Bread You Do Not Know Of

On Famine, Abundance, and the Voices God Raises Up

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Words Taken Away

You can sit with what has been shared in worship and find that all your words are taken away. The move of God can give you words when you don't have any, and watching God move can also make you put your hand over your mouth. I am impressed by God today. I am impressed by his ability to save and deliver. I am incredibly grateful for his abundance. God *is* abundant.

When you look at what has happened across the world and you see division, starvation, deprivation, when you see the emptiness of souls looking aimlessly because whatever was stable has been taken away from them, you can feel the vacuum. People are in a famine for the word of God. They are reaching for something, anything, that will anchor them. Isaiah says:

"Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and the strength of salvation" (Isaiah 33:6).

When everything else feels like shifting sand, we will grab for wisdom, even *pseudo*-wisdom, just for something to hold onto. And the trouble is that in an individualistic culture where the individual is exalted above the collective, what people end up grasping is a god after their *own* heart. I have done it. I have sought after the gods of my own heart. I have shaped the

God of all creation in my likeness. And then I always feel just a little better, because *he looks a lot more like me*.

Then voices come along and say, “Is that really what he’s like?” My sons. My daughters. My peers. The sages in my life come back and say, “Let’s look again. Have we cast away our confidence, which has great reward? Where are the markers? Where are the pillars? Where are the cornerstones of the foundation?” Can we begin to build again the things that have been decimated? I believe the Lord is saying right now, unequivocally, *yes*.

The Shunammite Woman

There is a story in 2 Kings 4. Elisha is traveling around: He is an itinerant preacher, and things in his ministry are going well. He goes into the home of a Shunammite woman, and she is drawn to him. Every time he passes through, she gives him a little food. Eventually she tells her husband, “Let’s make a little upper chamber for him so he has a place to rest.” And they do.

After some time, Elisha says to her, in effect, “You’ve done all this for me. What can I do for you? Can I speak to the king on your behalf? Can I speak to the commander of the army on your behalf?” And she says, “No; I have no son.”

Elisha tells her, “This time next year, you will hold a child in your arms.” Think about what is happening there. He breathes into her, through the *word*, a possibility that had seemed impossible only a year before. And then she is holding the baby.

That child grows. He goes out to his father in the field one day, and cries out, “My head! My head!,” and dies in his mother’s arms (2 Kings 4:19–20). And here is what is striking. She does not draw back. She carries the boy upstairs and lays him on the bed of the prophet who had spoken the future into her life. She had told Elisha, “Do not lie to me. My emotions can’t take it. If you tell me I’m going to have a son, be real with me.” And he had told her the truth. So now,

when that son is dead, she takes him to the one place she knows that life is, the bed where Elisha had laid.

There is a striking footnote to Elisha's story a few chapters later. After Elisha himself has died, some men are burying another man in a hurry, they see a raiding party coming and quickly throw the body into Elisha's tomb. The text says:

> So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet. (2 Kings 13:21)

When this man touches the bones of Elisha, *he comes alive*. He stands up on his feet. What did he come into contact with? We have to remember that there is something *deep in the bones* of what we have come in contact with through Jesus Christ. When you touch the bones of Jesus, the ancient life of God, it will quicken your mortal body and mine.

The Shunammite woman knew where life was. She laid her son on Elisha's bed and sent her fastest horse for the prophet. Elisha came. He stretched himself across that boy (mouth to mouth, hands to hands, feet to feet) and warmth came back into the body. We have begun, over the last few years, to see warmth coming back into the body. You can hear it in the voices outside this place. You can hear it in the voices *inside* this place. The life of God that was in Elisha, and in every prophet, culminating in Jesus Christ, and poured out at Pentecost, and burning in Philip's mouth, and meeting Paul on the road to Damascus, that life is breaking through. When you come face to face with it, you cannot question it.

Scrolled Into Soulless Death

There are seasons when you ask, "What am I? Where am I? I have poured myself in, sacrificed, labored, given everything I have, and it amounts to nothing." We give our lives to the

cruel. We have scrolled ourselves into a sleepless, soulless death. The world is dying in an anti-social media frenzy that leaves us empty and unmoored. And God is calling us out of that. He is asking us to get back into contact with the One who brings community and shared life, the One who can do things in your life that you cannot even imagine, if you will come into contact with him. Most of us have touched it a time or two. We know what we are talking about.

A Dark Passover

After the Shunammite woman receives her son back, a famine begins. It lasts seven years, and it is so grievous that 2 Kings 7 takes us into the besieged city of Samaria. Two women have made a pact with each other, and what follows is unthinkable. They are starving, and they have agreed: today we will boil and eat my son, tomorrow we will boil and eat yours. The first woman gives up her child. The boy is killed, cooked, and eaten. The next day, when it is time for the second woman to give up *her* son, she hides him.

"So we boiled my son, and ate him. And I said to her on the next day, 'Give your son, that we may eat him'; but she has hidden her son" (2 Kings 6:29).

This is a dark Passover. A *corrupted* Passover. The son dies on that Passover night. And the women (who, of all people, should have been the most heartbroken) have lost all feeling. The culture has become so depraved that the maternal instinct itself has been hollowed out.

And then the second woman goes to the king. She does not say, "O king, we have hit rock bottom. Do something about it." She says, "*Save us*", by which she means, *help me get her to deliver up her son for me to eat next* (cf. 2 Kings 6:28). She is looking to the king for help, but the help she is looking for would extend the horror, not end it. The Shunammite woman had known where to look for help, she laid her son on the prophet's bed. This woman looks to the king, and the king, "in his weak and pathetic behavior," rends his clothes:

"Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the woman, that he tore his clothes; and as he passed by on the wall, the people looked, and there underneath he had sackcloth on his body" (2 Kings 6:30).

How many times have I rent my clothes in the face of real problems people brought me, instead of speaking the word God had actually given me to speak? I have apologized to my own assembly for this. We have created a weakness. God is saying *no more*. God is pouring out a spirit of strength. A vision of a future. Of wholeness. Of abundance.

These women had thrown away their *future*. The children were the future, and the women were discarding them. But instead of rending his clothes for the atrocity, the king's response is bewilderment and self-pity. Then Elisha shows up. The king is angry at *him*: "if I get my hands on Elisha, this is on him" (2 Kings 6:31). But Elisha simply walks in and delivers the word:

> Then Elisha said, "Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord: 'Tomorrow about this time a seah of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two seahs of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria.'" (2 Kings 7:1)

The God of heaven is going to change the market economy so dramatically that what looked like famine will become abundance. Truckloads of grain for a penny.

The Eyes of the Sages

In the kingdom of God, when we begin to think *scarcity*, when we look at our culture and conclude it could not possibly get worse, we wring our hands. All we see is deprivation, scarcity, the loss of any future. But the prophets see something else. The sages see a world of *abundance*. They see that God is on the throne, that he has never changed, that he can change market economies overnight. He can change *cultures* overnight. He can take pathetic, weak men and turn them into strong voices. He can take women who have descended below their maternal

instincts and were ready to consume their futures, and turn them into courageous women who trust God and call on his prophets to come and raise their dead children from the grave.

That is what God can do. And that is what God *did* in Samaria.

Four Lepers at the Gate

The next day, chapter 7, there are four lepers sitting outside the city gate. They have a conversation that is theologically more honest than most of what gets said inside the city walls:

> Now there were four leprous men at the entrance of the gate; and they said to one another, "Why are we sitting here until we die? If we say, 'We will enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there. And if we sit here, we die also. Now therefore, come, let us surrender to the army of the Syrians. If they keep us alive, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall but die." (2 Kings 7:3–4)

So they get up and walk out toward the Syrian camp. And when they arrive, *the camp is empty*. The horses are still tethered, the tents are still up, the gold is still on the tables, the garments are still piled in the corners. The Lord has caused the besieging army to hear the sound of an approaching army that was not there, and they have fled in the night.

The four lepers (least likely men, sitting outside the city because their disease has excluded them from it) find themselves with everything. They start to bury gold in the ground. They go to a second tent and start hiding more. They are spoiling the Syrian camp the way Israel once spoiled the Egyptians at Passover. And then one of them says something that turns the whole story:

> Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent. If we wait until morning light, some punishment will come upon us. Now therefore, come, let us go and tell the king's household." (2 Kings 7:9)

"This is a day of good news, and we remain silent." The four least likely people in the kingdom (outside the gate, ceremonially excluded, near death) are the ones who realize that good news cannot be sat on. They go and tell. And just as Elisha had spoken, the city is delivered. The grain market collapses. A seah of fine flour for a shekel. Two seahs of barley for a shekel. The least likely people in the entire region carry the news that saves a city.

Hold onto your hats. Just when we think we have come to the precipice of culture, that we are about to fly over the edge: voices of prophets and prophetesses will be raised up in this land, in this church, in this community. And the voices will not bring just an end to a food famine. That is nothing. The Word will be so abundant that it floods the streets.

"Bread You Do Not Know Of"

When Jesus went outside another Samaritan city, he met a woman at a well at noon, another unlikely candidate. He spoke with her about living water for a long time. When his disciples came out from buying bread in the city, he said:

"I have food to eat of which you do not know . . . My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:32, 34).

This is bread the disciples don't know of. And then he says, in effect, Look up the hill; look at the white turbans of the Samaritans coming out of that city following the woman:

"Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35).

Pray that the God of the harvest will send forth laborers into the field, because the field is already white. The last thing this nation needs is more money or more things. What we need is the word of God to come raining down from heaven and cause us to be the people he wants us to

be. And the famine for the word that we are seeing right now will be answered by the *least likely*: the four lepers, the woman at the well, fishermen who never went to seminary.

Listen to how Luke describes the Sanhedrin's response to Peter and John in Acts 4:

"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

"Uneducated and untrained, but they had been with Jesus." And what did Peter and John say when the council tried to silence them?

"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19–20).

That is the very same logic as the four lepers. *This is a day of good news, and we cannot but speak.* You be the judge. If God has given us a word, we had better open our mouths.

The Abundance of God

When Jesus fed the five thousand and then the four thousand, here is what was striking: God never gives just what you need. He gives more. The five loaves and two fish fed the five thousand and *left over twelve baskets* (Matthew 14:20). The seven loaves and a few fish fed the four thousand and *left over seven baskets* (Matthew 15:37). Everyone was full and there was extra. That is the abundance of the kingdom of God.

And the prophet Amos pictures the same kind of abundance:

"'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord, 'when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it'" (Amos 9:13).

"Your mountains will drip with wine." When wine becomes as plentiful as water, you know the bounty of God is breaking through. So we should not be surprised that when Jesus performed his first miracle, at a wedding in Cana, he turned water into wine. The Messiah is here. Get ready for abundance. The best has not yet been told.

If you have been thinking the best days are behind us, listen carefully. The best days are *before* us. Christ is coming. Look at what God is going to do. And he is going to do it through the least likely people on this planet. Welcome to the project.

Amos goes on: the reaper will overtake the planter, and the planter will overtake the reaper. Don't say, "There is some specific time for harvest." *It is all the time.* God is doing something right now. Open yourself up to it.

Lay Them on the Bed of the Prophet

Are you tired? A mother with children who feels she cannot do it? Just *pour* into them. Whatever it takes. Bring those little bodies right up to the God of heaven. You think they're dying? You think they're dead? There is a God in heaven who will lay over the top of them. If the *bones* of Elisha brought a man back to life, what about the *living body* of Jesus Christ? What can it do when it touches a body in this world?

Get ready for your loved ones to come back to life. That is what is going to happen. That is what is happening. It is not just *going* to happen; it is happening now.

Let's see what God is going to do.