

What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord? Lessons from Elisha and the Widow's Oil

In 2 Kings 4:1-7, a grieving widow cries out to the prophet Elisha. Her husband is dead, her debts are overwhelming, and a creditor is threatening to take her sons as slaves. What unfolds is a story not just about a miraculous provision of oil, but about faith, the fear of the Lord, and what happens when we bring our emptiness to God.

Bad Things Happen to People Who Love God

One of the first and most important truths in this passage is one that many believers struggle to accept. Loving God and serving Him faithfully does not guarantee a life free from hardship, loss, or even death.

The husband in this story was one of the sons of the prophets. He was part of a school of men dedicated to studying God's Word, growing in their gifts, and serving the Lord. Most importantly, he feared the Lord. His wife even says to Elisha, "You know that your servant feared the Lord" (2 Kings 4:1, ESV).

And yet, he died. He left behind a grieving wife and two sons facing financial ruin.

This is a reality that faith does not erase. Trials, difficulties, and loss are part of life, even for those who walk closely with God.

What Does It Mean to Fear the Lord?

The phrase "fear the Lord" appears throughout Scripture, and it is worth pausing to understand what it actually means.

It Means Regarding God as Holy

To fear the Lord is to carry a deep sense of reverence, awe, and respect for who God is. It is an understanding that He is holy, that standing in His presence is standing on holy ground. It shapes how you see yourself in relation to Him.

It Means Living in Obedience

The fear of the Lord also produces obedience. Abraham demonstrated this in Genesis 22 when he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. After stopping him, the angel of the Lord said, "For now I know that you fear God" (Genesis 22:12, ESV). His willingness to obey, even at great personal cost, was the evidence of his fear of God.

The husband in 2 Kings 4 lived under the reign of King Ahab and Jezebel, during a time when the entire nation of Israel had turned to false gods. But not this man. He chose obedience when it was costly and countercultural.

The Fear of God Drives Out the Fear of Man

When your life is directed by the fear of God, you stop being controlled by what others think. This man did not care what Jezebel said or what the culture around him believed. He cared most about honoring the Lord. And that is the kind of life God honors.

What Can We Learn from the Widow's Response to Grief?

The widow in this story is facing devastating loss on multiple fronts. She is grieving, in debt, and afraid. But she does something powerful in the middle of her pain. She does not allow her trials to turn her away from God. She allows them to turn her toward God.

She runs to Elisha, the man of God, and cries out. She still believes that God can do something about her situation, even when she does not understand why He allowed it.

God's heart for the widow is not a minor theme in Scripture. In Exodus 22:22-23, God says, "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry" (ESV). This woman knew that God saw her. And she held onto her faith even in her darkest moment.

God's Compassion for the Vulnerable

Elisha's response to this widow is a picture of God's own heart. He does not dismiss her. He looks at her and asks, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" (2 Kings 4:2, ESV). That question is an expression of compassion, of genuine care for someone in need.

It is also worth noting that Elisha is referred to as a man of God in this passage, not while prophesying to kings, but while ministering to a desperate widow. God's work is not measured by the size of the stage. Serving the brokenhearted, the marginalized, and the desperate is an expression of God's heart, and it matters deeply to Him.

How to Trust God with What You Have

When Elisha asks the widow what she has, she answers honestly. She has nothing except a small jar of oil, likely no more than six ounces. And Elisha's response is essentially: that is enough. God can work with that.

This is the same principle at work in the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus asked His disciples what they had, and they brought Him a boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish. He fed thousands with it and had leftovers to spare.

Faith does not focus on what we lack. It focuses on what we have and places it in God's hands.

Why You Should Bring God Your Empty Jars

Elisha tells the widow to go and borrow empty vessels from all her neighbors, and not just a few. The number of jars she collected was a direct reflection of her faith. The more she believed, the more she gathered. And the oil kept flowing until every last vessel was full.

"When the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' And he said to her, 'There is not another.' Then the oil stopped flowing." (2 Kings 4:6, ESV)

Do not limit what God can do in your life. Bring Him your empty places, your empty jars, and trust Him to fill them.

The Power of a Closed Door

Elisha also tells her to go inside and shut the door. The miracle happens in private. There is something powerful about seeking the Lord behind a closed door, in the quiet of prayer, away from the noise. That is where God begins to move and fill what is empty.

Discipleship Happens in the Ordinary

This widow's sons were right there with her, watching their mother's faith in action. They saw her bring her emptiness to God. They saw the oil flow. That is discipleship. Parents and grandparents have an incredible opportunity to shape the faith of the next generation simply by living out trust in God in front of them.

God's Provision Is Always Sufficient

The oil did not just cover the debt. It was enough to live on. God provided what she needed and more. A scarcity mindset will rob you of the life of faith God intends for you. His provisions are not just barely enough. They are more than enough.

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19, ESV)

This truth is also the foundation of generous giving. When we give sacrificially, we do so with the confidence that God can do more with what remains than we could do with everything we held back.

Life Application

This week, identify one area of your life where you have been holding back from God because you feel like you do not have enough, whether that is faith, resources, time, or courage. Bring that empty jar to Him. Pray specifically and boldly, and then act in faith by taking one concrete step that reflects your trust in His provision.

Ask yourself these questions as you reflect:

- Is my life genuinely marked by the fear of the Lord, both in reverence and in obedience?
- When difficulty comes, do I turn toward God or away from Him?
- Am I limiting what God can do in my life by focusing on what I lack rather than what I have?
- Who in my life is watching how I respond to hardship, and what is my faith teaching them?

May we be a people who serve the Lord, fear the Lord, and trust the Lord with everything we have, including our empty jars.