

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE BOOK OF II KINGS

- PART TWO - CHAPTERS 4-5

We have already seen the remarkable parallel between Elijah preparing for Elisha, and John the Baptist preparing for Jesus. These next few chapters concentrate on a series of miracles God worked through Elisha which again and again foreshadowed the work of the Lord Jesus. Elisha's miracles each affected only a handful of people yet the pictures of the coming ministry of Jesus are among the most vivid in the Old Testament.

CHAPTER FOUR begins with a story which is very similar to that of Elijah in I Kings 17. Each story describes a needy widow with one or more sons and a jar of oil. We have seen how a jar can describe the human heart,(II Cor.4:7) and oil the Holy Spirit.(Heb.1:9) The jars in the story of Elijah were the source of food for a starving family, as God feeds us spiritually day by day, if we trust Him. The jar this time became the means of filling every other jar in the neighbourhood. Every heart and situation exposed to God will be taken over by Him. The danger this time was not of starvation but of slavery for her sons. Letting the Lord fill every situation we face means that our children do not have to be owned by the values of the world we live in. Equally each heart filled with the Spirit of Jesus will be God's means of filling other empty hearts around us which are open to Him.

The second story tells of Elisha's impact on another, seemingly quite different family. This family was wealthy in money but poor in what they really wanted. This woman opened her home to Elisha, 'God saves', and found that he was able to give her the desire of her heart, a son. Joy turned again to heartbreak, as in I Kings 17, as the promised son was taken away in death. The mother's instinct was to blame God, and Elisha, as we so often emotionally do in hard times. She learned to trust even this problem to Elisha and saw him restore life to her son. There is, in the widow's discovery, a close parallel to the account of Abraham offering his son, Isaac, to God on Mt.Moriah and receiving him back in 'resurrection'.(Gen.22; Heb.11:17-19) Our new life in Christ is God's not ours, so we must learn to let God do what He wants with our Christian lives rather than hanging on tight.

The next story is again about feeding people, this time the sons of the prophets, the Bible school students who learned from Elisha. An unwise contribution to the meal nearly poisoned the whole group. Teaching that arises out of our wisdom is going to be false, and so dangerous. Meal, ground up wheat seed, a picture of the word of God,(Lk.8:11) in the hands of Elisha restored value and safety to the cooking pot. The Lord has a wonderful way of working out our mistakes and even teaching people through them.

The final story seems like the Old Testament forerunner of Jesus' miracles of feeding 4000 and 5000 with only a few loaves.(Matt.14,15) One can imagine that it was this story Jesus had in mind as He approached those seemingly impossible situations. He still wants to use His servants to feed His hungry people.

CHAPTER FIVE describes Naaman, an army officer of a foreign power, who came to Israel looking for help, rather like the centurions of the New Testament.(Matt.8:5; Acts 10:1) His coming was the result of the faithful witness of an Israelite slave girl. The king of Israel saw the request of the king of Aram to fix his leprous general as a political trick to provoke a new war. Word reached Elisha of Naaman's coming so he invited the general to visit him. Without even meeting Naaman, he sent him instructions to bathe 7 times in the river Jordan. Elisha deliberately avoided making

any fuss of the general to test his willingness to listen to the word of God only. Naaman was obviously offended by the lack of VIP treatment and was preparing to ignore Elisha's orders until one of his servants pointed out that he had nothing to lose by trying them out. Eventually he bathed 7 times in the Jordan and was cured. Leprosy in the Bible is a very graphic picture of sin, beginning small, but gradually taking over and making us more and more ugly and insensitive.(Matt.8:1-4) The Jordan was the place which had repeatedly pictured death and resurrection with Christ by which we are made clean.(Josh.3; II Kings 2; Matt.3:13-17)

Naaman returned from the river Jordan cured and obviously delighted to meet Elisha in person for the first time. His immediate concern was to make a gift in appreciation. Elisha refused the gift as a way of teaching Naaman that God's grace is free and cannot be paid for. Naaman had two further requests; first he wanted to take some soil home with him supposing that a piece of the land of Israel would remind him of the God of Israel; his second concern was forgiveness in advance because of the compromise he would be making by accompanying his boss, the king of Aram, into a heathen temple. Elisha encouraged him that God understands the struggles of a young believer.

Gehazi, Elisha's servant, saw an opportunity too good to miss. It is not often one meets a rich man who wants to give his money away! He thought of all the good causes to which this money could be put. Making up such an excuse he followed Naaman and explained that Elisha had changed his mind. He accepted a generous gift on his master's behalf. Elisha was not fooled and confronted Gehazi with his dishonesty. Naaman's leprosy transferred to Gehazi. Jesus alone can pay for our sin. If we let someone pay us for being clean, then we should also receive the sin because we are taking the place of the Lord Jesus as the sin-bearer.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND FURTHER STUDY

1. Look one by one at the stories of chapter 4. What pictures of spiritual ideas does each story contain? What is the message of each story? How does the story remind you of a particular event in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ?
2. Now look at the stories as a series. How does each story build on the idea of the one before? Can you find a similar series of events in the life of Jesus?
3. Consider further the story of Naaman in chapter 5. What spiritual pictures does the story contain? What does it teach us about the way to be clean from our sin?
4. What really was Gehazi's mistake? Why was the consequence so serious? How do we make the same mistakes in the church today? What damage does this do?