

Released!

The prophet Elisha often became involved with the 'sons of the prophets'. They had dogged his steps since the time when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven, and they usually seem to have presented him with problems in one way or another. (See **2 Kings 2:3,5,7,15-18, 4:38, 5:22**) They seem to have thought in very similar ways to Gehazi, Elisha's servant, usually incapable of spiritual insight.

Who were they? The LORD had set up the family line of Aaron to be priests and had promised David that one of his descendants would always sit on his kingly throne but he had definitely **not** started any 'hereditary order of prophets'! It seems to me that they had set themselves up or perhaps been expected by others to be spiritual, simply because they were descended from men to whom the LORD had spoken! They certainly were not much help to Elisha, although he apparently took some responsibility for them. Perhaps it was something he was 'expected' to do!

In **2 Kings 4:1-7**, we see how one of their widows came to him for help. Her late husband **had** apparently 'feared the LORD', so there had been some reality in **his** life at least, but now he had died, leaving her with two sons to bring up. She had borrowed money and the two boys were about to be taken into slavery to pay off the debts, so she came crying to the man of God.

What was she expecting? A handout? A miracle? Elisha gave her neither. She was probably bitterly disappointed with his reply. She knew, after all, that there was next to nothing at home - that was exactly her problem, the reason she had come to him in the first place! What was he thinking of, sending her back to her empty home with the boys, and telling her to collect as many empty containers as she could from her neighbours?

It sounded pretty crazy but it says much for her that she did exactly what the man of God said, and soon she and her sons had borrowed whatever containers they could and were back in their sparse home. What a scene as she shut the door! Her two precious boys, soon to be taken away from her. They would have to work hard for someone else, but at least they would have food and shelter. With no prospects and no sons to support her, she was facing complete destitution.

And now there were all these rows upon rows of empty jars, bottles and barrels! A depressing sight, all this emptiness and no obvious means of filling it. All she had was one jar of oil. Was the creditor still banging on the

door? How had she managed to put him off? Hardly by telling him what Elisha had told her to do!

She was so desperate that there was only one thing to do, however foolish it might seem. Elijah was, after all, the prophet of the LORD and she had asked him for help. He had turned her back to what she already had, something that had probably come from the time when her godly husband had been able to provide for her - the jar of oil! It was not a big jar for daily cooking and so on, but one designed to hold oil for anointing, possibly for medical use.

As she poured and the boys fetched the empty containers and took the full ones away, their faith grew. Somehow, the oil in the jar had 'stretched' and had filled the first container - surely it could not go on stretching? But, as her sons kept bringing them and she just kept standing there pouring, each of the vessels was filled. By the time they had no more to bring, her faith was ready for more: *"Bring me another vessel."*

They were rich! This much anointing oil would set them up for life! The woman was so amazed that she just went and told Elisha what had happened. "Off you go then, sell the oil, then you and your sons can live on the proceeds." In present-day terms, very much like winning the lottery! End of poverty, no threat of slavery or destitution. Security for life.

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I am not trying to squeeze an Old Testament passage to mean something else. It just looks very much like an illustration of the position of many people I have met and go on meeting. Maybe it will seem familiar to you.

Many of us have a good background, like the woman. Perhaps you belong to a family of believers or a fellowship where God has been at work. Or perhaps you can look back to a time when the Lord really blessed you abundantly and was very real to you. You might think of this as your spiritual 'inheritance'. Maybe you are proud of it or perhaps it is just tucked away in an insignificant corner of your life.

Somehow you cannot escape the sense of poverty. It is as if you know you are 'living beyond your means' in spiritual terms, living an apparently godly life but knowing full well that it is as much really yours as your house would be with a 100% mortgage on it. Perhaps you fear that, sooner or later, your real spiritual state will become obvious and you do not relish the prospect of being **seen** to be destitute.

The most important thing the widow did was to admit her dire poverty, face it and seek a solution from God. She was just coming to the point of

no return, after which it would have been nearly impossible to change the situation. She realised just in time that it was not enough to have been married to a godly man, nor to be connected to 'the sons of the prophets'. She needed reality, and **fast!**

The alternative was to do nothing and let events take their own course. Her children would become bondservants and she would probably sink to the gutter. The cause was debt which she could not pay off.

Oil in the Bible is usually taken to be a picture of the Holy Spirit and it is tempting to oversimplify and just say, "You need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and discover the abundant life which will flow as a result!" True as far as it goes, but let's look at a bit more detail.

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The woman wanted a solution or, even better, a miracle! Elisha gave her neither. He sent her back to what she already had, the little jar of oil. There is a tendency, especially in some 'young people's churches', to encourage people to come back to the place, the meeting or the man for another touch of God in their lives, rather than teaching people away from dependence on men and systems and into personal dealing with God. Elisha was not interested in having a fan club - he wanted people to see the LORD at work for themselves. Here was the widow's first lesson in the obedience of faith.

She had to look again at her spiritual inheritance and draw from it. She did not benefit from the oil until she began to depend on it in obedience to the word of the LORD. Similarly, our 'inheritance' will do us no good unless we draw on it. Whether it was the Lord's blessing on the fellowship, the family or yourself, if you are not living in the good of it now, it is of no benefit to you. Without it, you are heading for debt, bondage and destitution, just as surely as the widow was.

So, what is this 'inheritance' in our terms today? There is only one thing that can clear our debts, release us from bondage and give us security of living, and that is the grace of God to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Real practical dependence on what our Father has given us in his Son. Hidden away, perhaps, in the history of God's dealings with our fellowship, our family or ourselves?

What can clear our 'debts'? You know, all those things we have done and thought that are wrong, the ones that accuse us before God and seem to make it impossible to pray. Learning to live in the grace of God means learning to depend on the power of the blood of Jesus to deal with these things. Not the blood of Jesus and my efforts, just the blood of Jesus. Nothing else justifies us before the Father. (**Romans 5:9**)

What can release us from bondage or the threat of it? Not dramatic bondage, perhaps, just the way we give in to peer pressure or our own ambition to 'be someone'. Being tied to legalism and traditions. Finding ourselves going on failing in the same ways, day after day, year after year. Giving up on expecting to be changed. Yes, all of these are bondage. What can set us free?

One of the most precious (and often overlooked) aspects of the grace of God to us in Jesus is that God tells us that our old life has gone. Not that it **should** have gone, but that it **has**! In practice, most Christians do not believe this and go on trying to overcome the 'old nature'. Our Father tells us he has already done it and that we just have to live in the good of what he has done. If (when!) aspects of our old life emerge, we can deliver them to the death which has already been accomplished by Jesus. This is not just words, or mind games! (See **Colossians 3:5-11**)

Because this fact is so vital to our life in Christ, the enemy finds all sorts of ways to cloud it. So, if it is not real to you on a daily basis, find out from the Bible about being dead to sin, dead to law, dead to the world's way of doing things, and start actively taking hold of this aspect of grace. (**2 Corinthians 5:14-17, Romans 6:1-11, 7:4, Galatians 6:14** may help to get you started.) Try to find someone who doesn't just know the doctrine or the Bible passages, but who is learning to **live** in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope you will find a person who is certainly not perfect, but whose life is gradually being transformed.

And then security, the opposite of destitution. The widow now had a 'nest egg' which would certainly see her through the rough patch and probably for the rest of her life. We have been given something much better, as we have already seen in **Romans 6:11** - we have been given the resurrection life of Jesus! Much of the rest of **Romans 6, 7** and **8** talks about this 'resurrection' life, making it clear that it is ours to take hold of in Christ, a life that really pleases God!

Yes, the oil is a picture of the Holy Spirit and he has been poured out on the Church. His most important work is to reveal Jesus and make him real to us, leading us into a practical daily experience of the reality of his grace to us. (**John 14:26, 16:13-15**) Don't say that it can't be done - it is our Father's means of "*bringing many sons to glory*" (**Hebrews 2:10**)

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