2 Kings 4 Death in the pot

Variety is the spice of life. Rather than following our usual pattern of working through the passage in sections, we are going to use first at the context tool, then the structure tool, both of which guide us to important themes we might otherwise miss. Finally we come to what is front and centre in the chapter: the miraculous salvation that Elisha brings.

**Context: Sin and judgment**

The context tool helps us get our bearings. We first need to remind ourselves how Elisha’s ministry was introduced:

‘The one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death’ (1 Kings 19:17).

His power to bring God’s judgment was illustrated in the incident with the she-bears in 2 Kings 2:23-25. In the last study, somewhat surprisingly, we saw him bringing salvation. Yet it was made clear that Israel and her king were still apostate (3:13-14) and the chapter ended ominously with a reminder of God’s wrath (3:27). We concluded that the intervention of God’s grace was not salvation *instead of* judgment but salvation *before* judgment. Exile will come. But first there is a chance to seek mercy.

Taking our lead from the context tool, we know what look for in chapter 4, and we find it! There are further clues that salvation is being played out against a backdrop of Israel’s sin and God’s judgment:

* God had commanded that ‘you shall not mistreat and widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword’ (Exodus 22:22-24). He had commanded also that ‘if your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner’ (Leviticus 25:39-40). Only through flagrant disregard for God’s law could the situation in 4:1 arise.
* One of the curses for breaking God’s covenant at Sinai was that ‘the land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit’ (Leviticus 26:20 cf. Deuteronomy 28:17-18). In 4:38 we read of a famine in the land.

**Structure: a focus on the remnant**

You may have heard of the multi-layered, Big-Mac-style, ABCBA structures in Biblical writing, referred to as ‘chiasms’ (or sometimes, by boffins, as ‘palistrophes’). We would urge caution in detecting them, because if you try hard enough you can persuade yourself that one exists almost anywhere. A silly example:

On the dining room table in front of us as we type these notes are: a bottle of water, a book of Chess openings, a pair of sunglasses, a music CD, a glass. “Knock me down with a feather, it’s a CHIASM!!”

Drinking vessel

Object associated with a leisure activity

Aid to sight

Object associated with a leisure activity

Drinking vessel

Hopefully we’ve made the point. The table does not contain a hugely-significant message from God about spiritual sight. The chiasm exists only in our fevered imaginations. And sometimes (it seems to us) the chiasms offered in bible commentaries are the same, particularly those based on themes or categories chosen by the interpreter. However in other cases the parallels are very specific, perhaps even using the exact same phrases, and we are persuaded that the chiasm existed in the *author’s* mind. Here is one such:

Salvation, by military victory, for the whole nation (3:1-27)

Salvation for a faithful remnant, the ‘sons of the prophets’ (4:1-44)

Salvation for a Gentile (5:1-27)

Salvation for a faithful remnant, the ‘sons of the prophets’ (6:1-7)

Salvation, by military victory, for the whole nation (6:8 – 7:20)

Even then, this is not the last word on the structure, because the Shunammite woman, first introduced in 4:8-37, reappears in 8:1-6; sevenfold sneezes in 4:35 mirror sevenfold washings in 5:14; Namaan is leprous in 5:1 like the four men at the gate of Samaria in 7:3; the start of the conversation between Gehazi and Naaman in 5:21-22 matches exactly the conversation between Gehazi and the Shunnamite in 4:26. Using the structure tool is art as well as a science: it requires judgement.

In this case, the chiasm serves to alert us to the identity of the *recipients* of God’s salvation. Taking our lead from the structure tool, we know what look for in chapter 4, and we find it! In this chapter is the faithful who are saved, and we find this highlighted in several ways:

* The phrase ‘the sons of the prophets’ comes three times (repetition tool v1, v38 twice); these are the same people who previously took such a keen interest in whether Elisha was legit as a successor to Elijah (see 2:5, 7 and 15). In other words, it’s those closely associated with God’s prophet who receive God’s blessing.
* The poor widow tells us that her late husband ‘feared the LORD’ (v1).
* The wealthy Shunammite woman goes out of her way to help Elisha, recognising him as a ‘holy man of God’ (v9) and persuading her husband to finance a loft conversion and a trip to IKEA to ensure he has comfortable accommodation (v10)!
* Some might think that the Shunnamite’s complaint in v28 undermines the author’s emphasis elsewhere on her faithfulness. However, there is nothing unfaithful about taking a problem to the one who is able to fix it, and there are many other examples of God’s people expressing themselves frankly in moments of suffering – think Habbakuk, Job, David or even Jesus himself (e.g. Mark 15:34). Notice also how warmly Elisha responds, in contrast to the way he answers wicked Jehoram in 3:13-14.
* The sons of prophets bring the ‘bread of the firstfruits’ to Elisha (v42). This is a subtle point, but readers who have Deuteronomy 18:4-5 at their fingertips (!) will remember that the firstfruits would ordinarily be brought to the priests. The priests in Israel were charlatans making false sacrifices at golden calf shrines (1 Kings 12:25-33) and so this is another clue that the faithful remnant distance themselves from the national idolatry. Similarly, but more subtle still, we can infer from her husband’s comment in v23 that the Shunnamite usually went to Elisha (rather than the calf shrines) for the new moon and special Sabbath festivals.

The point is clear. In a world under God’s judgment, the safest place is with the judge himself. Those who shun the idolatry around them and stick closely with the ‘man of God’ will be saved.

**Elisha’s power to save**

Having considered the context and structure, we come finally to the main events of the chapter. In each episode Elisha brings blessing of some kind and in every case it is clearly miraculous:

a poor widow receives miraculous oil (vv1-7);

a rich woman receives a miraculous son twice (vv8-37)

- he is conceived despite her infertility (vv8-17)

- he is raised from the dead (vv18-37)

a starving multitude are miraculously fed twice

- a deadly stew is decontaminated by flour (vv38-41)

- a meagre amount of bread is multiplied (vv42-44)

Given the wider context of judgment we can characterise these miracles as ‘salvation’ in a broad sense. God is kind to those who trust him. Of course the Shunnamite’s experience doesn’t mean a guarantee of fertility for every faithful couple struggling to conceive, just as the abundance of food for the sons of the prophets doesn’t mean Christians never go hungry. That would be to draw the lines of application too tightly. Nevertheless we can say that God is kind to his faithful people, and will often show this in physical, practical ways (this is Jesus’ point in Matthew 6:31-33).

But the general truth that God is kind to his faithful remnant doesn’t quite capture all of this chapter. There is great emphasis here on the fact that God works miraculously and through a specific man. The point is not so much that God brings salvation as that Elisha is the saviour.

The Shunnamite woman clearly realises this. When her son dies, she bizarrely reassures both her husband (v23) and Elisha’s servant Gehazi (v26) that ‘all is well’ with him. But this pretended calmness is clearly a strategy to meet without delay the ‘man of God’, on whom all her hopes are pinned.

As a miraculous saviour, Elisha is more impressive even than his predecessor, Elijah. He thus paves the way all the more clearly for his successor, Jesus:

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| **Elijah** | **Elisha**  **(whose name means ‘God saves’)** | **Jesus**  **(whose name means ‘God saves’)** |
| Provides a miraculously-bottomless jar of flour and jug of oil (1 Kings 17:8-16) | Provides a miraculously-bottomless jar of oil (4:1-7) | Miraculously multiplies bread to feed 5000 men – in particular, he instructs his helpers to distribute a too-small amount of food, at which suggestion they are incredulous, but everyone eats, and there are leftovers (Luke 9:10-17). |
| Miraculously multiplies bread to feed 100 men – in particular, he instructs his helpers to distribute a too-small amount of food, at which suggestion they are incredulous, but everyone eats, and there are leftovers (4:42-44) |
| Raises a widow’s son from the dead, by prayer and bodily contact, in an upper room in the presence of an angry, distraught mother (1 Kings 17:17-24) | Raises a woman’s son from the dead, by prayer and bodily contact, in an upper room in the presence of an angry, distraught mother (4:18-37) | Raises a widow’s son from the dead with a word (Luke 7:11-17) |

**MESSAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF 1-2 KINGS**

In a nation under judgment a faithful remnant who stick close to the man of God (God’s prophet, saviour and judge) will be saved.

**MESSAGE FOR NEW COVENANT BELIEVERS**

In a world under judgment, those who stick close to Jesus (God’s prophet, saviour and judge) will be saved.

**SUGGESTED PREPARATION**

1. Pray for the members of your group.
2. Read 2 Kings 4 more than once on different days.
3. Before the study it will be helpful to know your way around the passage. With a highlighter pen, identify the places that tell us about:
   1. God’s judgment;
   2. The faithfulness of the people who experience salvation (some are not so obvious); and
   3. The miraculous nature of Elisha’s saving acts (for bonus points, identify parallels to the miracles performed by Elijah and Jesus).