are looking for the warmth of a welcome, the need to be accepted and to feel a sense of belonging. Our Greeters are an extension of Christ, and they possess this gift of hospitality, but it is also something that God calls each one of us to develop. Romans 15:7 tells us, *"Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us to the glory of God."* Also, in Romans 12:9-13, where Paul is talking about what we should be doing to show love to one another, he says, *"distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality."* And here's one more from 1 Peter 4:9: *"Be hospitable to one another without grumbling."* The Shunammite woman certainly embodied each one of these scriptures, and we can all learn from her faith, generosity and servant's heart.

*"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing
some have unwittingly entertained angels."
Hebrews 13:2*

