

COMPASSION FOR THE WIDOWS

ELISHA: PROPHET OF COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

by Ron Ritchie

Very few wives are fully prepared physically, emotionally, or spiritually to become widows. I want to read to you a few lines from Dr. Larry Crabb, Jr.'s new book *God of My Father*, a tribute to his father Lawrence, Sr., who is eighty years old. Larry, Jr. had asked his father to tell him the story of his godly grandfather's death in Philadelphia during the 1917 flu epidemic, which killed thousands of people. Lawrence, Sr. told him that he was one of four children when his father Charlie become deathly ill at the age of thirty. Charlie's wife Laura and the four children took turns day after day watching over him as a high fever raged over his body and mind. Laura shared with her son Lawrence years later what happened on the day her husband died,

"I was sitting beside the bed. Somehow I knew this was the end, and for the first time I cried in front of you. God was taking my Charlie after giving us so short a time together. He was leaving me a widow with four children. What was I to do? Then Papa looked at me. He recognized me, and I saw all the tenderness again in his eyes. He sat up and put his arms around me. For a moment I thought he was going to get well. Then he said, 'Laura, Laura, don't cry. Hush, God is in it.' Then he was gone."

I have always appreciated how God speaks in his word to the issue of widows and how he lays out in such practical terms the manner in which he wants his people in the nation of Israel and in the body of Christ to care for them. This message will be a reminder of how we are called upon by our risen Lord to have compassion for the widows among us in our own generation.

In 2 Kings 4:1-7 we will discover the heart of compassion God has toward the widows of Israel as illustrated in this story of one godly wife of a dead prophet, the mother of two sons, who found herself in desperate straits after her husband's death. Every widow among us will understand the emotional and mental tension in this story. I am hoping that the rest of us who have not experienced this reality will be instructed and encouraged by our loving God to renew in our hearts a sensitivity to widows; to reach out to them spiritually, emotionally, and physically as he directs us.

Before we begin our study of this passage, let me give you some historical background. Israel was Jehovah God's chosen people, taken out of the slavery of Egypt, as God had promised Abraham. They were to become a holy people, set aside to love and serve God. This was so that the surrounding Gentile nations living in great spiritual darkness could find the light of the world in every generation through the Israelites' love, care, and responsibility toward each other and toward their widows, orphans, and aliens. Then the light of truth as seen in Jesus and his love and care for the whole world through true believers would bring salvation for all (see Genesis 15- 25; Exodus 19:5,6; Isaiah 49:6; and John 1:4, 8:12). After King David and his son Solomon were laid to rest with their fathers, civil war broke out in the united twelve tribes in 926 BC. Jeroboam I ruled over Israel, the ten tribes in the north of Palestine, and established his capital in Samaria. Rehoboam ruled over Judah, the two tribes in the south, and established his capital in Jerusalem. Over the next 204 years Israel was ruled over by nineteen kings before the Lord disciplined them for their sin of idolatry through the Assyrian captivity of 722 BC. And for the next 340 years Judah was ruled over by thirteen kings before the Lord disciplined them for their sin of idolatry through the Babylonian captivity of 586 BC (see 2 Kings 17).

But at no time in all those horrible years of idolatry did God leave his people without a prophet. In fact, he sent thirty different prophets to his people with the hope that they would come back into a loving relationship with him. In the years between 874 and 797 BC (seventy-seven years), God moved two major prophets into the northern kingdom. The first was Elijah ("My God Is Jehovah"). Elijah was an instrument of God's grace to an idolatrous people. That fiery prophet foreshadowed the forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, as he

confronted the wicked King Ahab and his wife Jezebel (see 1 Kings 16:28-22:40 and Discovery Papers 4367-4372).

Then as the life and ministry of Elijah were drawing to an end, God moved him to anoint a young farmer named Elisha ("God Is His Salvation") to take his place (see 1 Kings 19:15-21). Elisha was to minister for the next fifty-one years (848 to 797 BC) to the kings and people of Israel, Judah, Moab, and Aram. Elisha would become an instrument of God's compassion and confrontation to his idolatrous people. And he would foreshadow the Messiah himself, Jesus, in his ministry to the widows, the childless, the hungry, the lepers, the blind, and the captives of his generation.

After God took Elijah to heaven in the chariots of fire via a whirlwind (see Discovery Paper 4372), Elisha began his ministry by first purifying the waters of the city of Jericho (symbolizing the ministry to which God has called all of his people of being "the salt of the earth"). Then as Elisha travel up to the city of Bethel, a gang of forty-two youths began to jeer at him, calling him "baldhead." Seeing their disrespect for the Lord, the prophet called upon Jehovah God to deal with them. Two bears came out of the woods and mauled the whole gang (a warning to all of us not to make fun of God's word or his messengers). Elisha then was called upon by the evil King Joram, son of Ahab and Jezebel, who reigned in Samaria, to find out if God would bring him and the kings of Judah and Edom victory in a war to be waged against the Moabites for not keeping a trade agreement. Elisha told them that in this war Jehovah would grant them victory (see 2 Kings 2:19-3:27). (This was a fulfillment of Psalm 2; our Lord is the ruler of the nations.)

The next move God directed Elisha to make on his behalf was not to join the king on the battlefield, nor to stand up in the public square, renounce idolatry, and warn the people of Israel of the impending judgment of God if they did not repent of their sin. Rather, God asked him to minister to a single frightened widow who had two teenage sons.

A widow's need

2 Kings 4:1

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves."

Queen Jezebel had slaughtered the prophets of God, but one hundred men had been saved by Obadiah in the city of Samaria when he hid them in a cave (see 1 Kings 18:4). There remained in the cities of Bethel and Jericho a company of prophets all during the reign of Jezebel. Early in Elisha's ministry one of the men from the company of the prophets became his servant. However, a day came when for some unknown reason he died before he could pay off certain debts that he had acquired and that were due to his creditor.

When it rains it pours. For not only had this woman lost the love, support, and comfort of her husband; but she discovered upon his death the horrible reality of this debt and no means to pay it off except to place her two beloved sons into a position of slavery to the creditor until the debt was paid. Apparently she had no family to go back to.

As then, so now: Most women in India are not treated very well according to a public TV program shown recently in our area. The director was trying to show how the AIDS virus is out of control in that country and especially in the city of Bombay. He interviewed some local prostitutes and their customers to prove the point. But out of that tragic situation another story emerged: Many of the thousands of women who currently are prostitutes are divorced or widowed with no support from their parents or family members because of the poverty and lack of skills all the way around. One woman told the reporter of the harsh reality of her situation. She said she owed her pimp a large sum of money, and recently she had come to the realization that the loan combined with the compounded interest could never be paid off, leaving her his lifetime slave. She was looking to either sell her two sons or put them up for adoption.

Back in 2 Kings 4, the widow's fear as she thought of her young teenage sons' becoming slaves or servants

drove her to the prophet Elisha, and perhaps the company of the prophets, for help. The law concerning debt was clear in her situation. The law said, "If one of your countrymen becomes poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him work as a slave. He is to be treated as a hired worker or a temporary resident among you; he is to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers. Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God" (Leviticus 25:39-43). What this meant was that the widow's sons were to be taken until they could work off the debt of their dead father or until the Year of Jubilee. If a relative should later step forward and pay off the debt, the sons could be redeemed at that moment. The normal time of service was six years; then they were free to leave with gifts of produce and cattle (see Deuteronomy 15:12-15). (If the servants loved the master, they could be brought before the elders on the seventh year, have their ear pierced, and stay for life [see Deuteronomy 15:17].)

But God knows and loves widows (which means bereaved). When the Law of Israel was written he clearly stated Israel's responsibility toward widows, and what he said crossed right over into the New Testament church. God declares that he is a Father to the fatherless and a Judge for the widows (see Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 68:5); and that,

"He supports the fatherless and the widow,
But He thwarts the way of the wicked."
(Psalm 146:9.)

God promises to avenge those who slay the widow and the orphan or deal with them unjustly (see Psalm 94:6-7, 23; Ezekiel 22:7, 13-14; Malachi 3:5; Isaiah 10:1-4).

The Law said concerning tithes, "At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town [at the gates of the elders]. And the Levite...and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do." (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; see also Deuteronomy 26:12). The Law also said, "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back and get it [the same applied to orchards and vineyards]; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow...And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this thing" (Deuteronomy 24:19-21). Religious feasts followed the same spiritual principle: "...You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with a tribute of a freewill offering...and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite...and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst..." (Deuteronomy 16:10-11; see also verse 14).

Widows were required to remarry only if they were widowed before they had children. In that case the brother of the deceased husband had a right to marry them (see Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

In the New Testament, the apostles appointed deacons to handle the daily distribution to Grecian Jewish widows of food supplied by the new Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (see Acts 6:1-6). Thirty years later Timothy was instructed by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 to tell the church in Ephesus that the immediate family members were responsible to care for the widows so that the burden of support would not fall on the church. But the "widow indeed"---who is sixty or over, who has no children or grandchildren, who has put her hope in God, who was the faithful wife of one man before he died, and who has lived a useful and charitable life---should be supported by the church. On the other hand, young widows are encouraged to remarry as soon as possible.

Let's take this opportunity to review some basic spiritual principles for Christian families. Concerning husbands Paul wrote, "...if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Timothy 5:8). We are called upon by God to provide for our wives (and children) not only during our lifetime, but also after our death. It is morally wrong to leave them with no resources so that they fall into the hands of the state, the creditors, or the church in a

position of financial and emotional bankruptcy. In this day and age there are many godly men and women in the Christian community who can give wise counsel about making a will and estate planning that will protect and provide for our wives upon our physical death.

As Christian fathers, if we neglect our financial responsibilities to our children who are still dependent upon us at the time of our death, it distorts the spiritual image of our loving heavenly Father in his provision for us, his spiritual children, not to mention a fallen humanity. It leaves our children with emotional and spiritual consequences in the years to come as they feel the deep fear of abandonment and of the loss of protection and provision. The pain never quite leaves those who are left on earth. (That has been my own experience.) Nevertheless, our hope is that, in the words of David,

"Though my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will receive me."
(Psalm 27:10.)

Finally, as adult children and grandchildren, we are called upon to support our widowed mothers and grandmothers. Paul continued his instruction to Timothy: "...these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God" (see 1 Timothy 5:4). David provided for his parents even after they abandoned him (see 1 Samuel 22:3-4). And Jesus on the cross turned to his disciple John and said regarding his own mother, "Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27).

One of the finest examples of this in my life has been the love and tender care my wife Anne Marie showed daily toward her nearly blind and totally deaf widowed mother for thirty-four years before her mother went to be with the Lord at the age of eighty. And last Monday we were reminded in a memorial service for Katherine Duncan of how she cared for her widowed mother until her mother went to be with the Lord at ninety-three years of age. In turn Katherine's son Craig and his wife Chris and their children cared for her, for she was also widowed, until she went to be with the Lord at the age of seventy-nine. God loves widows and never wants his children to forget them or forsake them until he calls them home to be with him. So many in our body are being faithful to the Lord in regard to their widowed mothers and grandmothers, not to mention their widowed fathers and grandfathers. May I just encourage you again that in the midst of the joy and the difficulties, "...this is pleasing to God" (1 Timothy 5:4).

Our compassionate God watches out for the widows and at times provides for them miraculously....

God's provision for the widow

2 Kings 4:2-7

Elisha replied to her, "How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

"Your servant has nothing there at all," she said, "except a little oil."

Elisha said, "Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side."

She left him and afterward shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. When all the jars were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another one."

But he replied, "There is not a jar left." Then the oil stopped flowing.

She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left."

I'm sure that Elisha's mind traveled back to the time when his mentor and friend Elijah had informed the wicked king Ahab that there would be no rain for three years because of his sin of idolatry. As a result of that drought the wicked as well as the righteous suffered. And Elijah was told by God to go to Sidon, where he would find a widow whom God had commanded to feed him. When he arrived, he found the widow preparing her last meal for herself and her son. He asked if she would include him. And because she was willing to share her last meal in obedience to the Lord, Elijah was able to fill her heart with hope: "Don't be afraid....For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land'" (1 Kings 17:13-14).

Elisha heard the widow say in response to his question, "Your servant [her late husband] has nothing there at all except a little oil." Oil was a basic necessity of everyday life then, and is even today. Usually an olive oil was used as fuel for cooking and lamps.

Now entered faith---not faith in faith, but faith in God. Faith is the belief in invisible realities. This unnamed widow had only the word of God through his prophet Elisha and a little oil. But when he told her to go into the neighborhood and ask her friends for some clay jars, and not a few at that, she moved out in obedient faith. Once all the available jars were collected, she was to further step out in faith by taking them all home and then shutting the door. In this private moment she and her sons would learn that God alone would supply their emotional and physical needs and thus encourage them to greater faith in his sovereign and loving provision.

The widow and her sons took that next step of faith: "Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." They did as they were told until they ran out---not of oil but of jars. At that moment the oil stopped flowing. Later Jesus would teach his disciples, "...When you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:6). Jesus, like Elisha, would do miracles and ask the people who were affected not to tell anyone. Some miracles are to remain between God and you.

"Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left." The meeting of one's just debts was a matter of prime importance, casting reflection on the God whom the widow served. In the context of paying taxes Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, "Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due...Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:7-8.) God desired to have this godly widow reflect his character of love in her community by being responsible for her debts. God's provision consisted not only of meeting her need to pay the debt, but of providing a means of future support. James wrote to the church of Jesus Christ, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

Living out our lives as Christians is very difficult most of the time and includes much physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. Some of the deepest pain and fear for a wife can come at the time of the death of her beloved husband. Yet God is present, and his compassion and provision are available as we place our faith in him. Much of that compassion and provision can be experienced when a wife's faithful husband has provided for her after his death, and when the love and support of her children and grandchildren are expressed to her on a daily basis until he calls her home to be with him. When provision by a deceased husband or the children or grandchildren is not possible, then the brothers and sisters of a local church are responsible to move in alongside a "widow indeed" and care for her all the days of her life. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27).

God loves widows and is aware of who they are, where they are, and what they need. In this day and age we in the church of Jesus Christ are to have the same awareness and compassion for widows that our Lord has. At this moment the elders and deacons of PBC have a list of all our known widows, and most of those on that list are being taken care of by the provision of the faithful husband as well as of their faithful children and grandchildren. A few are "widows indeed," and we are seeking to provide for their current needs. I can say as one of the elders of this church that we are not aware of any widow who is not being cared for by her family and friends or this church. However, if you are a widow in this church who is struggling emotionally,

spiritually, or financially, please let one of the elders or deacons know so that we can remain faithful to our Lord and express his compassion toward you on his behalf.

Larry Crabb, Sr. wrote further in his account,

My baby sister Mabs wrote: of this many years later, a poem she called "We Five,"
A common phrase we five possess,
A tale bearing happiness.
The shadow bears a light within it.
At death, he said, "Hush, God is in it."
Fifty years later Laura (still a widow) was on her death bed and Mabs (her daughter) was sitting beside her. Larry Crabb, Jr. shares the end of her life,
"...her heart failed and she was unable to speak. Yet somehow, she mustered her last bit of strength and gasped one word that Aunt Mabel could hear: "Hush." Her husband's dying words remained with her through all those years and were on her lips as she went to be with him.

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Ron Ritchie
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