

## 2 Kings 4:8-37

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[ 0 : 00 ] Great, it's good to see you this evening. Let's turn back to 2 Kings chapter 4. We're carrying on and looking at this book together.

And tonight, in the passage that's on your sheet as well actually, I want us to see some lessons on the way that God gives gifts to his people.

Because God often gives us things in a way that seems strange and contradictory. And we see that in a special gift given to the woman in this passage, a gift of a son.

A wonderful gift that makes her happy and glad. But that son later dies, doesn't he? The same gift brings gladness. It also causes grief.

And I want us to think about why that is sometimes in life. Gifts from God that both gladden but also grieve us.

[ 1 : 10 ] So I've got two headings this evening and how we respond. Number one, God gives us things to make us glad. That's the first thing. God gives us things to make us glad.

Often, God gives things to his people for no other reason. Simply to give good things to his people and to make them happy in him. And I think that's what's happening here with this woman.

The back story to this gift in the passage of a son. We're told about a woman from this place called Shunem. Who becomes a kind of hostess to the prophet Elisha, doesn't she?

She urges him to eat food in their house on regular occasions. And then after a while, she says to her husband, you know, we should make this a permanent arrangement. Verse 10, let's make a small room in the roof with walls, a bed, a table and a lamp so that he can use it when he comes with his servants.

So she gets a lot of conversion at probably some expense to make Elisha, the man of God, more comfortable. And so Elisha wants to reward her for that kindness.

[ 2 : 16 ] Verse 12, you've taken this trouble for us. What can we do for you? Can I put a good word in for you with the king or the commander of the army? But she's one of these people who's already got everything.

She's quite content. Verse 13, she says, I dwell among my own people. In other words, it's okay, Elisha. I've got everything I need here with my own people.

Don't worry about it. But Gehazi, the servant, has noticed there's one thing this woman does not have, isn't there? A son.

It's the one thing that she didn't think to ask for to kind of have the favour returned. It's as if she's not really expecting a son now, is she?

And that's okay. She's content with that. But perhaps she's given up hope of that. And she belonged for a son, especially with her ageing husband.

[ 3 : 14 ] And I think you can see that in the way that she responds to the promise of a son. So verse 16, Elisha says, this time next year, you'll embrace a son. And she says, no, my lord.

Don't lie to your servant. Don't tease me. Don't toy with me. A son would be too much. She's quite sceptical about this gift, doesn't she?

It's too good to be true. She's unsure about God's gifts. And yet, verse 17 puts it so curtly, doesn't it?

There's no explanation as if, of course, the woman conceived the following spring, just as Elisha said she would. But she's sceptical about the way that God gives gifts.

Don't lie to me. Don't be cruel. Don't tease me. But, you know, often God gives gifts in a way that is just much more simple than we often think.

[ 4 : 16 ] We sometimes think, don't we, that there must be a catch. But God gives gifts simply for the pleasure of giving and of seeing his people happy.

And the reason I say that is because you could ask, actually, what is the point of this gift, really? Why does God give this woman a gift of a son?

Now, it's a familiar motif in the Bible, isn't it? A childless woman, miraculously conceiving. And the narrator hints at that motif, but in a phrase that comes up twice in the passage, when Elisha says to her, this time next year you shall embrace a son, and that comes up again.

And that phrase is only used in one other place in the Bible. I wonder if you can remember. It's with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. The Lord says to Abraham, I'll return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, shall have a son.

So it's bringing us a gift flashback, isn't it? To the gift that God gave Sarah. And that flashback keeps coming all through the Bible. God keeps giving gifts like this to childless women in the Bible.

[ 5 : 28 ] So God gives Rebecca the gifts of Jacob and Esau. She was childless for 20 years before they arrived. God gives Samson to his mother, who was childless in Judges 13.

Then Hannah gets Samuel, doesn't she, in one Samuel. John the Baptist is given to Elizabeth. Jesus is given to Mary.

And then there's our Shunammite woman. And I think the connection with her and all those other women is made, because we see what is different about her compared with the women in that illustrious list.

Because all of those gifts of sons given to those women were kind of essential gifts in God's plan. But this child is not essential.

Whether she gets a son or not is not going to make or break redemptive history. It is not going to continue the story of the Bible like the other sons did.

[ 6 : 34 ] All of those other children in that list were given crucial roles in continuing the story of God's people and eventually preparing the way for the Messiah himself.

But as far as we know, this little boy is just another Israelite kid, isn't he? We don't hear that he went on to be anything special or prominent. He's not in any genealogies.

We don't even know his name. So what is the point of him? What's the point of this gift in God's mind? Well, I think it shows us that God gives things sometimes simply to give to his people.

And perhaps this passage highlights how we should see that in the children given to all those other women as well. That as well as being these big redemptive historical figures that are born, they are simply gifts from God to women.

There doesn't have to be some grand reason. There doesn't have to be a catch. His gifts are often simply gifts to make us glad in him. That we might enjoy him and thank him and celebrate his generosity.

[ 7 : 48 ] And that's it. Paul says to Timothy that God is the one who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. Article 1 in the Belgic Confession, which I'm sure you all know really well, says that God is the overflowing fountain of all good.

So God allows himself to give gifts for the pure joy of giving and for seeing his people glad in him to show his overflow of goodness.

Like she said, she had everything she needed. This was an unexpected extra, wasn't it? And when we look at the world around us, the world points to a God who is like that.

You can ask the same questions about a lot of things in our lives and in the world. What is the point of them? What is the point of music?

What's the point of flamingos? What's the point of all the colours in the rainbow? What's the point of the way that caterpillars turn into butterflies?

[ 8 : 58 ] What's the point of all the different kinds of food you can eat? You know, nutritionists tell you that you can survive off milk and bananas. So what's the point in it all? Simply to show that God is like this.

He gives to make us glad in him. And he doesn't need any other reason. That we can go through our lives, can't we, moaning about everything. Or see that in each and every little wonder of the world, life is gift-wrapped from God in so many ways.

And he gives this gift, it seems, just to make a woman happy with a child, with a son. So God gives us things just to make us glad.

So, point number two. Why do God's gifts sometimes make us sad? Why do God's gifts sometimes make us sad?

You'll see in the story that the very same thing that God gives to make her happy is the source of great grief, isn't it?

[10:09] We've got a little biography of the lad in verses 17 to 20. Look at the key moments in his life. Verse 17, the child was conceived. Verse 18, the child had grown.

Verse 20, and then he died. It's terribly abrupt, isn't it? What a gift that was. We don't know what happened exactly.

He was out with his father, harvesting. He felt a pain in his head and he falls seriously ill. And he dies in her lap. It's terribly sad. And the poignancy of this is that had she never received the gift of a newborn son, she wouldn't have to deal with the grief of a dying son.

Notice how before he's born, she's content. I don't need anything, Eliza, thank you. I'm with my own people. She's a rich woman. Before the gift, she had no needs at all.

But now after the gift, she's very, very needy. She comes to Elisha in verse 27 in bitter distress.

[11:22] What the Lord gives her causes her loss. The Lord's gift has left her needy.

And the narrator presses and presses this tension. We're told in verse 21 that when the boy dies, she lays him on the bed of the man of God.

Now that is really poignant. It's a really poetic feature, isn't it, of this narrative. Because this whole story started with the loft conversion. Because she was gifted as a reward for her kindness.

But now that loft room holds the body of her dead son. The gift brings her to grief. And she makes that connection too.

Verse 28. Did I ask for a son? Did I not say, don't deceive me? Don't lie to me? I said it then and I feel it now.

[12:20] God seems to be teasing me. Don't be cruel. What we have here is a deeply perplexing picture of how God gives us things.

When the very things that he gives us to make us glad become the very sources of our sadness. It's deeply mysterious, isn't it? The long-awaited-for child joyfully comes, but then is sadly lost.

The joyful hellos turn to sad goodbyes. Those glad things in life that God gives us in themselves can become the sad things of life.

His giving is both simple, isn't it? Just to make us glad. And yet his giving can be so complicated.

You see that not even Elisha understands this mystery.

When she finally finds Elisha, he says, verse 27, she's in bitter distress. And the Lord has hidden it from me. He's not told me. He doesn't understand what's going on here.

[13:35] He wasn't expecting it. This is strange. And so Elisha has a plan to get the boy back. He sends his servant to go and put the staff on his face.

But verse 31, after all of that, there was no sign of life. Elisha doesn't know what to do with this. The whole thing is perplexing to her and to Elisha.

So we're pushed into thinking about this question, aren't we? Why does this kind of thing happen?

Why does the Lord give to take away?

Why the gladdest of gifts can become the saddest of gifts. So the gladness and the sadness.

Finally, how do we respond? What's the response?

The Lord gives and he takes away. Why do his gifts bring such sadness though sometimes? When he prospers his people, which he does with good things.

[14:34] The reason I think he does this, or part of the reason, is that God wants us to believe in the true prosperity gospel. His gifts to us are for gladness, pure and simple.

But sometimes, well all the time, he wants us to embrace more than what we get in this life. As well as treasure on earth, his desire is to give the gift of treasure in heaven.

He wants to give the gift of pleasures forevermore in him. And I think both the woman and Elisha show us the right response in this perplexing situation.

Because where is the only place that you can go when it feels like God is just lifting you up to drop you from an even higher height? When we think he is only giving so that he can take things away from us.

When God feels like that, the only person we can go to is God himself. And that's her response, isn't it? She lays the body down in the bedroom and goes straight to the man of God.

[15:47] There is nowhere else she can go. Do you remember she says to Elisha's servant, all is well, in verse 26, when clearly it isn't. Because she wants to get straight to the man of God.

She doesn't bother with pleasantries with the servant. She wants to get to God's representative, doesn't she? She wants to cling to him. She doesn't even tell her husband about what's happened. And she comes and complains to God, verse 28. Did I ask Lord for a son? I said don't deceive me. When she speaks to Elisha, she's speaking to God really, to his representative. Lord, did I ask for this gift? Why have you grieved me with it? This is the wrestling of faith, isn't it? In a perplexing time, she grabs hold of Elisha's feet. She says, I will not let you go. She clings to him. She clings to the God that she doesn't understand. And Elisha, too, has a similar response.

[17:00] And just see the poignance of it for him as well, in verse 32. Elisha comes into the house, where the dead boy is. And we're told, again, that the boy lies on his bed.

See, he feels this tension as much as anybody. The reward of the bed that he sleeps on is the place where the dead body is. And it feels so perplexing for him, too, doesn't it?

And he also comes to a God that he doesn't understand. So verse 33, he shuts the door behind him and he prays to the Lord. You get all sorts of wacky ideas about what's going on in verse 34.

It's funny, isn't it? Then he went up and lay on the child, putting his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands. And he stretched himself upon him. As he did that, the flesh of the child became war.

What's going on there? Lots of crazy ideas. It's worth saying this isn't some sort of magical technique to raise dead bodies. But actually, it's just an expression of fervent prayer which was appropriate in those times.

[18:16] It was a symbolic action, typical of prophetic people in that time in Israel. And as he puts his mouth to the boy's mouth, hands on his hands, eyes on his eyes, it's as if he's praying to the Lord fervently, let his lifeless body be like my lively body.

Warm his body like mine is warm. And the language of being bent down is the same as when Elijah was on Mount Carmel, bent down with his face between his knees in prayer.

You see, it's all about fervency in prayer. A desperation, really, from Elisha. A prayer to a God who baffles him.

Who baffles us sometimes with his gifts. And so what is happening here is that both Elisha and the woman are clinging to God, aren't they? The pain of the gift has brought them closer to him.

The pain, it's tested, it's refined their faith, it's brought them closer. And they are beginning to cling to the treasure in heaven. To understand the true prosperity gospel.

[19:34] Not just clinging on to the gifts, but the giver himself. It's not that God is vindictive with his gifts. That he just loves to give so that he can take away. It's not that he's vindictive.

But God is wise in his giving. God's gifts are simpler than we think. And yet they're more complicated often than we think.

It's not that God is malicious. But that his generosity to his people is beyond our understanding. It's baffling, isn't it?

You can spoil a child with the wrong kinds of gifts. Or given in the wrong way, can't you? If you're not wise. But God isn't like that. God gives wisely.

To bring blessing that we can't understand yet. But what we do know is that any sadness we feel now in his giving is only momentary.

[20:37] It is a temporary perplexity in his giving. So in the end, we might know a greater gift. The goal is not sadness. No, the sadness does not last, does it?

That God raises the boy and the woman, receives him back. And she gets to glimpse the God who gives. So that sadness is not the ultimate goal.

As we enjoy the giver and his gifts. It reminds us of that passage that we heard from Luke 7. Where Jesus raises the only son of a widow.

It's very similar, isn't it? And in both stories, you could kind of say, well, that was really nice for them, wasn't it? That was nice for her. It was nice for the woman in Luke 7.

But why doesn't this sort of thing happen to me? Why doesn't it happen now? Why can't God remove my sadness in that way? Well, as we read passages like this, they are only snapshots, aren't they?

[21:42] They're little glimpses of the final goal of God's giving to his people. That even when there is baffling sadness, he intends to bring ultimate resurrection gladness to all his people.

And they're only snapshots because the time for that has not yet come, has it? If you think about it, Jesus actually only raised a few people from the dead, didn't he?

There's only a handful of people that he raised in the Gospels. He didn't go around all the cemeteries raising everyone from the dead. Because those that he did raise from the dead, they were only snapshots to tell us what is to come in the future.

But in comparing that Luke account of Jesus with the one of Elisha, we see, don't we, the ultimate power of Jesus Christ over death. Look at the differences, feel the differences.

Where Elisha prays for resurrection, fervently prays, in Luke 7, Jesus commands resurrection. And the boy sits up.

[ 22 : 58 ] Where Elisha could only acknowledge the woman's bitter distress, Jesus tells the widow in Luke 7 not to weep. And you know, that is an absurd and callous thing to say, isn't it?

Unless you're a person with the power to do something about that weeping in the end. Where Elisha prays for a son to be raised, Jesus is the son gifted to a virgin who is the resurrection and the life himself.

So do you see in the snapshots, we see Jesus Christ with the ability to reach into the realms of death and to plunder all of the gifts.

Even those we thought we'd lost. The people we'd lost. The children we'd lost. Charles Spurgeon gives the story of a gardener who works for his master in a rose garden.

You might have heard it before. He comes into the garden one morning and he finds that his best, most beautiful rose has been snipped and taken away and removed.

[ 24 : 14 ] And he's absolutely livid. So he blasts at one of the other gardeners for taking the rose. The other gardener says they didn't have anything to do with it, but they did see the master of the garden walking there that morning.

And he watched him take the rose for his own use. The gardener suddenly changes his demeanour. And it is the same, isn't it, with those things, with those people.

That we have loved and we've lost. The gifts that have made us glad and sad.

It's the master of the garden who gives and who takes away for his own use and for his own attention. And he is generous with his gifts.

But he is also wise. Wanting to give us greater treasure in heaven. And these little snapshots will become the story of all of Jesus' people.

[ 25 : 46 ] When our gladness will be raised in the rose garden of Jesus Christ ultimately. So his gifts are so simple.

To make his people glad. But his gifts can be complicated, can't they? But even when his gifts are so baffling. He is wise and he is good.

And so until that day comes. The response is to cling to him, isn't it? Let us pray together. Amen. Amen.