ELISHA, A SHEPHERD OF KINGS AND PEOPLE

2 Kings 3:1-4:44

Key Verse: 4:43

“’How can I set this before a hundred men?’ his servant asked. But Elisha answered, ‘Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: “They will eat and have some left over.”’”

In today’s passage we see how Elisha served as a shepherd for kings and people in Northern Israel. The spiritual and moral condition was very dark. They needed a shepherd who could lead them to God. God raised Elisha as such a shepherd. Our times are also dark. We need shepherds in every segment of society. God wants to raise us as shepherds for his people (1 Pe 5:2). Let’s learn from Elisha how to be shepherds for his people.

I.  Elisha, a shepherd of kings (3:1-27)

Verses 1-3 tell us about Joram, another evil king, who succeeded Ahaziah in Northern Israel. Seeing the terrible result of Baal worship, Joram got rid of the sacred stone. Yet he clung to the sins of Jeroboam to maintain his power. The background of chapter 3 is a war between Israel and Moab. Verses 4-7 tell how this war broke out. After Ahab’s death, the king of Moab rebelled against the king of Israel (5). This brought great economic loss. So Joram decided to subdue the Moabites. He mobilized all Israel and invited Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, along with the king of Edom, to join his military campaign. They wanted to surprise the Moabites by approaching from the south, through the Desert of Edom. Their strategy seemed good. But they could not find water. They were doomed to destruction before fighting.

In this desperate situation, there were two responses. In verse 10 the king of Israel said, “What! Has the Lord called us three kings together only to hand us over to Moab?” The king complained about the Lord and became angry and fatalistic and doubted God’s love. Many people respond to hardship in this way. However, Jehoshaphat, a godly king, was different. He said, “Is there no prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of the Lord through him?” He believed the solution would come from the Lord. When Jehoshaphat was told about Elisha, he said, “The word of the Lord is with him.” So they went to Elisha. Usually kings summon people to come to them. However, Jehoshaphat and the other kings went down to Elisha.

Elisha said to the king of Israel, “What do we have to do with each other? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophets of your mother” (13). The king of Israel should have acknowledged his sins in this time of need and humbled himself. Instead, he retorted, “No, because it was the Lord who called us three kings together to hand us over to Moab.” This aroused Elisha’s holy anger. He said, “As surely as the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, if I did not have respect for the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you or even notice you. But now bring me a harpist.” Elisha was willing to help for the sake of Jehoshaphat. But he had to overcome his holy anger to hear the word of the Lord well. He needed music therapy (1 Sa 10:5). Sometimes, in order to listen to the voice of God, we need to overcome anger, bitterness, a busy mind, or stress. So the Bible teaches us to sing and listen to spiritual songs (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16b).

“While the harpist was playing, the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha, and he said, ‘This is what the Lord says: Make this valley full of ditches. For this is what the Lord says: You will see neither dew nor rain, yet this valley will be filled with water, and you, your cattle and your other animals will drink’” (15a-17). This was beyond reason or common sense. They needed to accept the Lord’s word with faith. Faith is to believe that what God says will happen, though it seems impossible. Here, it was to believe God’s power to give water in the desert. Elisha emphasized “this is what the Lord says.” With faith in the Lord, they needed to dig ditches in the valley. When the kings heard this message they were shocked. They could not imagine that water would fill the arid desert. Then Elisha said, “This is an easy thing in the eyes of the Lord.” He also prophesied that the three kings would defeat Moab completely (19). God wants to do great things through us. But we need to have practical faith in God. We must dig ditches before the water comes.

What happened? In the early morning of the next day, the land was filled with water. The three kings and their armies could drink and water their animals too. God’s overflowing blessing revived them in body and spirit. At the same time, the Moabites thought the water was blood. They assumed the three kings slaughtered each other. But when they went out to plunder them, the Israelites rose up against them and defeated them, destroying the towns of Moab. It was a great victory as Elisha had propesied.

During a time of national crisis, Elisha saved the nation by listening to the Lord and giving the right advice to the kings. In this way he became a shepherd of the kings. As God’s servants, we are called to be shepherds of our nation and its leaders. We must pray for President Obama to listen to the word of God and make right decisions. We must pray for our nation. Then we can live holy lives and obey the world mission command (1 Ti 2:1-4).

II.  Elisha, a shepherd of his people (4:1-44)

Elisha was now an important national figure. He could have enjoyed worldly power and honor. Instead, as chapter 4 reveals, he became a shepherd for his people. He lived with them and performed miracles, five of which are recorded in chapter 4. Let’s learn how he shepherded his people.

The first miracle: filling empty jars with a little oil (1-7). Look at verse 1. A great man of God lived poorly and died with a great debt. Now his creditor was coming to enslave his sons. It was more than his widow could bear. She had lost her husband, and suffered from poverty; now she would lose her sons—her hope. In that society, there was no way out of this problem. In great distress, some parents killed their children and then committed suicide to avoid this hardship. But this woman came to God’s servant and cried out.

Look at verse 2a. “Elisha replied to her, ‘How can I help you?’” Elisha was willing to help her out of a shepherd’s heart. It is remarkable that after being a shepherd for kings, he was so mindful of a nameless woman who was in need. The issue was how to help her. Depending on how he helped her, she would grow spiritually, or she would become useless. Indeed, to help people is very difficult. If we help people successfully, they usually say, “Thank you.” If we are unsuccessful, complaints are disproportionate. Even though we try to help others, we can be hurt by them. Then we may decide, “I will never help anyone again.” But as a shepherd we should not make such a decision. Rather, we need to help people well with divine wisdom from heaven. Elisha could have given money to her out of his pocket. Or he could have started a fundraising campaign. Or he could have cried together with her, saying, “I am so sorry. But I cannot do anything.” Or he could have criticized the wicked creditor and called down fire from heaven on him. Instead, Elisha asked her, “Tell me, what do you have in your house?” Elisha helped her to find what she had, and experience the power of faith.

How did she respond? Look at verse 2b. “’Your servant has nothing there at all,’ she said, ‘except a little oil.’” A little oil was all she had. Elisha found the solution from the little oil. So he asked her to collect empty jars from all her neighbors. He said, “Don’t ask for just a few.” That means to ask for many. Then he told her and her two sons to go inside, shut the door, and pour oil into all the jars. He asked them to participate in the work of God by faith. He planted faith in them to overcome their obstacles.

Still, Elisha’s direction sounded unreasonable. The woman could have been rebellious, thinking, “Do you also despise me?” But she simply trusted God’s servant and obeyed by faith. She borrowed jars from her neighbors and began to pour oil in them. A miracle happened! The oil came out continually. The oil stopped flowing only when there was no jar left. Then Elisha asked her to go and sell the oil and pay her debts. She and her two sons could live on what was left. Here we can learn the wisdom of helping others as a shepherd. We have a tendency to focus on solving problems. But the best way is to help others have faith in God. When they experience the power of faith through their problems, they can learn to live by faith.

The second miracle: a Shunammite woman bears a son (8-17). One day Elisha went to Shunem in the northern part of Israel. A well-to-do woman was there. She urged him to stay for a meal. Elisha was encouraged by her humble servantship. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to enjoy eating fellowship. She was not burdened by the increasing frequency of Elisha’s visits. Rather, she wanted to serve him further. So she persuaded her husband to make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp. So whenever he came to their house, he could have a place for personal Bible study and prayer and be refreshed. Why did she do this? It was because she recognized Elisha as a holy man of God (9). Serving him was the expression of her love for God.

Elisha was thankful for the Shunammite woman’s kind service. So one day he called her and said, “You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?” But she answered, “I have a home among my own people.” She was content with what she had; she did not want anything more. She did not serve Elisha in order to obtain benefit. She served purely out of love for God, and respect for God’s servant. This must have endeared her to Elisha all the more. So he really wanted to bless her. But how? Gehazi spoke up, saying that she had no son and her husband was old. Then Elisha knew that what she really needed was a son. So Elisha called her and blessed her, saying, “About this time next year, you will hold a son in your arms.” The granting of a child is something that only the Sovereign God can do. How could Elisha speak like this? Elisha could prophesy by faith, because he had a burning desire to solve her practical problem out his great shepherd’s heart. She was embarrassed and did not know what to do. She said, “No, my lord. Don’t mislead your servant, O man of God!” She said this out of her deep sorrow and resignation to not having a child. Though she really wanted a child, she had stopped hoping to have a child (28). It was easier to live without hope. Elisha did not say, “Okay. Forget about it.” Elisha blessed her according to her true heart’s desire. God blessed Elisha’s faith and shepherd heart and she became pregnant. The next year about that same time, she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had said (17).

The third miracle: raising a dead son (18-37). The child grew. He was a source of joy to his parents, especially his mother. It was not only the joy of having a son, but of experiencing the power of God. Then one day, an unexpected thing happened. The boy went out to his father, who was with the reapers. He said to his father, “My head! My head!” His father did not know what to do, and sent him to his mother. The boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. Now her miracle son was dead. She suffered from great pain and sorrow. She could have despaired, thinking that death was the end, or complained to the Lord or his servant, doubting God’s love. This might have been the worst day of her life. At this moment, what did she do?

She remembered that it was God who gave her a son, blessing Elisha’s shepherd’s heart for her. So she decided to bring this problem to God’s servant Elisha. She believed that the God of Elisha could solve this problem. She had resurrection faith. So she went up and laid her son on the bed of Elisha and shut the door. She asked her husband for a servant and a donkey to go and visit the man of God. When her husband questioned her, she simply said, “It’s all right.” She did not argue. She respected her husband, but this time she concealed her struggle from him, because he could not understand what was really happening. She simply saddled the donkey and instructed her servant, “Lead on; don’t slow down for me unless I tell you.”

So she set out to meet the man of God at Mount Carmel, about 20 miles away. Along the way she met Gehazi, and told him, “Everything is all right.” However, when she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet as a most humble and earnest supplicant. Gehazi tried to push her away, not knowing her agony. But the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why.” Even Elisha did not know what was in her heart, unless the Lord revealed it to him. She said, “Did I ask you for a son, my lord? Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes?’” In that moment, she thought that if she never had a son, she would have been much happier. It was hard to accept that God gave her the joy of having a son for a short time and then took him away. Although she expressed great anguish, she had faith in God. That is why she brought the problem only to God’s servant.

Elisha understood what had happened. So he sent Gehazi to lay his staff on the boy’s face. But the child’s mother said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So he got up and followed her. Gehazi’s effort to raise the boy failed. When Elisha reached the house, he went into the room, shut the door and prayed to the Lord. Then he got on the bed and lay upon the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out upon him, the boy’s body grew warm. It was a great spiritual struggle against the power of death. Then Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room. Maybe he needed a break. Then he got back on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. Then Elisha gave the boy back to his mother. She showed deep thanks and reverence to Elisha by falling at his feet and bowing to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

Here we learn Elisha’s faith in God who raises the dead. He could have given up because the boy was already dead. He could have complained to God for taking away the son he had given. But Elisha did not do so. He believed that the Lord could raise the boy to life again. He believed that the Lord is sovereign over man’s life and death. So he challenged the power of death by faith. He did so out of great compassion for a grieving woman.

The fourth miracle: removing the poison of death (38-41). When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in that region. Elisha met with the company of prophets. They must have been studying the Bible together. Elisha knew that they were very hungry. So he asked his servant to put on the lunch pot and cook some stew for them. But there was nothing to eat. So one of them went out and found gourds on a wild vine. He made some stew with them. However, when they began to eat it, they cried out, “O man of God, there is death in the pot!” At this moment, someone might ask, “Who put these awful gourds into this pot?” But they did not blame anyone. They only cried out to the man of God. Elisha did not blame anyone. Instead, he put some flour in the pot, removing the poison of death. Then they could eat it deliciously. Many young people have contracted the poison of death as they have eaten from the pot of modern culture. Only the word of God has power to cleanse the poison of death and give life and health. So we must share the word of God with young people of our times.

The fifth miracle: feeding the hungry people (42-44). A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. Instead of bringing his firstfruits to the apostate priests at Bethel and Dan, he brought them to Elisha to support his ministry. Elisha wanted to feed hungry people, saying, “Give it to the people to eat.” The problem was that it was enough only for twenty people, but there were one hundred people there. Still, even if each one had only a small piece, Elisha wanted to share it among them all. Then his servant asked, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” Elisha could have said, “It is okay. Each one can have a bite.” But rather, he challenged the situation by faith, saying, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says, ‘They will eat and have some left over.’” His servant thought based on human reason. But Elisha thought based on faith in God Almighty. Humanly, it was impossible to feed one hundred people out of twenty barley loaves. But Elisha believed in the Almighty God and challenged the impossible situation by faith. Faith pleases God (Heb 11:6). Elisha’s servant obeyed and set the bread before the men. A miracle happened! They all ate and were satisfied, and even had some left over, according to the word of the Lord. Elisha’s shepherd heart produced a great miracle. This reminds us of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves and two fish.

In chapter four we have studied how Elisha shepherded God’s people through performing five miracles. We learn his faith in God Almighty. He believed that God could solve any problem and bless his people with life and peace. We learn his challenging spirit. Elisha confronted serious problems that were hard to solve: a large debt, a childlessness problem, a dead boy, the poison of death, and hunger in a time of famine. But he never gave in to the problem. He challenged the impossible by faith in God Almighty. Most of all, we learn Elisha’s great shepherd’s heart. Elisha deeply understood each person and helped each one properly, according to their need. His miracles came from his burning desire to help his people know God and experience his power. God gave him great wisdom. Elisha’s shepherd heart revealed the heart of God. God is mindful of the widow and the needy. God wants to feed the hungry and heal the sick. Elisha knew God’s heart. Jesus’ miracles in the gospels were done out of his great compassion for needy people.

God was pleased with such a man of faith. God really wanted to save people from the power of death. But God wanted to use a man of faith like Elisha. Even though God is living, and God is almighty, God works through in and through people of faith. If we do not have faith in God, nothing happens. God wants to use us to reveal his glory in our times. Let’s pray that God may raise us up as shepherds, like Elisha.