

2 KINGS 4:42-44
“TO HIM WHO IS ABLE...”

Think for a moment:

What do you like best about God?

What bothers you most today?

How can the answer to the first question help with the second? How can what you like best about God help you deal with what bothers you?

Famine is in our world. People are hungry in Africa because of drought and crops have failed; or because of civil war and crops are destroyed, people have to move and can't farm and hundreds of thousands of people are on the move; because of food prices – increases of 40% are not uncommon and people can't afford to buy food. Corruption and greed often make matters worse. There are parts of the world where this is what bothers people most. Famine is not our greatest need: the average UK family throws away £420 worth of food each year. Some other kind of need is top of our list: a culture that is increasingly secular, a nation that is pushing God to the margins and maybe that bothers us. Personal needs might be top of our list, health and healing, family issues, work-related stress – there are all kinds of things that bother us in our everyday life.

How do we put alongside the things that bother us, what we like best about God? It is astonishing to read material that comes from Africa in magazines like *Tear Times* (if you don't take it you should; it is really easy to read and is full of insight into our world!) where people who are faced with famine often declare their faith in the God who will provide for them. Their faith is unwavering. At a time and in circumstances when we would understand if people were angry that God had let them down, there are many who continue to believe that the Lord will provide. How do we relate our faith to the world of our everyday concerns, the things that bother us? So often we don't! Work, family, health – these are issues that bother us every day, but when we come to Church we try to forget about them for an hour to think about other things; “we'll worry about that after Church!” For some reason, the blessing of God is supposed to be for people whose faith is perfect and whose life is serene. The beauty of the Bible is that it brings what God is like and what bothers us most onto one page; they are part of the same world!

Elisha lived in the 9th century BC. He was a prophet in Israel and had a ministry of about 50 years. He was the successor to the more famous Elijah, but with a very different ministry. His ministry was conducted against the background of which God Israel will follow: will they follow Baal or the Lord? This was an issue that would continue to bother Israel for generations. The religious and spiritual leadership of the people had been weak and poor for a long time; the priests had opened the doors to idols and other gods, being unfaithful to the Lord! Elisha spends his time nurturing new leadership, groups of prophets, schools where young men were nurtured in the faith and learned something of the ways of God so that they can go to teach and preach the word of the Lord in Israel. There was famine in the land, a struggle to find food and there was poverty amongst some.

Then we have this little story of 20 loaves. An anonymous man came to Elisha with 20 loaves; these are loaves the size of rolls more than our large loaves. 20 rolls among 100 young men – how far will that go? Yet, the story tells us that Elisha gave these 20 rolls to the 100 young men and they ate and even had some left over. This was not a miracle that Elisha performed, but something that God did to provide for these people. “Then

he..." (2 Kings 4:44) God promised, God provided and Elisha and his friends had the food they needed. The story reminds us of the faithfulness of God: God had promised and had kept His promise and there is plenty left over. This little story is amongst others in chapter 4 that demonstrate other ways in which God provides for people's needs: a widow and her son are given an endless supply of oil to sell so that they can buy food to live; a woman whose son has died sees him restored to life by God's power through Elisha; a pot full of poison is changed so that there is nothing harmful in pot. God is at work in the lives of these people to help them, to provide for them so that they can overcome what bothers them.

This little story reminds us of a much bigger story. Jesus fed 5000 people with a little boy's picnic. 5 loaves and 2 fishes are given to Jesus by this little boy, whose name we don't know and by this little boy's gift, a great crowd of people is satisfied and there are 12 basketfuls of leftovers. In the aftermath of that event, "*Jesus declared...*" (John 6:35) Jesus satisfies the deepest needs of our lives. We understand these words as a picture of something profound: bread is the staple of life, it stands for all of our food; the "breadwinner" doesn't just bring home bread, but earns money so that a family can have all that it needs in life. So Jesus, the "bread of life", is for more than places where there is famine; Jesus supplies our every need; Jesus can meet us in every situation that bothers us and provide for us everything; that reality is powerfully demonstrated in the feeding of the 5000.

Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus. The first century Roman Empire was a hard place for Christians to be. The religious life of the Empire meant that there were many gods and that often brought the church into conflict with the culture with its confession that Jesus is Lord. Politically, the emperors wanted to be acknowledged as 'lord' and were angry when Christians refused to honour them in this way, reserving the title for Jesus alone! Christian soldiers in the army had a hard time. The Church was becoming persecuted for its faith; John was the leader of this Ephesian Church later, when he was sent into exile on Patmos as described in the book of Revelation. It was a society that knew how to party, becoming famous for its excess, addicted to partying, with too much food, too much wine and too much sex of all sorts. Paul a prisoner for his faith.

We read his second prayer for the Ephesian Christians in his letter. It is a hugely positive prayer, full of big ideas, full of lavish language, designed to give people heart, designed to bring something of the great resources of the power and love of God to bear on the life and faith of the Christians in Ephesus. The thread running through the prayer is the word 'power'; Paul prays that the Christians may have power from God in three ways. For Christians who are weak, the Bible never tells us to pull our socks up or get better at something; for Christians who are weak, the Bible always tells us to look at Jesus, to fix our eyes on Jesus; we are to see His power and His love at work and be strong. There are three ways in which Paul prays for the power of God to be at work:

Power #1: "*I pray...*" (Ephesians 3:16f) Christ already lives in their hearts through faith, so there has to be a sense here of Christ *continuing* to live in their hearts and Christians continuing to have faith. There is a danger of giving up faith; a danger of walking away from faith because life is too hard; or because being a Christian is too demanding in first century Roman society; or because other things seem more attractive. For whatever reason, the temptation to give up is strong, but the glorious riches of God's power are at work to help Christians continue in their faith, the Spirit of God living in them to sustain

them and strengthen them. The power of the Spirit is at work to help Christians continue to live by faith in Jesus.

Power #2: *“I pray...” (Ephesians 3:17b-19)* The dimensions of God’s love are beyond us. We will never know just how big God’s love for us really is. We can see something of it in Jesus and in His self-sacrifice; we can discover something of His love in our day-to-day experience of life, but we will never understand just how big it really is. Paul prays that the Christians get a bigger grasp of God’s love, that we grow in our understanding of the love of God for us. *“So high you can’t get over it, so low you can’t get under it, so wide you can’t get round it...!”* Have a bigger, deeper, stronger sense of God’s love for us and of what it means to be loved by God!

Power #3: *“Now to...” (Ephesians 3:20)* What can God do? More than we know! “He is able...” - three little words that should fill us with hope and reassurance and should inspire our faith. What can God do? More than we know; He is able to help us when we are tested; to save us completely; to build His Church! This power of God is at work in us and is still at work in us. God has not gone away; He is not beaten by the things that bother us; He is still able to help us and His power is still at work in us to bless us.

This prayer is full of marvellously big language: God’s riches are glorious; His love is so big that it goes beyond our understanding; we are to be filled with all the fullness of God; God is able to do far more than we know. Consider this for a moment: did any of you pick this as the thing you most like about God? His bigness? The bigness of His power and His love? It is exactly this big power and love of God that sustains and strengthens us when things bother us. It is this power and love that inspire us to faith in the first place; this power and love enable us to continue in faith when we’re bothered by life, or by other people, or culture, or church, or society, or the world; it is this power and love that provide for us all that we need for life; and it is this power and love that help us deal with every circumstance that life throws at us.

There is all sorts of lifestyle advice that will tell you to look inside yourself for power to deal with the things that bother you! Sometimes it is even wrapped up in some kind of Christian veneer. The Bible tells us to look at Jesus, to focus our eyes on Him, to see Him as One who is able to give us everything that we need. That’s what these stories of the bread tell us: God can provide for us: in famine there can be bread; when we are unloved, there can be love; when we feel our weakness, there can be strength; when guilt bothers us there can be forgiveness; when we are full of anxiety there can be peace; when there is confusion in our minds, there can be guidance; when we have a sense of calling, there can be equipping; when life is full of strife, there can be reconciliation; where there is poverty, there can be justice. Look at Jesus; this is what Jesus can do; this is what Jesus will do for us. See His power and love and take heart; He is at work in us. Whatever we need, He is able to provide for us.