

2 Kings 4:1-7

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[0 : 00] 2 Kings 4. We're going to carry on in the book of 1 and 2 Kings together tonight, just in this little section at the beginning of chapter 4. And this evening I want to explore with you some unpopular or unspectacular features of authentic Christianity or authentic Christian faith.

You'll see in the next six chapters of this book, God deals with debt, death, disease, drought, difficulty through the prophet Elisha.

They are chapters full of spectacular miracles. But tonight we're zooming in on a pretty unspectacular character. We don't often celebrate the kind of example that this anonymous unspectacular widow in our passage gives.

Limitations, difficulties, quiet obedience, private devotion. Those kind of things won't usually make the headlines, will they?

But actually they are the marks of authentic Christian faith, authentic Christian spirituality. She's all the things that often we don't aspire to in life, certainly in our culture, maybe especially in the vision of a modern woman in our culture.

[1 : 25] She is nameless. She's unimpressive. She's poor. She's helpless. She lives a quiet, understated, modest and submissive life.

But actually it's an authentic life and it's authentic Christian faith. And I want us to look at this life together tonight to see four unspectacular, four unpopular features of it.

And the first feature is that authentic faith has its disappointments, often has its disappointments.

The Bible is wonderfully realistic, isn't it, about life.

It's realistic about living for and trusting in the Lord Jesus. And look at the disappointments of this woman's life. Look at verse one with me.

The wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, Your servant, my husband, is dead. And the creditor has come to get the debt to be paid.

[2 : 29] Or he is going to take my two children to be his slaves. It's really heartbreaking, isn't it? She's lost her husband. Not only that, she has a debt problem.

And now she might even lose her two children as well to a ruthless slavery system. But the real disappointment, if that wasn't enough, is that this family that she belongs to, belongs to God. Did you notice what she says? You know that your servant, that's her husband, feared the Lord. But the creditor is coming.

Can you sense the intensity of the disappointment? We have been trusting in God, Elisha. But this has happened. I've been fearing him, Elisha, but still this is happening to me.

It turns out that a life that is authentically lived, rightly before God, doesn't always mean everything is going to be all right. He and his family have feared the Lord.

[3 : 43] Perhaps they've refused to go along with the idol worship that we've seen under Ahab's rule earlier. They've swam against the tide of the culture, haven't they? They've held fast to the Lord.

But the creditor is still coming. But disaster is still about to strike. And this is one of those unpopular features, isn't it, of authentic Christian faith.

That God's people aren't immune to disappointments. The sign of authenticity is not that you don't have any problems on the country.

Maybe you're saying something like that. I've trusted in you, Lord, but this illness just keeps coming back. We've looked to you, Lord, as a family, but situation at work just gets worse and worse.

You could fill in the rest, couldn't you? The church or the minister who stands for the truth, but the hate campaign gets worse and more ferocious.

[4 : 49] The disappointments of the Christian life. Not a feature we want to advertise, as it may be. And often we think, don't we, if you're really spiritual, you're really authentic as a Christian, then you won't face disasters.

If you're really spiritual, you won't feel disappointments. You won't need to cry out to Elisha in this case. You'll ride it out. If you've got enough faith, you'll be fine.

Some commentators on this woman in this situation, they're quite harsh with her, actually. They say that she hasn't got enough faith. And that's why later in the story, the oil runs out.

But I think that really misunderstands her and her situation. There's no suggestion that any of this is her fault. No suggestion that she's brought this on herself.

And I think that's the point. That authentic faith and suffering and disappointment are not contradictions. Disasters that come upon God's people don't always expose disloyalty from them.

[6 : 04] Maybe quietly we believe that when we or others fall on hard times, it's some reflection of spiritual bad health. But on the contrary. Because this servant feared the Lord.

But this was still happening. And disappointments may come for you. But it might not be a reflection upon you and your faith at all.

You're just living in a fallen world. It doesn't mean your faith is inauthentic on the country. So in the authentic life of faith, there can be disappointments.

But secondly, authentic faith also includes deficiency. So there's disappointment and there's deficiency. Look with me at what Elisha says to her in verse 2.

So he hears the trouble. He hears the problem. And then asks, what shall I do for you? What have you got in the house? It's as if he's saying, isn't it okay?

[7 : 08] I hear what your problem is. So what have we got to work with here? What are your strengths? It is a disaster. But what can be the starting point?

What might we be able to use to get you through this situation? What have you got in the house? And her answer is quite terse in the Hebrew, actually.

It reads a bit more like, and she said, nothing. Nothing in the whole house has your servant got except a little jar of oil.

And the emphasis there is on the nothing. I've got nothing. The emphasis is on her efficiency. And we think, don't we?

Ah, but she's got a little jar of oil. So somehow God is going to use that, isn't he, in a miraculous way. But we know the story. We know what happens. She is not thinking that. She's not thinking it is a disaster.

[8 : 07] But it's okay because I've got a little bit in reserve. I've got a little kind of widow disaster restart kit hidden in the larder. The little jar of oil.

I can put all of my hope in that. She's not thinking that at all. And the passage emphasizes the little jar of oil as being nothing in this situation.

I've got the grand total of nothing. It's next to nothing, Elisha. And again, that's not popular, is it? That's not a popular feature of authentic Christian faith.

To say, I just don't have what it takes. I don't have what I need to contribute to my own salvation and my own life.

What have I got in my spiritual bank? What have I got in the house? Nothing. Next to nothing. But again, whilst it's an unpopular feature, it is part of authentic faith.

[9 : 12] Disappointments, deficiencies, they are par for the course in the Christian life. And actually, God typically works, doesn't he? Precisely in the area of our nothingness.

That's what he does here. I've got this little jar of oil, Elisha. It's nothing really. So Elisha says, okay, let's use your nothing.

Let's put your uselessness to good use. He gets the very thing that defines her deficiency and says, let's use that.

Let's get your helplessness and make that the source of your help. The symbol of your deficiency, the little jar of oil is going to be the means of your recovery.

And I think that is how God often works, isn't it? In the life of authentic faith. Remember Jesus and his disciples on a hillside with a crowd of hungry people.

[10 : 15] And he asks them in Mark, how many loaves do you have? What have you got? Five loaves and two fish, Lord. It's next to nothing, really. So he sits them down in groups on the grass.

He looks to heaven and he prays and he divides up the food. Let's use your nothing then. What do you have? Next to nothing.

Let's use that. Let's have you come to me with your nothing, with your deficiencies. That is part of authentic faith, isn't it? Disappointment, deficiency.

Thirdly, authentic Christian faith and quiet humility. Quiet humility. There is a miracle in this chapter where the oil miraculously fills all his vessels.

And it is a spectacular miracle, isn't it? And yet it is. It's done quietly. Elisha uses the woman.

[11 : 24] Elisha gets the woman to use her nothing, gets her to fill some borrowed jars. And pouring and pouring fills all the containers. But can you sense how it's done on the quiet, how it's done in private?

It's done behind closed doors, isn't it? Literally, in verse four. Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all the vessels.

And when one is full, set it aside. So she went from Elisha and she shut the door behind herself and her sons. This spectacular miracle, this amazing experience from God is very private and quiet and humble.

Something similar happens later in the chapter in verse 33. On another occasion, Elisha brings a child back from the dead. But before that, Elisha shuts the door for the outside world.

It's done in a very private and quiet way. God's work is miraculous and spectacular in the Christian life. But it's quite understated here, isn't it?

[12 : 38] There are no fanfares. There is no hullabaloo. There's no giant screens. There are no commentaries to excite the neighborhood, to drum up some fanaticism.

No one gets to see it apart from her and her two sons, not even Elisha. Done quietly, isn't it? In someone's kitchen or in someone's back room. It's not totally secret that the neighbors know something is going on.

Why does she need all of these vessels? Maybe they're curious, but it's not showy. It's hidden. The quiet work of God.

And that's not too popular either, is it? True spirituality is thought of as something as being loud. It's shouted from the rooftops, isn't it?

It's ostentatious, isn't it? We want everyone to know, the whole world, don't we, to know the gospel.

We want the world to know what the Lord has done for us, don't we?

[13 : 46] And if we don't, then we're not really authentic in a way, are we? And of course, there is a sense where that's true. We should want to do that. We're the salt of the earth.

Don't lose your saltiness, says Jesus. The Bible is full of people who want to speak about the things that God has done in their lives. Psalm 66.

Come and hear all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for my soul. And we're always to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is in us, Peter says.

Yet, I think there are times when true faith isn't always authenticated by loudness and proudness.

There are some works of God that might not be for public consumption. Some works of God that perhaps ought to be enjoyed and rejoiced in, but done quietly, celebrated quietly.

[14 : 56] Why would that be the case? Well, I think there's always a risk, isn't there, that as we speak about God's work in our lives, it can actually end up being us talking about our lives more than God.

But we can get into a kind of Christian posturing. And it might be more of a sign of authentic faith to keep quiet about certain works of God in our lives sometimes.

The preacher Spurgeon said, Don't be proud of race, face, place, or grace. It's easy to cross the line, isn't it, from giving glory to God into signaling our own virtue before others, or displaying our own righteousness in public.

Paul talks about this. Listen to him in 2 Corinthians 12. He says, Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth.

But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from becoming conceited, because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

[16 : 23] Now he's saying there, isn't he, Paul, that he has had some incredible spiritual experiences. God has done some amazing things in his life. He calls them the surpassing

greatness of the revelation given to him about Jesus.

He met Jesus, didn't he, on the road to Damascus. And many other occasions, things have happened to him. And if he were to publish all of those things, if he were to talk about them, he'd be speaking the truth.

But he keeps quiet, so that he doesn't become big-headed, that he doesn't become conceited, so that people don't think more of him than they should do. The way that we judge other people's spirituality can be so skin deep, can't it?

And some works of God aren't for public consumption. So maybe you've had a particularly poignant time in prayer, and you start to cry.

You're moved by the trees of the gospel, but you don't take a picture of yourself crying and stick it on Twitter, do you? Or you have an encouraging conversation with someone about the gospel.

[17 : 42] And it's wonderful, and you mention it to others, but you don't go on and on about how well you spoke about the Lord Jesus, do you? We don't tell people how sacrificially we've given to the church recently.

People didn't see what happened in this miracle. And they didn't see your obedience on those occasions. It was hidden.

And that's not that popular, is it? It's not that popular with us. When we perform a good deed, we want to advertise it, don't we? Just in a little way, just in a subtle way.

We like to draw attention to our piety. But of course, when we do something cheap or evil, we want to hide it. We don't publish that. Wouldn't things be different if we switched those two things around?

To be more quiet about any great spiritual successes or heroic sacrifices that we might give occasionally, and instead tell people about our failures and our struggles more.

[18 : 52] But that's unpopular. And she won't get noticed, will she? She won't get praised for this by the neighbours. She won't get famous. But true faith is like that sometimes.

It's quiet. And what matters is that God sees what is done behind closed doors. The Apostle Paul had to defend his ministry, didn't he, on countless occasions, quite a bit in his letters.

And he has a phrase often that he uses. And he says this, God is my witness. God is my witness.

My ministry, whom I serve with my spirit. In the gospel of his son, he says, God sees what I've done and what I do and what he's doing in my life.

And that matters most. And think about that. This is Paul, isn't it? For all of his public preaching, his brilliant preaching, his public persona, his writing.

[19 : 55] Only God would see his inner spiritual life when Paul shut the door. Only God could see that.

Whether you're able to be in church here tonight, in the building, it's great that you can, or you're stuck at home and you wish you could be. There is a sanctuary, isn't there, in a way, that God is witness to.

That no one else sees or hears you worship in. In your heart. Behind closed doors. We shouldn't think less of each other, should we?

If we've not come to church, for various reasons today, we should be careful on how we judge the authenticity of other people's spiritual life.

And this woman is authentic because she engages in the quiet, private devotion that often we neglect for more noticeable things.

[21 : 00] When you pray, go into your room and shut the door. Pray to your father who's in secret and your father who sees you in secret will reward you, says Jesus.

He isn't saying don't go to church, is he? Of course he isn't. He's not saying don't go to a public prayer meeting. Don't show any sign of outward faith. Of course he isn't. He is saying though that we should be aware of thinking that only noticeable stuff is authentic spirituality and faith. because even in your back room, God is your witness. This is authentic faith with the disappointments, the deficiencies, the quietness.

And fourthly and lastly, with the obedience. The obedience. Just look with me how this woman quietly and unquestionably does what Elisha instructs.

And what he suggests, what he commands her to do is ridiculous. But Elisha doesn't ask her to agree with him on this.

[22 : 20] Just to obey him. You don't have to agree with God to you all the time. You don't have to understand what God is saying in its fullness.

You don't have to be able to explain it in its fullness or know exactly how God is going to fulfill his promises. You just have to obey his commands.

And don't get me wrong, it's not that her obedience is what makes this miracle happen. Obedience is not what saves a person from their sins and from death.

And she's not thinking that. She's not thinking, I can do this. I can obey my way into life. She's not thinking that. She knows that she comes with nothing and she cries out to Elisha in verse one.

She calls out to God with no idea how to get out of this herself. She doesn't come up with her own suggestions of how God should solve the problem. She just tells him the situation and then waits for an answer.

[23 : 30] And so it's not her obedience that does the miracle, but her obedience is the means of it happening, isn't it? It is a miracle and faith is central, but obedience is required.

Part of that faith. And the answer comes as she acts. The miracle happens as she acted in faith.

Yes, God could have done it without her. God could have zapped oil into gallons worth of vessels, couldn't he? God doesn't need us to do anything.

And obedience isn't popular, is it? We'd love to let go and let God. But often, rather than bypassing our actions, he exercises our faith so that our trust should become visible and tangible.

And it wasn't spectacular obedience, was it? It wasn't showy. It wasn't noticeable. You could even call it mundane, filling up Tupperware pots with oil.

[24 : 44] It was domestic obedience. It's almost routine. And it was that obedience that God used to bring her blessing. Not popular, but authentic.

Disappointment, sometimes, deficiencies all the time, quietness, obedience. There aren't any fanfares for this sort of living, are there?

This woman is not what we usually celebrate today, not usually what we aspire to. And yet, she is more worthy of recognition than most. She is a contrast, I think, on purpose here to the last person we saw approaching Elisha.

Do you remember last Sunday evening if you were watching, King Jehoram comes to Elisha in the drought in the battle, doesn't he? And you can see the contrast between the two characters in the questions that Elisha asks each of them.

So Jehoram comes to Elisha back in chapter 3 and Elisha asks him at verse 13, what have I to do with you, Jehoram?

[25 : 59] Not a great welcome, is it? The king of Israel, because of his idolatry, gets this scathing reaction from Elisha.

He is not welcomed by God were it not for King Jehoshaphat. We saw that last time. But then look at the contrast with the question Elisha asks this woman in verse 2, what shall I do for you?

What have I to do with you? What shall I do for you? It's ironic, isn't it? The most important, powerful person in Israel, the king of Israel, is contrasted with the most obscure, run-of-the-mill person there is, a quiet, nameless woman.

A bit like the women that we saw this morning in Matthew. But who is honoured more? Who is more authentic? Who do we want to be like more?

Who do we envy more? Well, it's the difference, isn't it, between affluence and visible power and what this woman has, which is access to God.

[27 : 16] In her disappointments and deficiencies and difficulties, she has access to God. the king had everything, didn't he, apart from God.

She had nothing apart from God. He was the king and she was the nameless widow, but God is willing to bless and hear her prayer.

What shall I do for you? So, whilst her life is not the one that we naturally are drawn to or broadcast or aspire to, she is the one with all the privilege in this chapter.

This woman, she gets more airtime in the narrative than probably one of the most famous kings of the time. He was mentioned back in 1 Kings 16. He was called King Omri.

He ran one of the most successful military campaigns in the ancient Near East. He was notorious, he was prosperous. If you read the history books, you'll have volumes written on King Omri.

[28 : 20] And she doesn't even get a mention, does she, in the history books? Yet, who do we know more about? Unless you've got a PhD in Near Eastern history.

You haven't got a clue who Omri is, have you? But we know this unknown woman. And this is the enigma of the Christian life, of the authentic Christian life, of your life. People won't be impressed. by your disappointments. They won't be impressed by your deficiencies and your quiet, devoted obedience. But God cares about his anonymous people, the quiet acts of devotion, and the discreet sacrifices, and the acts of love, behind closed doors. because there, God is your witness. Let us pray. Let us