

8. The Living God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2009

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Please, at page 314, and we'll have a word of prayer. Speak, O Lord, as we come to you to receive the food of your holy word.

Father, we know that our souls will die unless we receive that living bread that comes from heaven. And so I pray this evening that as we draw near to you, that you will most graciously draw near to us.

And you will open your word to our hearts, and open our hearts to your word. In Jesus' name, Amen. I want you to imagine a grain of ember morning in London in the reign of Queen Victoria. A distinguished funeral procession was making its way through the streets towards Westminster Abbey. And the streets were absolutely lined with people, hundreds and hundreds of people, many of them in working clothes.

In those days you could tell people what class of society they were in, what they did through the way they dressed. Multitudes of people in working clothes stood there, many of them weeping.

[1 : 18] For this was the funeral procession of the great Lord Shaftesbury, who had spent his life helping these people, helping them in distress, getting rid of such abominations as sending small boys up chimneys to sweep them, and doing everything he could to alleviate the lot of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the worker.

As the procession paused for a moment at one street corner, one of the men lifted his bonnet and said, with tears streaming down his face, he was one of us.

This was his assessment of Shaftesbury. The great Lord Shaftesbury was one of us. Because Shaftesbury had not simply been a remote benefactor, dispensing his largesse from a distance. Shaftesbury had involved himself with these people, involved himself in such a way that he could transform their lives. And that, of course, is the very heart of the Gospel, isn't it?

God becomes flesh. Jesus, one with God, becomes one of us, and is one of us still. And that's our way into this little episode.

[2 : 34] You may have wondered as we read it. You may have thought, this is pretty thin nourishment this evening. There's not very much in it, but there's actually an enormous amount here. And there's an enormous amount here because this little episode shows us what the Elisha stories are all about.

Like a prism through which light passes. This story is telling us to pause for a moment. If you haven't understood what these stories are about, then listen to this story and this will tell you. Because the next few episodes, the final few episodes in Elisha's life, we're going to see Elisha with kings, with kingdoms, with nations. Here, once again, he is involved in the background, but nonetheless involved, bringing the grace of God to ordinary people, being one of them.

And bringing them God's word and God's grace. But there's a particular word here that occurs four times in these few verses. It occurs once in verse 1, restored to life.

And then three times in verse 5 in different forms. The verb that means to restore to life, to bring back to life. Because this is not about a remote God who simply looks from a distance across billions of leagues of space.

[4 : 02] This is the living God who involves himself in people's lives and brings life where there is death. That's the significance, it seems to me, of this little episode.

That's why I've called this evening the living God. Way back in chapter 3, verse 14, Elisha had stated the secret of his ministry. As the Lord of hosts lives before whom I stand.

And his master Elijah, back in 1 Kings 17, had said the same words. As the Lord God of Israel lives before whom I stand. This is the God who does not faint or grow weary.

This is the God who has so much life in himself that he can share it with us without diminishing it. That's the great thing about God.

He gives and gives again as we sang this morning. But he does not diminish himself because he has so much life in him. And not only that, this is a God for the whole of life.

[5 : 03] As we'll see in a moment or two as we look through these verses. God of the covenant, marvels of mercy, adoring we see, as we sang a few moments ago. So in this little prism, so to speak, the light shines.

This is the living God, the God of the past, the present, the future. Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and forever. And the first thing I want you to notice in verses 1 and 2 is this God cares for physical needs.

The background here, as I say, is chapter 4. God gives a son, that son dies and then is raised to life again. And now again that life is threatened.

Threatened by death through famine. We've noticed in the Elisha stories and earlier in the Elijah stories that famine and war were the background to the ministry of these prophets.

Which of course were the judgment of God on the unfaithfulness of the nation. But we not only have judgment, we have mercy. Go and depart with your household and sojourn wherever you can.

[6 : 11] For the Lord has called for a famine. Notice, it's not an accident. It's not the economic situation. The Lord has called for a famine and it will come upon the land for seven years.

Elisha realizes that people are not disembodied and super spiritual. They have bodily needs. We live in a physical world. This world is fallen.

This world is to be redeemed. This world is under a curse. Our bodies are under a curse. But they are still good because they come from God. And one day they are going to be revealed.

One day they are going to be glorious. One day it's going to be an unbelievably beautiful and wonderful new creation. So God does not forget his people.

And this reminds us of a much earlier story, way back in the book of Genesis, when Joseph predicted to Pharaoh that God would send seven years of famine on Egypt.

[7 : 10] Now, it's very important, I think, as we read the big story of Scripture to see how later parts are always echoing earlier parts.

Even if you don't mention it specifically. Once again, a famine is announced. Once again, the Lord sends the famine. And once again, steps have to be taken. Among other things, it suggests the prophet's continuing interest in this widow and her son.

So the Lord sends a famine, but he provides a means of escape. That's what the New Testament says, isn't it? The Lord, with the temptation, provides a way of escape.

God of judgment and God of mercy. But the other thing to notice in verses 1 and 2 is he provides unexpected sanctuary. Where does she go? She goes to the land of the Philistines.

You wouldn't expect her to go there. That's the old enemy. And that surely recalls another story. When Ruth, or rather Naomi, went down to Moab, another old enemy.

[8 : 14] And there the Lord preserved life. And surely points forward an even more astonishing story. When Mary and Joseph take the child Jesus into Egypt.

The ancient enemy. And there he is protected and preserved. Very often the Lord uses the most surprising means to help us. Nurse, I'm sure all of us can think of situations where help came from the most unexpected quarters.

People we would never have expected to help. Situations we could never have imagined. Because, after all, he is the living God. He is the Lord who made heaven and earth. But notice again in verse 2, According to the word of the man of God.

All this on earth is being orchestrated by the words of Elisha, which are the words of God. We need to have confidence in the living word of God. And one of the great things that these stories are teaching us, I think, is to have confidence that this word actually works.

It's a living word because it's the word of the living God. And obedience leads to blessing. Now, once again, I'm not saying this invariably happens.

[9 : 30] Many of God's people have perished without this kind of help. But this kind of incident shows us that God cares. And more important, that one day in the new creation, famine, destitution, war, and death are going to be no more.

It's not surprising when the prophets speak words of the new creation. They use language about fertile lands. They use language about the desert blossoming like the rose. They use language

about a renewed and rejuvenated creation.

And the other metaphor they use is feasting. In other words, barren lands and empty tables are going to be replaced by the desert blossoming like the rose and by feasting.

That's the first thing. God provides for our people's physical needs. Don't be super spiritual. Don't try and live a kind of Christian life that neglects and ignores your bodily needs.

God has placed us in bodies. He knows that and he cares for that. God does great things.

[10:36] Very interesting little verse here. The king, verse 4, the king of Songbehazi, the servant of the man of God, saying, tell me all the great things that Elisha has done.

Now, all the way through these stories, we met this character, King Jehoram, or Joram as he's sometimes called, he's called that later in the chapter, the son of Ahab.

Now, the thing about Jehoram is, Jehoram is very good at using religious language. He knows the talk. He knows the right things to say, the right gestures to make.

But you'll notice, he doesn't say, tell me all the great things the Lord has done. He says, tell me all the great things that Elisha has done. Now, Elisha, we know, is the instrument.

It is through Elisha these great things have happened. But it is the Lord who does great things. As Mary sings a magnificat, he has put down the mighty from their seat, exalted those of low estate.

[11:37] He does great things, as the psalmist continually tells us. So, as we look at this little episode involving the king, the woman, and Gehazi, we must see what's actually happening.

First of all, Jehoram, king of Israel, is curious. It's not really faith. It's curiosity. Tell me all the great things Elisha has done.

And the word tell is repeated several times. Now, he knew of some of the great things Elisha had done. Back in chapter 3, Elisha the prophet had brought about, through the Lord's agency, a victory over Moab.

No doubt he remembered Naaman. But there's many things he doesn't know. And this is one of them, the story of the woman's son, who was restored to life. You see, this is a nameless individual, this woman.

She's not named back in chapter 4, and she's not named here either. But we can be certain her name is written in heaven, which is an important place for it to be written. Doesn't Jehoram remind you of a character in the New Testament?

[12:47] King Herod, when he saw Jesus at the trials, Luke who tells us this, was glad to see him, because he wanted to see a miracle. He didn't want to come to Jesus and believe, and repent, and have faith.

He wanted to see a miracle. But you see, the Jehorams, the Herods, all these people who want miracles, usually refuse the evidence that they see.

And we'll come back to that in a moment. So this is curiosity. Undoubtedly, God had done great things. Undoubtedly, Elisha had been used to do great things. But Jehoram, like Herod after him, was only interested in the spectacular magic.

Now, there's an odd name here, isn't there? The king was talking with Gehazi, the servant of the man of God. But didn't we read back in chapter 5, that after the healing of Naaman's leprosy, that Gehazi tried to cheat Naaman into giving him money and possessions?

Well, why is he here again? Now, there's different points of view. One possibility is that the stories here are not in chronological order.

[14:01] And this may actually happen earlier than Naaman. I'm not totally convinced by that. I think this is just one of the questions we don't know the answer to. It's very important, by the way, the kind of questions we ask of Scripture.

There's lots of questions that people ask, which aren't really questions to find about God. They're questions of curiosity. Where did Cain get his wife from? What about the dinosaurs in Genesis 1 and 2?

These kind of questions, which may be interesting, but are purely speculative. What happened to the Garden of Eden? All these sorts of things. So, Gehazi's role here is not all that important, except insofar as he tells the story of the woman whose son had been restored to life.

And at the beginning of verse 6, the woman has given her testimony. Now, what's the point of all this? God has done great things. Elisha has been used to do great things.

Excuse me. Elisha's word has worked miracles through the power of God. Wouldn't it be great if we read, Jehoram fell down on his knees, trusted the living God, repented, and became a believer.

[15:25] Now, we don't read anything of the sort, do we? Jehoram did not believe. And that tells us now something important about miracles. As I've said before, these stories of Elijah and Elisha, the Old Testament prophets, are full of miracle.

I said, don't rationalize them. Don't try to explain them away. But on the other hand, don't sensationalize them. Don't say things like, if we had more miracles nowadays, people would believe. Here is a man who has seen miracle after miracle after miracle.

And he does not believe. And surely that reminds us of another New Testament passage. A terrifying story in Luke 16 of the rich man and Lazarus.

And the rich man says, send Lazarus so that he can tell my brothers not to come to this place. What does Jesus say? He has Moses and the prophets.

If he doesn't believe them, then he won't believe if someone rises from the dead. Surely Jehoram had Moses and the prophets. But he didn't believe.

[16:32] And he wouldn't believe. Even if a miracle happened in front of him. You see, miracles can always be explained away. Miracles can always be given rationalistic explanations.

But the living word of the living God, which challenges, has to be faced and has to be either accepted or rejected, as we saw this morning. There is no neutral ground. There is no middle ground.

We have to accept it or we have to reject it. Because the gospel word is not something accompanied by the power of God. The gospel word is the power of God.

If we don't believe Moses and the prophets, a miracle is not going to convince us. I remember talking to a group of people, it must have been about 25 years ago, just the time that David Watson, who had been used so greatly in York, in ministry, in St. Michael the Belfry, and this guy sneered and he said, St. Michael the Belfry, it sounds like bats in the Belfry to me.

That's how worldly people tend to treat miracle. But the word of the living God, the word of Moses and the prophets, which Jehoram most certainly had, he refused, he rejected, and in the next chapters he is destroyed because of that.

[17:54] So, God is a God who cares for our physical needs. God is a God who does great things. But, the whole, the rest of the episode, really, if you like, verse 6, shows us that God is a God who reverses worldly standards.

You know, in Jehoram, you wouldn't have expected him to do this, would you? Restore her, restore all that was hers. See, Jehoram is interested enough to give the woman justice.

And I think that recalls an earlier story as well. You remember back in 1 Kings 19, Jezebel, Jehoram's mother, who of course is still alive and undoubtedly a sinister presence behind the throne, when she had persuaded her husband Ahab to destroy Naboth and give the vineyard. Here's a similar case. But, you see, Jehoram does this, does this thing which is right, which is just, and he's not committed.

And he probably does it because he's interested enough. As Ralph Davis says, with Jehoram, it was fascination, not faith. I think that's true. You see, why are all these commands in the Old Testament to help widows and orphans?

[19:16] Surely because it's not the way of the world to help widows and orphans. It's the way of the world to trample the poor and the destitute. It's the way of the world to feather our own nest.

And you see, once again, even in the actions of this unbelieving king, we see a glimpse of a world to come when a king will rule in righteousness, when the poor will be raised from the dust, when the world will be fertile and beautiful.

So you see, this is a little story, but we meet the living God. I want to say something else here. Two things, really. Elisha here is behind the scenes.

He's basically referred to in the third person. And this is so important as well because what it tells us is even when God's prophets are not treading the national stage, their words are still having effect. Not that everyone believes, not that everyone repents. The words are still having powerful effect. And they're having powerful effect because the God that they present is a living God.

[20:28] Now, the second thing I want to say, this is related to the whole basis of understanding Old Testament narrative. One of the reasons many people find Old Testament narrative off-putting is because they don't know what to do with it.

All this stuff about kings we've never heard of, famines and plagues and wars, old, unhappy, far-off things and battles long ago. This is of no great interest and no great help to us.

I want to suggest the reason for that is that because we often read these stories starting at the wrong end. The worst place to begin anywhere in Scripture, particularly in Old Testament narrative, is to have as your first question, what is this passage saying to me?

Because you see, if you begin that way, instantly me sets the agenda. My interests, my prejudices, my circumstances, my hopes, my fears begin to colour my interpretation of the passage.

Rather, since this is God's story and not really the story of humans, we've got to say, first of all, what is this passage telling us about God? What is God saying in this passage and what is being said about God?

[21 : 41] You see, if we took this little incident in a moralising, what does it say to me way, we would end up with a sermon of platitudes. First of all, one good deed deserves another.

There's the first point. Elisha helped the woman who had helped him. Here's the second point. Even in dodgy characters like Gehazi and Jehoram, there are good things.

Now, that is not gospel. That is not grace. That's moralism. And when we preach or think of the Old Testament in that way, we are simply robbing it of its grace.

No doubt. Don't misunderstand me. We must, of course, say, what is this passage saying to me? But we must get to it by the right root. And the right root is what is it saying about God?

What is God saying in this passage? Otherwise, because then, the questions we ask will be God's questions. The agenda will be God's agenda. And the agenda here surely is this is the living God.

[22 : 45] The God who not... The Bible isn't interested in the theoretical question does God exist. The Bible talks about the living God who is still on his throne.

He's not just on his throne when we are here on Sunday evening, when we sing the hymns, when we read the word, and when we pray. God is still on the throne on Monday morning and every other day in the week.

This is the living God. The God who made you. The God who loves you. The God who has glorious purposes for his redeemed people and for his whole universe.

And that's what this little episode is about. As the prophet Isaiah said, those who wait on this God, the living God, will renew their strength.

They will mount up with wings as eagles. They will walk and not grow weary. They will run and not go faint. And that is the God we believe in. That is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 47] That is the God of all grace. Amen.