

Christianityworks
Having Faith that Moves Mountains
057-2
When We Step Out, God Steps In

God has a plan and He tells us about that plan through His Word. Read any story about any character whom you would choose to name in the Bible and you will discover a faithful God in that story.

A Hopeless King

Have you ever been in one of those places of real desperation – you know, nothing is going right – you’re wondering what, if anything, God is thinking and has He taken a holiday; has He taken leave of His senses? How can a faithful God allow this to happen to me....me, of all people?

Today on the programme, in this second in the series called ‘Having Faith that Moves Mountains’, we’re going to take a close look at such a time in the history of Israel. It was absolute desperation time, in fact, things were so bad; people were so hungry that mothers were cannibalising their children. Can you imagine? See, by and large, we don’t have to rely too much on faith when things are all going swimmingly well. We need faith when there are mountains that need moving; we need faith when we have something impossible to deal with. And those are precisely the times that we find ourselves at our weakest and most vulnerable. Those are precisely the times when the last thing we feel like we have is some mighty faith.

So this story.....this story takes place at a time in Israel’s history that can best be described as ‘rock bottom’. So let’s have a look – if you have a Bible, grab it. We are going to Second Kings chapter 6, beginning a verse 24:

“Sometime later, King Ben-hadad of Aram mustered his entire army; he marched against Samaria and laid siege to it. As the siege continued, famine in Samaria became so great that a donkey’s head was sold for eighty shekels of silver and one-fourth of a kab of dove’s dung for five shekels of silver. Now as the king of Israel was walking on the city wall, a woman cried out to him, “Help me, my lord king!” He said, “No! Let the Lord help you. How can I help you? From the threshing floor or from the wine press?” But then the king asked her, “What is your complaint?” She answered, “This woman said to me, “Give up your son; we will eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.” So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, “Give up your son and we will eat him.” But she

has hidden her son." When the king heard the words of the woman he tore at his clothes – now since he was walking on the city wall, the people could see that he had sackcloth on his body underneath – and he said, "So may God do to me, and more, if the head of Elisha son of Shaphat stays on his shoulders today." So he dispatched a man from his presence.

"Now Elisha was sitting in his house, and the elders were sitting with him. Before the messenger arrived, Elisha said to the elders, "Are you aware that this murderer has sent someone to take off my head? When the messenger comes, see that you shut the door and hold it closed against him. Is not the sound of his master's feet behind him? While he was still speaking with them, the king came down to him and said, "This trouble is from the Lord! Why should I hope in the Lord any longer?" But Elisha said, "Hear the Word of the Lord: thus says the Lord, "Tomorrow about this time a measure of choice meal shall be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Samaria." Then the captain on whose hand the king leaned said to the man of God, "Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?" But Elisha said, "You shall see it with your own eyes, but you shall not eat from it."

What an incredibly sad state of affairs! Can you imagine a hunger and a hopelessness so deep that mothers are cannibalising their children? I can't conceive of a situation more desperate, more repugnant, and more sad than this. But here it is – that's what happened – rock bottom, in fact, so rock bottom that you and I would struggle to point to an event more rock bottom in our own lives.

Israel was under siege from the Aramean Army. The whole point of a siege is to starve the opposition out of their impenetrable citadel and quite clearly, the food has run out. I don't know the last time you went to the butchers shop and bought a donkey's head but my hunch is there is not a lot of meat on a donkey's head and this was selling for an outrageous amount of money. A clear case of supply and demand.

So here's God's anointed King – in fact, the Hebrew word for God's Anointed is 'Messiah' and it was so often used of the Kings of Israel. The King is walking up on the ramparts of the city and tearing at his clothes – he is wearing sackcloth which means that he is in mourning. And up there on the city wall all the people can see him. What they need is leadership and inspiration from God's anointed leader but he's lost all hope in every sense of the word – he's hopeless. And a woman comes to him out of sheer desperation

having eaten her son (eaten her son!!) and what does the King have to say? "What do you expect me to do? Look at the mess we are in!" Great leadership!

And what's the obvious thing to do when you believe in God and loose hope? Well, of course, you blame God which is what the King did. Clearly this mess was God's fault – He is God isn't He? And that's exactly what the King did. So as any good King anointed for leadership by God would do, he decides he is going to go and kick the dog – in this case, he is going to go and kill the prophet Elisha – to shoot the messenger, as it were.

I make light of it but Elisha was in danger of losing his head. So the King goes to see the prophet. Remember the prophet in society is the man who speaks for God – the prophet's role here in Israel is to speak God's Word into the life of Israel. And so the King demanded to know of the prophet, *"This trouble is from the Lord – why should I hope in the Lord any longer?"*

That, as it turns out, is a very good question. It's a question that a few of us have probably asked once or twice at some rock bottom point along our own journeys. And the prophet speaks the Word of God – it's a word of outrageous hope and promise – it's a faithful word from a faithful God. *"Hear the Word of the Lord. "Thus", says the Lord, "tomorrow this time a measure of choice meal shall be sold for a shekel and two measures of barley for a shekel at the gate of Samaria."*

Now that was completely and utterly outrageous; it was impossible, unless you believe God. And remember what the King's soldier said, *"Even if the Lord would have made windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?"* But God did more than that and as we will see in a moment, within twenty four hours the words of the prophet – the very Word of God – came to pass. Why? Because however difficult it is to believe; however impossible the situation and big the mountain and distant our God seems, He is mighty to save; He is faithful; He is awesome – just is!

Four Nobodies

Have you ever met a Mr or Mrs Super Christian? I have! These people have their lives so incredibly together and they seem so strong in their faith, that you go home, you look in the mirror and you think to yourself, 'Oh, I could never be like that, I'm hopeless; I'm a failure.' Funny how we look at things through the world's eyes - just because on the outside someone appears to be confident and they can tell us good stories of their lives, we assume that they are

perfection personified. And we know for sure that they're not. If someone has a position or a title or something like that, we imagine, well, that they are better than us. To do something mighty and powerful, God would obviously use them instead of you or me.

But here in this city of Samaria that was under siege, where there was no food, where things were so desperate that mothers were killing and eating their children, God had a plan to bless His people. And you and I, we'd imagine that He is going to do this through His King, the anointed King of Israel, or maybe, His prophet, the man of God on the ground. That's because we look at it from a human perspective. God ends up doing neither of those things – He chooses, well, not even ordinary people like you and me because He wants to make a point, so He chooses the least of the least.

I would like to introduce you now to the four key characters of this story. They are so far down the pecking order they don't even have names – in fact, they were lepers; outcasts, they were sitting at the city gate. They were cast out; they didn't get to live with everybody else in the safety inside the city walls. The leper colony was on the outside of the wall – outside the protection of the city. If there were a social register in Samaria, these men would be so far down the bottom they wouldn't even make it on the list because as far as the people inside the safety of the city were concerned, these men didn't even belong. They are at the complete opposite end of the social scale to the King.

"Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate who said to one another, 'Why should we sit here until we die? If we say, 'Let us enter the city,' the famine is in the city and we shall die there, but if we sit here we will die here too, therefore let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they spare our lives we shall live and if they kill us we shall but die." That comes from Second Kings chapter 7, verses 3 and 4.

Now it turns out that these four nobodies ask the very best question they could have ask – 'Why should we sit here until we die?' And the very next verse; verse 5 of Second Kings chapter 7 – it says, *"So they arose at twilight to go to the Aramean camp."* Imagine you and I are a couple of those lepers and we have thought it through and it's logical. Our hunger tells us so. We know that if we sit here much longer, we are going to die – we can't go back because they are dying in there so we get up and we start that long walk to the Aramean camp.

How do you feel – jubilant, excited? I don't think so. We sick in the stomach – we have weighed up our chances and they are slim – five

percent, ten percent at best. Every fibre in our being want to stay put, to preserve our lives for just a few more hours; a few more days maybe. It's such a long walk to that camp – a kilometre, two, three – out to the Aramean camp, across the open ground; the no-man's land. But then.....then we arrive at the Aramean camp and something strange is going on. Have a listen, in Second Kings chapter 7, verses 5 to 8:

"So they arose at twilight to go to the Aramean camp but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp there was no one there at all, for the Lord had caused the Aramean Army to hear a sound of chariots and of horses – the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "Oh, the King of Israel has hired the kings of the Hitites and the kings of the Egyptians to fight against us," so they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, their donkeys, leaving their camp, just as it was and they fled for their lives."

"When these leprous men had come to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent, ate and drank and carried off silver and gold and clothing and went and hid them, then they came back and entered another tent and carried off things from it and went on and hid them."

Can you imagine? We wander across, we bump into the camp, we go...., 'Hang on, where is everyone?' I stick my head into this tent, it's full of stuff but there is no one there. You stick your head in that tent, same thing. What's going on? We wander around tent to tent and God's done this amazing miracle.

And of course, what happens is exactly what the prophet Elisha prophesied. God's done this miracle – eventually all the people come out, the camp is full of food and bounty so they take it back and they use it and eat it and drink it and just like God said, there's abundant food – there's plenty. I love this story! God is just such an amazing God; He does an amazing miracle. And you know, when the message gets back to the King, he doesn't even believe that it's happened. He goes, 'No, no, it's a plot. It's a trap and he sends scouts out to find out.

See, so often when God does a miracle no one else wants to believe it – no one wants to show any faith that God has done this miracle but God did a miracle because God is a faithful God. He spoke His Word to these people through the prophet Elisha. He said, "I'm going to bless you," and everybody was blessed, everybody that is, except for the Captain of the Guard, because the King had appointed this Captain on whose hand he leaned to have charge of

the gate and when all that food was there, the people trampled him to death in the gate just as the Man of God had said when the King came down to him:

"For when the Man of God had said to the King, "Two measures of barley shall be sold for a shekel and a measure of choice meal for a shekel about this time tomorrow in the gate of Samaria," that Captain had answered the Man of God, "Even if the Lord were to make windows in the sky could such a thing happen." And Elisha had answered, "You will see it with your own eyes but you will not eat from it." It did indeed happen to him – the people trampled him to death at the gate." That's in Second Kings chapter 7, verses 17 to 20.

Unravelling the Story of Faith

Well, let's stop and go back to this story of Israel and the siege in Samaria and the great miracle that God does, for a moment. Israel is under siege; the King has lost hope; mothers were eating their children; these lepers; these four lowly outcasts, who were the only ones to step out into the unknown, even they acted out of necessity instead of faith. They sat at this gate under siege and they said to themselves, 'Why should we just stay here and die? We can't go back – they are all dying in there. We can't stay here! Well, the only option is to see if we can convince the Aramean Army to spare us.' So off they go only to discover that God has already done this mighty miracle and the Aramean camp lies empty and ready to be plundered.

These people Israel, who profess to believe in God showed not a single ounce of faith – none, zip, nada. That's it in a nut shell. You might say, 'Berni, how can this be a story of faith? What's it doing in a series of radio programmes called "Having Faith that Moves Mountains? It has nothing to do with faith.' They are all good questions and my answer is this: it is precisely because not a single mustard seed of faith is to be found in this story, that I have included it. Not one person showed any faith....not one, except the prophet Elisha – the man who stood his ground and spoke the Word of God to a King who was ready to kill him – the one man who trusted in God.

Did Elisha have any idea how this impossible Word from God was to be fulfilled? Well, we don't find that out but even if he did, what a mighty amount of faith it would have taken to believe. This particular prophesy to the King didn't give Elisha a whole bunch of wriggle room, did it? It was very specific with a twenty four hour

fuse on it and if God didn't show up, it was going to blow up in Elisha's face.

Yet none of the others in this story showed any faith and here's why I've included it in this series about faith: because it demonstrates very clearly that God doesn't depend on us to do His will. He isn't sitting around waiting in heaven scratching His head, wringing His hands, sweating on you and me to deliver. He is not sitting there looking at me saying, 'Oh, no, Berni's going to blow it again. What am I going to do? How am I going to solve this dilemma without Berni?'

We may laugh, but don't we start getting a crazy notion that God's eternal plan for this cosmos hinges on the strength of our faith? Well, get this; let it sink into your heart: this story is about the faithfulness of God, not the faith of men. This story tells us about a God who is worthy of our faith – it tells us that what God says and what God does are one and the same thing, however impossible things may seem.

God has a plan and He tells us about that plan through His Word. Read any story about any character whom you would choose to name in the Bible, even the story about four hapless lepers with no names and you will discover a faithful God in that story. The whole point of this story is that when God speaks, you and I can take Him at His Word. He never, ever departs from His Word.

Let me say that again: When God speaks you and I can take Him at His Word. He is the one person who always delivers on His promises. He always does! So I can open my Bible and believe that what it says about who God is and what His plans are and who I am in Christ and how He is calling me to respond, I can believe that He means those things for me and that He will never, ever fail me.

If we are going to talk about faith, then let us not begin to conceive of faith as some inanimate object. It's not just faith that moves mountains – it's faith in God; the God who has the power and the desire to move our mountains – that's what moves mountains. Let me ask you something – who benefitted from this miracle in this story? Well, the lepers did – they showed no apparent faith, but they did step out. They walked into a miracle – they kind of stumbled in on it rather than believing for it.

The King benefitted – he was this hopeless leader, whichever way you look at him. He was going to shoot the messenger, the prophet, but he didn't. He neither heeded the Word of God nor believed it.

He didn't even believe when he was told of what had happened and yet the King benefitted from the miracle. Isn't that amazing?

Elisha benefitted from the miracle – not specifically – not in any special way that we discover but only that he was part of Israel in that city of Samaria that once was under siege and starving and now had an abundance of everything. The whole of Israel benefitted from the miracle, including the women who had eaten their son, presumably. They all benefitted – no particular faith to be found there so far as we can tell – but the one man who did not was the Captain of the Guard because he defied God; he hurled unbelief in God's face.

It's a dangerous thing to do. It seems to me, the thing that we learn from this story is this: that even in the most dire of circumstances; amidst the most impossible of people, God remains the God of blessing. Our failures will not bring God undone. His plans do not depend on us – they won't be thwarted by us. And sometimes.....sometimes all we need is to step out and to walk into them.....to step out and walk down the path that God has kind of pointed us on and bump into the miracles, like those lepers.

Can I ask you this? God blessed a whole nation where only one man showed faith, how much more then, will we see the blessings of God when we hear God's Word and believe in Him? I want to ask you something today. What is the one thing that somehow you can't quite seem to believe God for – the miracle, the breakthrough, the healing – whatever it is? What if instead of imaging somehow, that it all depends on you and your faith and you being perfect and good, you just abandon it to God?

What if instead of staying here in this place and dying, you just head off across no-man's land, like those lepers did? Sure, it's going to be scary! Sure, there are going to be times when you wonder, 'What's God doing? What's the plan?' We don't deal well with ambiguity; we don't deal well with uncertainty. We want to see it all, we want to know it all, but the whole point of the way that God has set the universe up is that we need to navigate it by faith in Him.

What if we just stepped out and walked into His miracles?