

Elisha and the healing of the waters

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[0 : 00] Now I'd invite you to turn for a meditation on God's word to 2 Kings chapter 2. The second book of Kings chapter 2.

And we'll read from verse 19. 2 Kings chapter 2 verse 19. And the men of the city said to Elisha, Behold, I pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord sees, but the water is not, and the ground barren.

And he said, Bring me a new cruise, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. And he went forth to the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus says the Lord, I have healed these waters.

There shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. So the waters were healed to this day, according to the saying of Elisha, which he spoke.

Now over the past few weeks we've been considering together the life and ministry of God's servant Elisha. And here we come to an incident which we must admit is not the kind of thing that literally we see happening today.

[1 : 20] Poison as water being made whole through the instrumentality of a prophet of God. But we have the very best authority for taking a story like this in a spiritual sense.

For recognizing that God hasn't simply told us these old things about a miracle that happened thousands of years ago, simply for historical reasons.

So that we can build up a picture of what things were like then, or what God's prophet did in those days. We have the best authority for believing that God speaks to us in spiritual terms through that ancient miracle of long ago.

Because none other than the Lord Jesus Christ speaks on several occasions of waters that are not merely, as we have them here at Jericho, physical or material waters.

But he speaks of waters that enter into the life and the soul of a man or woman. Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him, says the Lord Jesus Christ, it will be in him a well of water springing up to everlasting life.

[2 : 32] Or again you remember how he says that whoever believes in him, out of that person's innermost being there shall flow out streams of living water.

And our Lord tells us that the reference is to the Holy Spirit. This he spoke of the Holy Spirit and the impact and effect that the Holy Spirit would have in the life of a believer in Jesus Christ.

Or again, because you see here that Elisha effected the cure of the waters by means of salt. He took a handful of salt and threw it in the water and it was made whole.

So here we have the Lord Jesus Christ who comes and says to his church then and to his church today, you are the salt of the earth. So that there is obviously a spiritual application, a very real and relevant meaning for you and me as we read about the waters being healed through the application of salt.

And our Lord says that if we are Christian men and women, we are intended in this needy world to stay the corruption of sin and to bear a witness that will speak powerfully and effectively for the Lord our God.

[3 : 43] So let's go into this story, delving into the various details of what happened that day in Jericho and how they can be applied to the church of Christ today.

Here are some men, the men of Jericho, with a problem. The first thing I want us to notice is what their problem was. It was a very simple thing.

They lived in Jericho, which was well known then and is well known today as a very beautifully situated place. It was called in our Lord's day the City of Palms, ringed with beautiful palm trees.

A very fertile area, very pleasant climate. The fragrance of aromatic shrubs would be wafted continually through the air. And so it was a pleasant and a delectable place to live in. But, say these men of Jericho, we have a problem. Although the climate is so pleasant, although the situation is so attractive, our water supply is poisoned.

[4 : 50] It's vitiated. We don't know why, but we can't drink it. And not only can we not drink the water, but if you look around Elisha, you'll see that our crops, they're just not producing.

We sow, but we can't reap. So here is their problem. And if we care to put it very simply, so that it can be applied in other situations, is this.

There is outward prosperity, but inner corruption. Outside, everything looks fine. But inwardly, it's very different.

Now, obviously, our Lord doesn't tell us this story merely for horticultural or agricultural reasons. Our Lord wants to delve deeper. And he wants us to see deeper in these things.

Here we are in the land of Israel. Elisha, the prophet of God, to that kingdom. And again and again in the history of Israel, who had broken away, you remember, from the southern kingdom of Judah, who had opted to go their own usually sinful ways.

[5 : 53] Time and again you found in Israel that it was outwardly prosperous. That economically things were going well. They had, just as we have in our own days, they had their economic booms from time to time.

The father of King Ahab, under whom, or to whom Elijah prophesied. Omri was a case in point. A very wicked king. We're told that he did wickedly, but things were prosperous.

Or, a few years later, there was another king called Jeroboam. Jeroboam II. And again, all that the writer of the king says, is that he did evil in the sight of the Lord.

But we know from other sources, that there was prosperity. Things were going very well. Well, economically. You turn to the prophet Amos, who prophesied under that king, in the same kingdom where Elisha is.

And he gives us the picture. He points out the leaders of Israel, lying, as he says, on their couches of ivory, drinking their bowlfuls of wine, eating the lambs from the flock.

[6 : 54] All things are going well. Prosperously. But then Amos points underneath. And he says there was corruption and oppression and injustice.

He says they have no concern for the needs, for the affliction of Joseph. They're selling the poor for a pair of shoes. The land was riddled with corruption and immorality and idolatry.

Though outwardly things were going well. Outwardly it was pleasant. Outwardly it was prosperous. And is that just true in Israel long ago?

Was it not some 20 years or so ago in our own country that we were being told from the top that we'd never had it so good? And indeed, economically, things were going well.

There wasn't a poverty of days gone by. There was prosperity all throughout our nation. But what about underneath? What about the moral decay that continues in our own day?

[7 : 57] What about the broken homes? What about the increasing alcoholism? What about the increasing drug addiction? What about the increasing surging crime rates? Even when the outward prosperity is so attractive.

Pleasant, the men of Jericho say. It's lovely to live here, but the water is no use. The ground is not producing. Underneath there is corruption.

It never ceased to surprise me, if our local people will forgive me, yet another reference to the land of Peru where we lived for many years. It never ceased to surprise me how in certain parts of the city of Lima you would find young girls very smartly dressed, very attractively got up, going to their work in the city.

And you would say, well, these girls must come from very well-off homes. They must come from very prosperous families. But if, as often we had the opportunity through church work and through social relief work, if you went to the parts of the city where they came from, if you went into some of the hovels, no running water, no toilets, flies, dirt, you were amazed that out of there there could come someone so prettily and attractively dressed.

Well, all credit to them. All credit to these girls who dressed like that in spite of their background. But it's a parable, isn't it? It's a parable of how outwardly things can seem so beautiful and yet inwardly there is corruption.

[9 : 36] Inwardly there are problems. Inwardly there are tensions. Inwardly there is sin. And isn't that what God's word says?

Not just nationally, but individually and personally. Isn't it true that God doesn't judge by outward appearance? God just doesn't see only what we are outwardly to our neighbors, to our friends, to our congregation when we meet here today.

God may see, our neighbors may see outwardly everything personally, pleasant, decent, and so on. But God looks on the heart. Man looks on outward appearance.

God looks on the heart. Well, what's God's verdict? Well, it's remarkably similar to the verdict of the men of Jericho about their situation.

God says that we may outwardly appear as that land appeared, but inwardly the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.

[10 : 42] Inwardly there is that tension between man and his maker. inwardly there is that dominion of sin that can only, as we'll see in a moment, that can only be relieved and taken away by the intervention of God himself.

So their problem was an outward pleasantness, an outward prosperity, but an inner problem, an inner corruption. And this is the problem of every man, woman, or child born into this world.

And the Bible tells us that God is not mocked, that we can fool others, but not God. There's a saying, if I may once again go back to these days in Peru, there's a saying in the Spanish language that they call the story of the uncle.

And that doesn't say very much to us. But the idea is the kind of person that you get in the streets who accosts somebody and spins them a yarn about their trials and their tribulations and about, and the idea is the uncle who's lying sick and unless you help me then he's going to die.

And I well remember a colleague of my own coming into the staff room in the school where I was teaching. And he was, as we would say, he was kicking himself.

[12 : 01] Because he came into the staff room and he said, you know, I've been done. It was the story of the uncle. That was literally what he said. I was coming along to school this morning and a young man smartly dressed, he stopped me and he began to explain to me and it was literally about an uncle.

About his uncle whom he'd left lying there in the home. He was so ill, he was dying, he had no money to buy medicine for him, he was just about to lose his own job and so on and so forth.

And this colleague of mine, this Peruvian colleague, he knew that it was a yarn. He knew that he was being conned and yet somehow the man, the young man, so smart, so earnest, so apparently sincere, seemed to be impressing him and the end of it was that he handed over a pound note knowing all the time that he was being conned.

Well, says the word of God, God's not like that. We can't fool God. God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. And God gets through his word to the real me and to the real you.

And it's a part of wisdom for us to be exposed and allow ourselves to be exposed to the searching light of the word of God. Even though it reveals inner corruption, that we might find out what to do with the corruption, that the pleasantness outside might be matched by the healing within.

[13 : 33] Well, there's the first thing, what their problem was. Let's go on in this old story and see where the problem was taken. What did they do with their problem? Well, we're told there in verse 19 at the beginning of the story that the men of the city said to Elisha, behold, such and such is the case.

They brought their problem to Elisha. Well, that's a very simple thing. They brought it to Elisha. But it's more significant than perhaps it appears on the surface. Because they brought it to Elisha in the belief that Elisha could do something about it.

There was something about Elisha that made these men in Jericho feel, well, we've tried other means, they haven't worked, but Elisha, he can do something for us.

Now, they knew that Elisha was just an ordinary man like themselves. They knew that he spent years in farming up there in Abel-Meola in the north of Israel.

They knew that he'd walked behind the plough just like many of them did. And yet, there was that conviction in their hearts that though he was an ordinary man like themselves, yet there was something about him.

[14 : 43] There was something different that made them believe that Elisha could solve their problem. Now, of course, we know what it was because we've already seen it in previous studies.

When he crossed the Jordan, they looked on amazed and they said, the spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha. Elijah, the great prophet of God who's been taken up into heaven, his spirit, his power rests upon this man Elisha.

And it was proved further on in the story in verse 21 when Elisha goes to the spring of waters and begins in this way, thus says the Lord.

Elisha was just like themselves, an ordinary man from the ordinary common clay. But Elisha was at the same time a man of God. Elisha could say, thus says the Lord.

And they sensed as they saw Elisha that here was someone in a way that others couldn't who could meet their need. And so they didn't go if they'd had anyone like them in those days.

[15 : 46] They didn't go to the water engineer. They didn't go to the agronomist. They didn't go to the water diviner or the soothsayer. They went to the man of God that he might help them with their problem.

And isn't there here a challenge to the Christian church? Isn't there here a challenge to every man or woman here in this church today who calls himself or herself a believer in Jesus Christ?

A challenge not to become specialists in agriculture or in engineering or in medicine or in politics, though the church may be called at some times to enter into such spheres?

Indeed, yes. But as far as the church, as a church and individual believers as believers are concerned, the call is to be as Elisha was, to be men and women who are so clearly the representatives of God, upon whom so clearly the spirit of the Lord rests, that people out there with their need, whatever they need, they'll not find it strange.

They'll not find it out of the ordinary, to come to the church of Jesus Christ, to come to men and women of God and to say, look, we've looked elsewhere, we haven't solved our problems, you're a man of God, you're a woman of God, what can you do?

[17 : 06] What a challenge, isn't it? When men and women in our society are plagued with the problem of guilt, guilt for their past sins, guilt for various things in their own lives, problems of guilt that the psychiatrist can never cure, and I mean no disrespect to psychiatrists, problems of relationships that no social worker can ever cure, and I mean no disrespect to social workers, but problems in these areas that only God can cure, and the church of Jesus Christ has been set as a healing community, well are we?

Do we so live? Do we so work? Do we so witness that men and women in their need will come? It's not only a challenge, isn't it? A rebuke to those of us who bear the name of Jesus Christ.

Are we a source of healing? Are we that body that can say with confidence, thus says the Lord?

And putting it to the other side, to those, perhaps even some among us today, who cannot as yet claim that they are part of the true church of Jesus Christ, who cannot say that they have found in Christ the Savior for their souls, but who do know that they have problems, who do know that there are tensions in their lives, in their homes, in their work, whatever it is.

Is it, I wonder, is it time that you brought these problems to those whom you know to be men and women of God? Not perfect, like Elisha, just common clay, ordinary folk like yourselves, but you know that they have been found by Christ.

You know that they are men and women of God. Is it perhaps time to bring the problems there and ask them to pray and ask them to guide and ask them to point to Jesus Christ?

[19 : 06] Well, we've seen what their problem was. We've seen where their problem was taken. The last part of the story is this, how their problem was solved.

And there are three elements in the way in which Elisha solved the problem of the men of Jericho that I'd like to bring to your attention. First of all, notice that the problem was solved through unlikely means.

There in verse 20, Elisha says to the men of Jericho, bring me a new cruise, a new vessel or a new bowl and put salt in it. And they brought it to him.

The waters were purified by a handful of salt. Now you would say, or they probably would have said, how ridiculous. Surely salt is not going to cure such a problem.

We've taken it to other sources. We've tried our draining and we've tried our filtering and we've tried putting in our purifying agents and it hasn't worked. And now they see Elisha, the man of God.

[20 : 14] What does he do as God's representative? He takes just a handful of salt and says, let's go. Let's go to the spring and let's do something about it. Why, they might have said, isn't this plain ridiculous?

Isn't this ludicrous? Surely Elisha would at least do what Elijah did. He called down fire from heaven. That was spectacular. That was dramatic. You'd expect something to happen.

But just a little old salt, what can that do? You remember, and we're going to see this in a few weeks time when we come in the story of Elisha, when we come to Naaman. Naaman, the chief, commander and chief of the army of the king of Syria.

Elisha says to him when he wants healed of his leprosy, go and bathe in the river Jordan. And you remember the reaction of Naaman. His reaction was, are not Abana and far rivers of Damascus? Far better than this muddy river of Jordan. Can I not wash in them and be clean? I thought, said Naaman, that the prophet would come out with a great posture and a great display and he would strike the place where the leprosy is and he would pronounce a mighty word from God.

[21 : 21] I thought that's the way it would be done. But this simple, trivial, apparently way. And so it was in the time of Elisha for the men of Jericho.

what a poor, mundane way of healing the waters. A handful of salt. And you know here God is bringing out for them, as for you and me, the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God says to the highest, the most brilliant, the most outstanding of men and women, he says this, except you be converted and become as little children.

all the brilliance of your intellect, all the magnificence of your good deeds, they're no use. You have to become as little children, a handful of salt, that which apparently seems insignificant.

That's where the power of the gospel lies. Didn't Paul write in the same vein, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

[22 : 26] Yes, for the Greeks, it was foolishness. For the Jews, it was madness. But, says Paul, the foolishness of preaching is what saves men and women.

And when our Lord ascended into heaven, wasn't the same principle evident? He says to his disciples, just a handful of them, peasants, fishermen, most of them, he says, go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

You're going to conquer not just Jerusalem and Judea, you're going to conquer the world with the gospel of my grace. Well, how ludicrous. How could it happen?

How could such poor instruments do it? And yet, that's the way God works. And if Elisha had yielded to the temptation to be more dramatic, to say to these men of Jericho, well, let's get you all together and let's have a great ceremony, let's have something impressive so that the world will see he would have failed.

For God desired the glory to himself, for men and women to be led to him, not to Elisha, not even to the church today, but through these instruments to the living God.

[23 : 40] And so the gospel stays as it is. We're 2,000 years on since it was first preached and we can't change it. We can't rub off its rough edges.

We can't make its simplicity more advanced. It's the same gospel. Whosoever believes is saved. Whosoever does not believe is condemned.

There are two other things very briefly as we draw to a close, as we notice how their problem was solved. Firstly, it was through unlikely means. Secondly, it was with a new, clean vessel.

Elisha didn't only use the salt. He said to them, bring me a new cruise, a new bowl, and we'll put it in there.

Now it was a very simple vessel. It would be an earthen vessel, made as the potter made it in those days. Nothing very striking, nothing very brilliant to look at, but it was new and it was clean.

[24 : 44] And there's a vital principle, surely, in the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel. This gospel must be proclaimed by men and women, made new. Unless we have experienced the renovating power of the Holy Spirit, how can we bring healing and blessing to others?

I know that God in his sovereignty can do amazing things. He can use even unconverted men preaching the gospel to bring others to Christ.

It seems incredible, but he can do it. And you may have read, as I have read, astounding cases of men, unconverted men, preaching the gospel and when they were reading the scripture and some of the things they were saying were true, they were converted themselves in their own pulpits.

God in his sovereignty can do these things. But God's exceptional ways of working don't describe for us his normal demands. And his normal demand is that clean vessels, new men, new women in Christ making known the gospel of his saving grace to others.

And the last point is this, Elisha solved their problem by going to the source. A very significant phrase, I wonder if you noticed it as we read this.

[26 : 09] In verse 21, Elisha went forth to the spring of the waters. Now I suppose that like many of these ancient communities, the Israelites were very skilled in the use of waters.

They would have their channels and their drains and their reservoirs. Many people that we consider primitive have very sophisticated or had very sophisticated means of spreading the water supply. They doubtless had it too. But you know what Elisha didn't do? He didn't go to this dray, this channel. He didn't go to that reservoir. He didn't go to the domestic supply here or there or anywhere else.

Because he could have healed these. And in an hour or two or a day or two it would be back to where they were. The spring, the source, would still be vitiated, would still be corrupt.

And so Elisha went to the heart. He went to the spring of the waters. And once they were healed, the whole supply was transformed. And surely as we come back to the beginning, for God doesn't look on the outward appearance but on the heart, we come back to the heart of the gospel too.

[27 : 21] The Lord Jesus Christ has told us again and again and again that it's out of the heart that what we are comes. The Lord Jesus has said, and we read it in Matthew's gospel chapter 7, make the tree good and then the fruit will be good.

Don't tinker with the branches. Don't try and grow good fruit from a bad tree unless you make the essence and nature of the tree good. And so it is that programs of self-reform are not enough.

A man may proclaim to his fellows, he may do it from a pulpit or a platform or any other way he likes. A man may proclaim that people ought to improve themselves and ought to make efforts to be better people and no doubt in some ways they might succeed.

You might well make the effort between today and a week today to keep a watch over your temper and say, well I was reminded in church that it's not good to lose my temper and so I'm watching so that I won't lose my temper.

And you may be successful. You may decide that you're going to spend less on yourself and more on others. And this week and next week and the week after you may well do it. You may say, well I think I should cut down on smoking or drinking and you may be successful in doing it.

[28 : 39] But the word of God says that all these things, they're just palliatives. They're just outward things. They don't get to the heart. And we must get to the spring of the waters. We must get to the heart.

Made new through Jesus Christ. There must be what you have here. At the spring of the water, the miracle takes place. The purification comes.

And so you and I come to Calvary. There is no other way through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. By faith in him, our hearts are made new.

And then, then there will be the fruit. Then there will be the cleansing that is seen outward. But first, we go to the heart. And Jesus Christ deals there.

Purifies there. Saves there. May God enable us so to come. Now let us sing together to his praise. In Psalm 51.

[29 : 40] Psalm 51, which speaks of this healing and cleansing and purifying process. Psalm 51, verse 6.