

3. The Gracious and Generous Word

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: 14 June 2009

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] And now as we turn to God's Word, a moment of prayer. And God our Father, when we look into your Word, we recognize, first of all, how great is your grace, and secondly, how great is our sinfulness and our need.

And so we pray tonight that as we draw near to you, you will most graciously draw near to us, that you will open our hearts and minds to your Word, and open your Word to our minds and hearts.

We ask this in the name of the living Word, Christ Jesus. Amen. So if you could have the Bibles open, please, at page 309, that would be a help.

This is the third of the series in the prophet Elisha, and looking particularly at the power of God's Word that came through the prophet. We've looked at the powerful Word, we looked at the disturbing Word, and this evening it is the gracious and generous Word.

That's our particular theme this evening, the gracious, the generous, the bountiful Word that came through Elisha. Sometimes we hear very sad stories of an elderly person dying in poverty and squalor, perhaps in some upper flat, somewhere up a tower block, in complete poverty by every appearance, no heating, places dirty, and the place is lonely.

[1 : 37] What a way to die. And then afterwards, sometimes it's discovered that when the flat was searched, there were literally tens of thousands of pounds stashed away in cupboards and under the bed, in brown paper envelopes.

In other words, somebody died in poverty and squalor who didn't need to. There were resources there, but they were not drawn on. There was the wherewithal to pay, but it wasn't drawn on.

You know, as Christians, sometimes we simply fail to draw on the resources of God, His limitless, boundless grace, which does not depend on our goodness and is not turned away by our sinfulness.

So keep that in mind as we begin to look at this tonight. The first thing we want to say is, here Elisha is away from kings and courts. We noticed in the first study that he had been called particularly to give a message to the great and to the powerful, to the kings and to the rulers of his own land and of other lands.

And last week we saw in chapter 3 how he was involved with the kings of Israel and Judah and brought about a victory from what could have been a defeat. But here his ministry is among the nameless.

[2 : 55] The only named individual in this chapter is the prophet himself. And the incidents seem to be quite trivial. They're about the necessities of daily life.

They're not high drama. Although they'd be dramatic and life-changing enough to the persons involved in them. The emphasis surely is on God's overwhelming generosity to the nameless and in every part of life.

It's not just about kings. It's about ordinary nameless people. The word of God for every circumstance, however apparently trivial.

The good and generous word of God. The second thing I want to talk about is the place of miracle. Some of you may remember the series on Elijah we did earlier this year.

I said something then but it's worth repeating. There are two mistakes we can make when we come across miracles in the Bible. First of all we can sensationalize them.

[3 : 54] We can say something like this. If we expected miracles like this then it would happen. If we expected God to pour out his blessing the way he did here then it would happen.

And the reason it doesn't happen is because we're not expecting it. Now that's a very superficial reading of the stories. These people were not expecting miracles.

That is the whole point. This was God's grace responding to their need. Not responding to their desperate attempt to make him work in miracle. Miracles are always in the grace and providence of God.

If he chooses to work in this way then he chooses. But the second thing which is the thing that most of the commentators do is they rationalize the miracles.

They say what happened here is simply a hyped up version of some very ordinary story. For example in chapter 4 verses 1 to 7 the widow's friends obviously got to hear about this.

[4 : 56] So they brought along their oil and they helped her out. Now clearly once again that is simply to trivialize the story.

It's not a story about neighborly kindness. Indeed there is no evidence of that at all. This is a story about the effects of God's word through the prophet.

Miracles are never explained in scripture. The technique, the chemistry, the physics if you like are never explained. What we are told is that God spoke. Why should we be surprised?

God said let there be light. And there was light. God said let the earth produce living creatures. And they came. God said let the sea multiply.

This is the creator at work. These are miracles as C.S. Lewis says. Miracles of the new creation. Anticipating what will be true in the new heaven and the new earth.

[5 : 53] So I want us to look at these three incidents then which show us God's grace and generosity. And the first one, verses 1 to 7. God's generosity helping the helpless.

And you couldn't get much more helpless than this. There is a background of debt. There is a background of inevitable death. One of the sons of the prophets had died.

But very possibly as a result of the state sponsored persecution that went on in the kingdom of Israel many times. We read about it in Elijah's time. It kept going on.

It's perfectly possible. This son of the prophet. We can't prove that. But it's perfectly possible. This is what had happened. And so often in the lives of God's people. Faithfulness seems to go unrewarded.

People give up everything to serve the Lord. Things go badly wrong. A young missionary goes out and suddenly is struck down by some deadly disease.

[6 : 55] A woman spends the best years of her life looking after elderly parents. And then is left with nothing. So often this happens. And God's grace doesn't seem to be much in evidence.

So I'm going to make of this story. First of all, the woman turns to the real source of help. She cried to Elijah. Elisha. A very strong word.

You know that your servant feared the Lord. And she shows her faith. Her world is a dismal one. Her world is a world of debt. A world where her sons are going to be enslaved.

A world where death stares her in the face. A chilly, loveless, pitiless world. Where the king of Israel is hostile to the word of God.

Hostile to the servants of God. So what does she do? She turns to a world of reality that's beyond royal control. She's nothing to gain from the king.

[7 : 52] So she turns to the prophet. It's fascinating to look at Elijah's politeness and concern in verse 2. If you glance back at chapter 3 verse 14.

That we looked at. Verse 13, sorry, first of all. We looked at last week. Elisha says to the king of Israel. What am I to do with you? Go to the gods of your prophets of your father.

And to the prophets of your mother. In other words, he faces the king with his apostasy and idolatry. But this widow who has come to him helpless. This widow who trusts in the Lord as her husband has done.

He comes to her with concern, with politeness and with generosity. The generosity that mirrors God's own generosity. All this woman could do is pray.

Have you ever been in that situation where you've said, All we can do now is pray. Frankly, that's true of every situation in our lives.

[8 : 53] When you think of it. We must keep our powder dry, as Cromwell said. We live in a vulnerable, uncertain world. But there are many, many times when that vulnerability, that uncertainty faces us.

And we have to turn to the only source of help. Cry, she is earnest. The cupboard is bare. There is no state-sponsored aid going to come. So she turns to the Lord.

And it is secondly that God begins with what she has. God uses what she has. What does she have? Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.

Limited resources. Totally limited. Totally useless, we would have thought. He doesn't need, and we'll see this later on in the final story, he doesn't need to use the resources that we have.

But that's what he does here. And he transforms it. And he uses it beyond all expectations. By the way, notice Elisha is not even there. He's simply spoken the word of God and let the word do its work, quietly behind the scenes.

[10 : 01] See, when God's word is working, there's no razzmatazz. There's no hype about it. The word works silently behind the scenes, but it does the work effectively.

So effectively that the supply of oil was only limited by the supply of empty vessels. Nothing once again about method, only the boundless generosity of God don't limit him.

When we reach the end of our hoard of resources, as we sang, our Father has just begun his giving. Remember the words of the psalm that we sang a few moments ago, as a father has compassion on his children.

So the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. Here is a God who helps the helpless, the protector of the orphan and the widow, the defender of those who have no defense in themselves.

And how does he do it? He does it by his creating and life-giving word. He speaks and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive. We'll be coming back in the next study to Elisha and the Shunammite woman of how that word actually broke into the realm of death itself.

[11 : 11] But come down with me now to chapter, verse 38. God's generosity overrules our mistakes. Now, I'm sure when you read this story, you thought to yourself, this is pretty trivial stuff.

This is not high drama. This is not about the word becoming flesh and about angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. This is not one of the great passages of Scripture.

The trouble about that is, we forget that God is not only the God of greatness, of transcendence, as in Genesis 1. He is the God who comes right down into his world, as in Genesis 2.

Ralph Davis talks about the earthiness of God's interest. God is actually interested in food. God is actually interested in everyday matters like this. As C.S. Lewis says, God likes matter.

He made it. Don't let's get super spiritual about this. Don't let me be the kind of people who think that God is there when we feel a call for the mission field, but not there when we have to pay the bills.

[12 : 19] That God is there at moments of high drama, but not when we have to catch a train or pick up our children. We are people with physical needs. We are people who live in bodies.

See, it has all to do with the word become flesh, isn't it, after all? The word incarnate who became flesh because he cares for those things. It is all about angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

But I'm pretty certain, as all these miracles took place in Israel, are rejoicing in the heavenly courts. Now notice how this works. First of all, there is a visible sign.

Then bring flower. Now, I'm not going to try to spiritualize the flower and see all kinds of imaginative and totally, and totally, things which are totally impossible to prove, or to disprove.

That's the wonderful thing about giving fantastic expositions of scripture, of course, that no one can disprove them any more than they can prove them. Let's look at what the story actually says.

[13 : 26] Elisha had done this before. Back in Jericho, in chapter 2, he had thrown salt into the polluted water. Surely the point here is not that it was flower, but that that flower was a visible and tangible sign to help the people's faith.

After all, they had had a nasty experience. Man of God, there is death in the pot. Very nasty experience. He says, they ate this stuff which looked rather nice and then suddenly began to feel griping stomach pains and all the rest of it.

They needed something physical to show them that God was at work. And that, I suggest, is the point of the flower. Certainly nothing magical about flower. Certainly nothing esoteric.

And there are times in our lives when God, in his graciousness, gives us physical signs of his presence. This could be, this could be, for example, let me give you a very small example of my own experience.

In my study at home, there is a book which I don't read often, but whose title is with me every time I preach. It's called Trembling at the Threshold of the Word of God.

[14 : 38] Now, I know that's true, but the physical presence of that book reminds me of what it is to handle the Word of God, what it is to be a messenger of the Lord of hosts.

Perhaps there are certain places that are particularly associated with things that God has done in your life. None of these places are magic. Not that you need them in one sense.

But sometimes God in his grace accommodates himself to our physical weakness. Remember Psalm 119, 3 again. He remembers our frame. He knows we are dust.

But the second thing to notice is God's overruling. This man who put death in the pot was not a malicious man. After all, he was trying to help.

And indeed, he was trying to help in a time of famine. As it's been said, there is no situation however bad that a do-gooder can make worse. And that's what was happening.

[15 : 35] That's what was happening here. This man was only trying to help. And so often, we've had experience when we only try to help and we make things immeasurably worse.

Our intentions are good, but the result is not good. And God in his grace overrules. I think it's important to remember that.

That what this incident is really telling us, he's not simply that once in the lifetime of Elisha, the prophet saved these people from our nasty death by poison, from death in the pot.

It's telling us that God overrules in every circumstance of our life. It's telling us, in other words, that it's God's work, not ours. And it prevents us from getting too conceited about our own work.

Sometimes I think our work for the Lord, the Lord, must look sometimes and shake his head, not in unkindness, not in unpleasantness, but a loving parent, a father having compassion on his children as he tidies up the mess after a children's party, as he removes the broken toys and so on.

[16 : 48] I think if we thought in that way sometimes, it would save us from taking ourselves too seriously and being too impressed by our own work. It is the Lord's work. It's not ours.

And as one of the characters in Narnia says, it's a wonderful phrase, it is the courtesy of deep heaven that when we mean well, he takes us to have meant better than we did.

That is wonderful. That is grace. That's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God who helps the helpless. The God whose generosity overrules our mistakes.

And thirdly, this final incident, the God whose generosity gives us far more than we need. Once again, it's a time of famine.

And famine, of course, marks much of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha and much of it was a judgment, of course, of the idolatry and the apostasy. And Willie mentioned this morning a famine of the word of God.

[17 : 51] Which, of course, is the very phrase that Amos uses. There will be a famine, not of eating and drinking, but a famine of the word of God. And you find that many, many places in this country.

There is a famine of the word of God. There is death in the pot. There is no life-giving word being preached. And therefore, there is no life-giving growth.

And that is a judgment of God. And so here, it's interesting, this unnamed man. Man came from Baal-Shelisha, bringing the man of God, bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

Now, in the books of Moses, in fact, in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, and in Deuteronomy, look up Deuteronomy 18, not at the moment, look it up later, 18 verses 4 to 5, that the firstfruits were to be given to the priests.

The firstfruits were to be given as a sign of respect for the priest's office and of gratitude for what the priests had done. What kind of priests did we have in Israel then?

[19 : 02] We had priests of Baal, didn't we? Priests who were totally idolatrous. Priests who were pagan. But we also had pagan mixed priests. Priests who followed Jehoram, king of Israel, who had a bit of the Lord and a bit of Baal.

Priests who talked some things that were true and many things which were false. Priests who sat in judgment on the word of God instead of declaring it.

So what's this man doing? This man is coming to the prophet and saying, Elisha, you are the true voice of God in this land today. The priests may have turned their back on the word of God, but God has still provided us with godly leadership.

In other words, this man is one of the believing remnant. I want us to look at two things about this. First of all, we have the spoken word of God.

This time, there is no visible sign. Elisha said, give to the men that they may eat. She said, how can I say this before a hundred men? So Elisha repeated, give them to the men that they may eat.

[20 : 09] For thus says the Lord, notice, thus says the Lord, they shall eat and have some left. As I've said, sometimes in his grace, God gives us visible encouragement.

But even when he doesn't, we still have his word. We have his promises. Build him as right, trust and obey. But there really is no other way but to trust the promises and to obey the commands.

And even at times of famine, even at times of spiritual famine, there is still the authentic word of God being heard, the gospel is still being proclaimed, and people are still being fed and there is plenty left over.

So the spoken word of the Lord, that's the way that God works, that's the way God brings life, that's the way God destroys death, that's the way he builds up his church.

But the second thing, I'm going to call this the living word because surely as we read this, you can't have failed to notice that this points forward to another story, doesn't it?

[21 : 11] one of the few stories that all four gospels tell us and the living word of God broke bread and fed 5,000 at once.

This is a little trailer of that bigger incident. The little boy who gave his lunchbox to Jesus. Now let's not sentimentalise this story.

Let's not say, would you like to give your lunchbox to Jesus? Would you like to help Jesus out? He's got a bit of a problem here and he needs some help.

Surely, surely we recognise better than that the God we are dealing with. The miracle is not that the one who created from nothing was able to multiply the loaves and the fish.

The miracle was surely that he accepted the loaves and the fish. And surely the miracle is that the Lord and we come back to the point I said we come back to the Lord is willing to use the little that we have.

[22 : 18] The Lord can do without us. The Lord does not need please don't please don't ever repeat and think you're being spiritual and you repeat God has no hands but our hands no eyes but our eyes no feet but our feet.

God does not need my hands my feet and my eyes and my voice but the wonderful thing and this is what grace is about that God is graciously willing to use our hands and our voices the little gifts that he has given us used in the service of his kingdom not only to feed those there but to leave plenty over.

The point surely is that with Jesus that little grows and grows and grows because it is the living word of God the seed has life in it in itself and we've noticed this haven't we as we've gone through Acts those last months the word of God increased not very much about church growth the word grew and the word grew because the word is a living word Jesus is willing to use what you have so let's say let's not sentimentalize either this story or the feeding of the 5,000 they shall eat and have some left this is verse 44 so he set it before them and they ate and had some left according to the word of the Lord and notice the modesty and understatement which this story is told this kind of thing were happening nowadays people be hiring halls and showing videos and so on and telling everybody about this wonderful experience it's almost added as a kind of afterthought because surely what the prophet is saying is this is what

God is like he gives he gives and he gives again that's what grace is about so we have a good and generous God God does not need us God does not need what we have but in his amazing grace he takes us and he takes the little we have and he transforms them these people here were not superheroes they're not names that reverberate down scripture and history remember in Hebrews 11 where there are the great names of faith the Moses the Abrahams and so on there are multitudes of others nameless individuals who ran the race of faith who honoured the Lord in their day and whom the Lord used he will take our little gifts he'll take ourselves and he'll transform them and through that he'll feed multitudes and this is a God who is not only with us in moments of high drama he's with us every day of our lives he's with us every part of our lives and indeed beyond it into the life to come because this chapter is an anticipation of that wonderful new creation where there will be no famine no death no poison for the former things have passed away and God in his grace gives us wonderful glimpses of that life to come here and now

Amen Let's pray Our Father how conceited we are often and how we imagine the kingdom depends on us Father we thank you that the work is not ours but yours the glory will not be ours but will be yours how we celebrate your grace and praise you for our goodness and pray that throughout our lives you will be with us and use the little we have to feed the multitudes and to glorify the name of our Lord Jesus Christ Amen Amen