

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Pulman

A Place to Stay: A place for hospitality

Good morning. Our talk this morning is on the subject of hospitality and our main Scripture comes from 2 Kings 4. The story is found in 7 and is in two parts. Verses 8-17 relate to our subject this morning concerning the provision of hospitality. The remainder of the verses concern an additional event which, although not related to the subject of this talk, flows out of the initial event. The whole story is very interesting and instructive and well worth reading.

Let me read verses 8-11 as these are the kernel of the story for today. For completeness verses 12-17 will be considered later in the talk and then we will briefly make mention of verses 18-37 to conclude our talk on hospitality and the growth of faith in the woman who is at the centre of the whole event.

“Now it happened one day that Elisha went to Shunem, where there was a notable woman, and she persuaded him to eat some food. So it was, as often as he passed by, he would turn in there to eat some food. And she said to her husband, ‘Look now, I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please, let us make a small upper room on the wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lamp stand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.’ And it happened one day that he came there, and he turned in to the upper room and lay down there.” 2 Kings 4:8-11.

Hospitality is a theme that runs through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. *In Genesis 18* we see hospitality being shown by Abraham. This not only included food but the washing of feet to refresh and the opportunity to relax in the shade of a tree during the heat of the day. In Revelation 3:20 we find the Lord offering to dine with anyone who would open themselves to Him.

There are three characters in this section of our story, Elisha, a notable woman and the woman’s husband. From verse 11 we gain the impression that the offering of hospitality was not a new thing for this woman. It may be that any traveller passing or stopping to ask for refreshment was willingly given hospitality. With regard to Elisha, and this may have been his first time in journeying to Shunem (a city in the tribal area of Issachar) he is persuaded to stop and take refreshment. The woman was on the lookout for travellers and was only too willing to encourage such to turn aside that some form of hospitality might be provided. Hebrews 13:2 states, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”. Here is the same encouragement for believers to be involved in this work of hospitality. Also, in 1 Timothy 5:10, in connection with the good character of widows, it is stated “Well reported for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints’ feet.” The first challenge from this story is: Are we on the lookout for opportunities to show hospitality? This type of hospitality is not to friends and family, it is to the stranger.

Whatever was said on that first occasion we read that, “as often as he passed by, he would turn in there to eat some food.” So we have a beautiful picture of a home that provides a welcome place of rest and refreshment. Elisha is happy enough to turn into this home and the woman is willing to be the host to this passing stranger.

Now we read that this was a “notable woman” and from this we gain the impression that this person may have been well off and easily able to provide a meal to passing strangers. The cost may have been easily borne from the household budget. Does this allow a “get out” for those of us who are not very well off and may be feeling the pressure of reduced budgets during hard times of recession? Should we think in such a way then we need reminding of Elijah’s experience when God told him, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you”, 1 Kings 17:9. Reading this story we see the desperate state this widow was in but there was sufficient when God was in the picture. The food was not grand and it does not need to be; it is the thought and actions done for God that are the most important.

So this woman at Shunem was willing to act in this service of hospitality and not just a one off but repeatedly and probably with many passing travellers. In the process of time, possibly through conversation and the way in which Elisha behaved, the woman comes to a conclusion. In verse 9 the woman talks with her husband that Elisha must be a “holy man of God, who passes by us regularly.” While some may be given to hospitality, they may not see their visitors regularly. But for Elisha he is seen regularly as God’s work takes him to that part of Israel. The conclusion then leads to action. Note that it is a joint action as she says to her husband, “Please, let us make a small upper room on

the wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lamp stand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there”, verse 10.

Now, many of us may well be able to afford a meal now and then, even on reduced income, but what is now being suggested is something a lot greater and probably costly. This is a house extension, small it might be but it is still an extension to the house. It is not a shed at the back of the house; it is going to be on the top, probably by the parapet wall on the roof and adequate for an overnight stay. In later verses we find that Elisha was not travelling alone but had his servant with him who would need accommodating as well. We have a major change in terms of hospitality, not simply a meal and the stranger goes on their way; this is for overnight stays.

Is this an isolated case of this type of hospitality or do we find similar situations elsewhere in the Bible? In Acts 16:14-15 we have an account of a new convert who responds with hospitality to Paul and his companions, “Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ So she persuaded us.” This is the same kind of attitude, although not to strangers because Paul and his friends had preached the Gospel to Lydia and others. So Lydia was aware of them but it was the response from a person who has been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. True conversion not only provides eternal salvation, knowing sins forgiven, but changes a person in practical ways. One of those ways is the provision of hospitality. In doing so, Lydia helps forward the work that Paul, and others were occupied with at Philippi. Paul had a base from which to work in both the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of new converts so that they might understand what Christianity is all about.

We come back to the extension. Once completed, it needed to be furnished. Notice verse 10 regarding the contents of the room, “Let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lamp stand.” The contents might seem sparse compared to how we might furnish what could be called a one room bed sit. But the contents are certainly adequate, providing all that Elisha would require. I mentioned earlier that Elisha had a servant. He would probably sleep on the floor as that would be normal practice in those days. A bed: for the taking of rest during the day or for sleeping upon at night. A table: in order to eat meals, another part of the hospitality offered by this woman of Shunem. A chair has many uses; it may be used with the table for meals or as a place to sit and rest, relax, mediate or even pray. Finally, there is the lamp stand. The lamp stand with the oil lamp placed upon it can be used in a number of situations. Early morning before the sun has fully risen and late at night after the sun has gone down it will give light when it is dark. Also the light provides a means for reading and writing: copies of the Scriptures and letters to be read and the writing of letters. Then there would be the preparation of God’s messages to be proclaimed to others through His servant, some of which would eventually form part of the Scriptures we have in the Bible. The accommodation is adequate and would not be a restriction to Elisha while staying there.

As we have journeyed down this story of hospitality, it has developed from the provision of a meal to a passing stranger into a full blown provision to lodge a prophet of the Lord helping forward God’s work. We can now see hospitality in probably its fullest form as a very necessary service to be performed among believers. Yes, in its simplest form it is a cup of cold water to a passing stranger whom we may never see again, but as the Lord said in Matthew 10:42: “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward.”

The woman wanted Elisha to have full use of this provision as stated at the end of verse 10, “so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.” Verse 11 clearly shows that Elisha much appreciated the room and its furnishing, “And it happened one day that he came there, and he turned in to the upper room and lay down there.” Now reading only as far as verse 11 the story could have ended there. However, Elisha is not an ungrateful person. He values what the woman has done and so on the day he arrived he calls for her. Let us read verses 12 and 13. “Then he said to Gehazi his servant, ‘Call this Shunammite woman.’ When he had called her, she stood before him. And he said to him, ‘Say now to her, ‘Look, you have been concerned for us with all this care. What can I do for you? Do you want me to speak on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?’” She answered, ‘I dwell among my own people’”

Elisha wants to show his appreciation. By now there is a friendship between Elisha and the woman and, as we have seen with the cup of cold water, the divine principle is that kindness does not go unrewarded. Sometimes kindness is repaid sooner rather than later but not always so. The Lord is no one’s debtor. It may be that the majority of rewards will not be seen or received until believers reach heaven at the rapture. Elisha was a person of influence: he could speak to the king or to the commander of the army. However, we see that whatever motivated this woman to show kindness, it was not to receive favours from king or commander. The woman expresses her contentment by simply saying that she was happy to dwell among her own people. With this the woman shows that she required nothing from Elisha. Whatever Christian service we do, our motivation is to do our service for the Lord, as it states in Colossians 3:23-24, “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”

Let us now look at verses 14-17. "So he said, 'What then is to be done for her?' And Gehazi answered, 'Actually, she has no son, and her husband is old.' So he said, 'Call her.' When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. Then he said, 'About this time next year you shall embrace a son.' And she said, 'No, my lord. Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant!' But the woman conceived, and bore a son when the appointed time had come, of which Elisha had told her."

It would appear that the woman then left Elisha and the conversation at some later point continues possibly because Elisha is burdened that the kindness of the woman should not go unrewarded. Elisha asks his servant, "What then is to be done for her?" Here is a man who lives his life in the will of God, committed to being a prophet and always ready for service, yet he has not been able to understand the woman and her husband to the same extent as Gehazi. Gehazi has been able to find out what was possibly a family sadness - they had no son. There may have been daughters in the family, on this Scripture is silent. But a son was considered necessary for the family name, without which the wealth of this couple will go to another member of the wider family.

Once again the woman is called and the prophet Elisha states, "About this time next year you shall embrace a son." The reaction of the woman is, "No, my lord. Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant!" As we look at this response we see conflicting emotions combined with a faith which is not able to grasp the enormous power and capability of God. The woman may well have been much younger as we are told that her husband is old. And it is possible that the attention and love that might have been lavished on a son had been redirected towards providing hospitality towards strangers. The woman's first statement is a contradiction "No, my lord." Due respect is given to Elisha as a prophet and man of God. Elisha's word was God's word and to say "no" to His word is not of faith. Peter, in the Gospels found himself in this kind of situation, telling the Lord "No". Do we sometimes find ourselves in the situation of refusing God's directions?

The woman further compounds her little faith by saying that Elisha is lying, even though she takes the place of being a servant to Elisha. A servant's place is to obey and do as directed. There is no record of Elisha reproving her for this lack of faith. The promise had been made by Elisha on behalf of God and God cannot lie, see Numbers 23:19, Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18. Scripture does record, "But the woman conceived, and bore a son when the appointed time had come, of which Elisha had told her." In total contradiction to her lack of faith, the woman conceives and a son is born.

Now we must not draw conclusions that if we submerge ourselves in the Lord's service then any secret longing we may have will be granted to us as a reward for faithfulness. To do so highlights the wrong motive for service and implies that we can manipulate God for our own designs. As believers, whether we have children or not, our primary objective is to live our lives putting our Lord Jesus Christ first in all that we do. We need to be like Paul who said in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

The last part of this story in verses 18-37 again focuses upon the woman. As yet her faith was still dependent upon physical things, in this case her son who dies. In her grief the same issue is raised about deceiving her as to a son. However, as the story unfolds to its climax we see that Elisha represents the "living God". It is God who holds life in His hand and ultimately is the giver and remover. Elisha is to demonstrate that God is able through His servant to restore life to the child. The interesting point in this story that when the child dies, the woman lays him on the bed prepared for Elisha. The Hebrew word for "bed" can also be translated "bier" on which a dead body is laid and eventually carried out for burial. However, God intervenes and life is restored. This brings the woman to worship God as she bows down in the presence of Elisha. Elisha, or indeed any servant of God, is not to be worshipped because worship belongs to God alone. But for this brief moment, Elisha stands as God's representative observing the work of God in this precious soul who has made a long and painful process in the development of her faith.

There is a tremendous need for the service of hospitality among Christians. Over the years as a family we have experienced hospitality from many dear believers around the United Kingdom, sometimes, meeting them for the first time when we arrive on their door step. In part, it is a normal expectation because we belong to the family of God. It is this aspect that enables a guest to feel at home and to be comfortable with the host. Thankfully over the years we, as a family, have been blest by God in offering this same service to others and sometimes meeting believers for the first time as they arrive at our home.

I do trust that this morning's talk will be an encouragement to you in the service of hospitality. This is an important work of faith and labour of love to the "stranger" and fellow believers, helping forward the servants of the Lord.

In closing let us remind ourselves of God the Father's hospitality by reading from JG Deck's hymn,

*High in the Father's house above,
Our mansion is prepared;*

*There is the home, the rest we love,
And there our bright reward.*

*With Him we love, in spotless white,
In glory we shall shine;
His blissful presence our delight
In love and joy divine.*

*All taint of sin shall be removed,
All evil done away;
And we shall dwell with God's Beloved,
Through God's eternal day.*

Thank you for listening and the Lord bless you this Lord's Day.

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