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EXPOSITORY SERMON

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A POT.....A PROPHET.....A PROVISION

Scripture Reading – 2 Kings 4:1-7.

Introduction

The incident which we have just read would seem to fit more into the ministry of Jesus than in the ministry of prophet. But God used the prophet to perform a miracle for His glory. This dramatic story has the touch of human sensitivity and human compassion for a family in need. It reveals the concerned heart of God reaching out to one of his own. There are two main visible actors in the drama which took place. There is a widow woman in desperate need and then there is the prophet Elisha, God's man of the hour. Elisha was the instrument who God used to meet the need of the widow. There is something else in the story that filters through and which tells us that God was standing the shadows of all that

took place. It is a description of how God worked in a mysterious and yet powerful way to bring about relief to poverty stricken woman. He was the prime mover in the story.

The Prophet Elisha was God's servant in the miracle that took place. This prophet was both the companion and successor to the renowned prophet of fire, Elijah! Elisha you may recall made a request of Elijah before he was caught up into the heavens in chariot of fire. His request was significant and important for it was related to his ministry. "Let me," he said, "inherit a double portion of your spirit." The subsequent impact of his life and ministry gave clear evidence that his request had been granted. For instance he performed twice as many miracles as Elijah had. But there were also significant differences in personality and certainly in ministry. Each man's ministry was needed for this moment in history. While Elijah had the ministry of stern denunciation and proclaiming the message of God's judgment upon the sin of the nation, in order to bring it back to God, Elisha's assignment was one of instruction and winning people. His spirit was characterized by mercy, sensitivity and compassion. He reached out to people in need. The story we story we read is an account of a widow woman hopelessly lonely and desperately needy who was at the end of her rope. It would appropriate to say that she was in the midst of storm in her life. What we see here is

1. HER DISTRESS. 2 Kings 4:1. She did not know what to do. She called out to Elisha for help. The word tells us that she was the wife of the company of the prophets but her husband had died. It is clear that he was a man of God who in her words "revered the Lord." Then she outlined the reason for her distress for she said "his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves" as payment for debt. This was a legitimate action to take in those days. The Prophet asked how he could help and put a question to her "Tell me, what you have in your house?" Her reply indicated that she had nothing at all except a little oil. So it is apparent that she was in difficult situation. Clearly she was,

a. Destitute. 2 Kings 4:1-2. She had nothing with which to pay her husbands' creditors and the prophet asked her, "How can I help you? Tell me what do have in your house? She replied "Your servant has nothing there at all, except a little oil." She was destitute with no hope of relief in sight. Humanly speaking there was no way out of her predicament. She was poverty stricken. It is significant that even though she was destitute she was also,

b. Devoted. 2 Kings 4:1-2. This woman came from a devout family. He husband was a man from the company of the prophets. He was a man who revered God. They were a family who were devoted to the worship of God and committed to the God of Israel and His service. They were people of faith. Notice that she said that her husband was from the company of the prophets and was revered. In spite of this his creditors were coming to take her sons away in order to pay for the debt he had left behind. Could she be saying we are devoted to God as a family and my husband served Him, yet now we are the midst of a storm? She could have asked the question "Is this fair? What have we done to deserve this kind of pain and distress? Surely God would honor those who love Him and serve Him. Why do the good suffer and the wicked are so prosperous. That is the timeless question? Is it just that the righteous have to endure tribulation? These are natural questions, but they are flawed for they assume that because there has been a personal commitment to God and that good lives are being lived; God owes it to us to immunize us from life's cruelty. The truth is that God does not owe us a thing. He is not obligated to make the rough places smooth and the crooked places straight so that we can travel the highways of life with comfort and ease. That, I believe, would be destructive for us. This poor widowed woman was in the midst of a storm. The waves of life were swamping the boat. In the story of the disciples in a little boat on storm, it was Jesus who suggested that His disciples cross the Sea of Galilee that night and He accompanied them. What is striking is that while they were obeying him and were with Him on board, that the storm broke in on them."(Stewart p.119). The truth behind this is, that storms will inevitably break in upon our lives even while we are obeying God.

Being a Child of God is no insurance against calamity or pressure. It was James Stewart who asked "Do we think that God gives an exemption from the trials of life. Do we call it unfair when someone who is a real saint is struck down by illness and misfortune, and a deep dyed sinner gets off scot-free? If we think this way, we need to understand the consequences of this mindset. If we feel this way we are asking God to play favorites. We are asking Him, in return for being worshipped and served, to deal out preferential treatment. Is that a Christian principle? Is it really a Christian concept? Would it be good for a boy at school to receive exemption from discipline just because his parent happened to know the headmaster?" (Stewart Walking with God p.120) Jesus did not say "sail with me and I'll guarantee you smooth seas all your way." What Jesus did say "Sail with me through the stormiest sea I'll get you to your desired haven?" (Stewart. P. 120). With this in mind there are four truths we need to grasp this morning.

First

i. That Jesus Promised tribulation in the world. Tribulation and trial in this world is a fact of life. The integrity of Jesus contrasts with those who propose the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. He does not promise this on the material and worldly level. His Kingdom is not of this world. He does call upon us to take up the cross and follow Him and then proceeds to inform His disciples that in this world you will have trouble, but His words are tempered by a promise, "take heart I have overcome the world." F.B. Meyer tells us that "Earthly prosperity is no sign of the special love of heaven nor is sorrow and care any mark of God's disfavor but the reverse. God's love, true and eager, is not for our own comfort, but for our lasting blessedness and happiness." God always does what is best for us and He does all things well. God's answer is not always the eradication of suffering but the infusion of His amazing grace. The answer to Paul's thorn in the flesh and was not its removal but the impartation of God's grace so that in his weakness he is made strong and in such a way that he glories in his infirmities." ((see 2 Corinthians 12 v. 9-10) His thorn was the means of God's power resting

upon Him. God's power was manifested in the pain of the thorn. Jesus promised tribulation trouble in the world.

ii. God does not send suffering to His saints. He may allow it to come our way but he does not send it. We live in the world in which suffering is a reality. God permits the rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. Suffering does the same, but God does not send it. One has written "Don't confuse the facts of life with acts of God.....life is the business of living in a sinful world where evil, injustice and wickedness is very much alive! Place the blame where it belongs on the facts of life and not the acts of God. God does not send suffering to his children. Furthermore

iii. Not all suffering is a result of personal sin. Suffering can be the result of sin but it is not necessarily so. It is true that all suffering has its roots in sin. It is a result of the sin of Adam. But simply because we go through the raging storms of life, does not mean that they are a result or punishment for personal sin. The fourth truth is that

iv. Suffering to the Christian can have a creative and redemptive purpose to it. While suffering is not necessarily punishment it may be discipline. It is not merely to be endured but to be accepted as part of the maturation process. Something good and redemptive can come out of pain. This is the way the Apostle Paul views it. His words point to this truth. "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance. (Read Romans 5 v. 3-4) Perseverance character and character hope or as J.B. Phillips clearly put it, "We can be full of joy have and now even in our trials and troubles. Taken in the right spirit these things well gives us patient endurance, this in turn will develop mature character and character produces a steady hope." What is important is not so much what happens to us but what happens within us. How do we respond to adversity? It is good to recognize that adversity can make us strong. New Zealand is a fascinating country to those who are interested in geography and travel. Do you know that there are no dangerous wild animals in New Zealand and dangerous reptiles native to New Zealand at all? Not one!

Apart from its human occupants, a child could have wandered through its primeval forests unharmed. Do you know also that New Zealand is the home of more flightless birds than any other country? The Kiwi. The Kakapo, the Penguin and the Weka Rail. These birds had wings but lost them by neglecting their use. Scientists say they neglected to use them because food was always abundant and there was no danger near - any fearsome beast or reptile. And the cost of their immunity and constant comfort was the power of their wings. They had no necessity to fly; now they have no ability to fly. If there was no adversity in life we would be weak people with no spine, fortitude or courage. Peter told us that we have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials - these have come so that your faith is greater worth than gold which perishes even though refined by fire, maybe proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus is revealed. In our story is a good woman, widowed, poor and indebted and about to lose her sons in order to pay her debts. She was in distress. But the story is not over yet. Note further

2. HER DILEMMA. 2 Kings 4:1-7. The crisis in which she found herself was at a boiling point. She knew that,

a. Her Human Resources were not enough to meet her need. 2 Kings 4:2. She had but a pot of oil. She was poor and she faced an impossible debt. Her creditors were about to snatch her sons away in order to pay the debt. These were obstacles that she could not humanly overcome. Every where she turned there was deep darkness. She was in a tunnel and there was no light at the end of it. One senses her desperation as she cried to the Prophet Elisha for help. She could not do anything else for her resources were not enough to meet her need.

How many of us have been at the point in our lives where the demands of life have been excessive and you discovered that your resources were at an end. But when man comes to the end of his extremity, it opens the door to God's opportunity to display his grace and power. Now while her human resources were not enough to meet her physical need you will note that

b. Her Human resources were more than enough for God to use in order to meet her need. 2 Kings 4:4-7. The woman's cry for help found a response in Elisha's

heart. Elisha replied to her "How can I help you. Tell me what you have in your house? Her reply was simple "Your servant has nothing there at all except a little oil." Elisha said Go around and ask all the neighbors for empty jars. Don't ask or just a few. Then go outside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side." This woman had just a jar of oil. Her resources were limited – She had no material wealth from which she could draw. She had no assets to tap; no capital to use. She discovered the limitations of her capacity to find a solution to her problem. She came to the end of herself and then God stepped into her predicament.

You may recall the Old Testament story of Abraham and Sarah. Sarah was beyond child bearing age, but God had promised that she would give birth to a son. But the promise was slow in being fulfilled. Lack of faith in God's covenant promise resulted in Sarah's impatience and she feared that she would die before giving birth to a child. Now as was permissible in those days she said to her husband Abraham, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go and sleep with my maidservant Hagar, perhaps I can build a family through her. Abraham agreed to it and Ishmael was born. (See Genesis 16:1-8) It was not long after this that Isaac was born to Sarah and friction between Hagar and Sarah arose in the home. Abraham thought it wise that Hagar and Ishmael should leave home so that peace would be restored to the household. So she left with some bread and water in a water skin. And in the desert of Beersheba, she ran out of water. With a sense of hopelessness she placed the boy under one of the bushes and the scripture tells us, "She went a way off and sat down nearby to about a bow shot away for she thought "I cannot watch the boy die." And so she sat down and began to sob. As far as she was concerned, for her and her son it was the end of the road. In the dry fruitless waste land of the desert, her water gone and no resources to meet her need, God met her and opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She gratefully filled the skin with the water and gave the boy a

drink. Man had given her a pitcher, but God gave her a well. Genesis 21 v. 8-20)
What is important to absorb here is that man thinks in terms of a pitcher while God thinks in terms of wells. When God steps into the picture, He supplies inexhaustible resources and unlimited grace from which we can draw and find grace to meet adversity. The miracle is that God takes what we have and uses it to meet the need. God is not limited by our limitations. He is not confined by our shortcomings. He is not intimidated by our crises. He is only limited in our lives and service by our lack of availability to Him. The issue then is not our weakness, but God's power. So the problem does not lie in our difficulties. God cannot work in and through our lives to the need when we refuse to make ourselves and what we have available to Him. The widowed woman was in a critical dilemma but in the midst of it all she made we note

3. HER DISCOVERY. 2 Kings 4:1-7

While this woman found herself in an extremely difficult situation, she discovered that God does not desert His own.

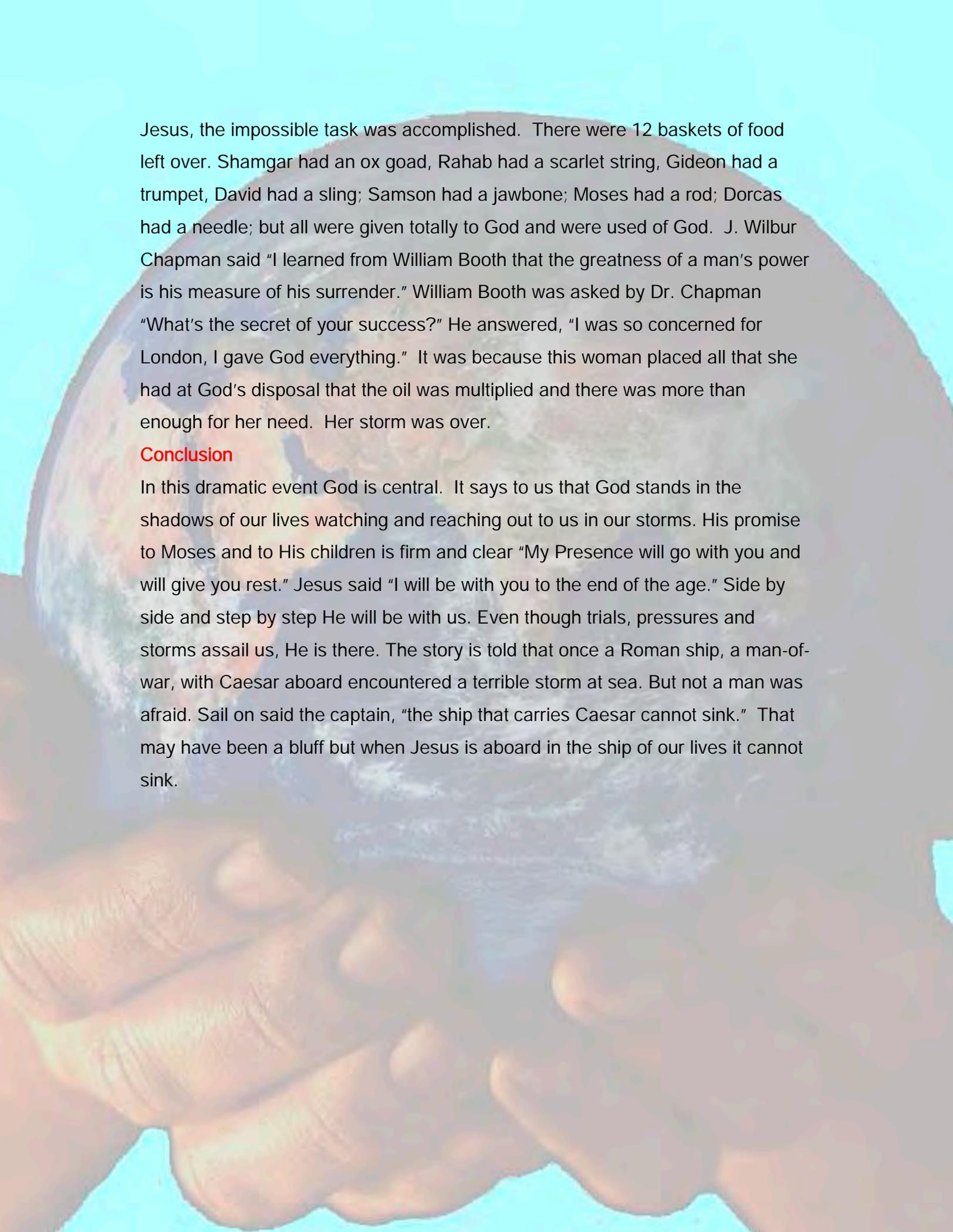
Do you remember that in the midst of a raging storm the disciples woke Jesus and said to Him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown? Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and said to the waves. "Quiet! Be still. The wind died down and it was completely calm." (Matt. 4:38) The widow woman in the midst of her storm learned some lessons from which we can derive some help. She discovered that,

a. A Cry for help from a desperate heart gets a loving response from the heart of God. 2 Kings 4:1-7. God responds in various ways to the cry for help but respond He will. God's response to this cry came in the form of the prophet Elisha. God does not have set ways to perform his wonders or supply our needs. The hymn writer writes so well and with great insight. "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take. The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on your head." The Psalmist David wrote, "They cried to you and they were saved, in you they trusted and

were not disappointed." (Ps. 22 v.5). When our hearts are turned towards God in plea for relief, be sure of one thing He has heard and help is on the way. It may not come in the person of a prophet, for God's ways are mysterious; they are past finding out, but our "God is a very present help in the time of trouble." (Ps.46 v.1) A cry for help always gets a response from the heart of God. That is a discovery that brings meaning and glory to the crisis. But in that discovery, the widow woman also found out that help was contingent on her response in two ways. She discovered that

b. Implicit Obedience is indispensable to the releasing the power of God in order to meet her need. 2 Kings 4:1-7. When the prophet Elijah found out that she had a jar of oil, he told her to collect as many jars as she could. "Don't," he said "Don't ask for just a few." Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it aside." She did as he said. She kept pouring until the last jar was full. The first condition for this miracle to take place was obedience. Service and sacrifice do not mean much to God if there is disobedience in the life. The timeless principle of scripture is that to "obey is better than sacrifice." The supply of God's power and grace in the storm, hinges upon obedience to the Holy Spirit. Obedience to God is the key which opens the door to blessing power and strength in the storms of life. It releases the power of God to meet our needs. But God's help was also contingent on an,

c. Absolute Surrender to God's Plan that will confirm the operation of His power to meet the storms of life. 2 Kings 4:1-7. Obedience and surrender to God go together. Obedience is part of surrender and surrender is part of obedience. "What do you have in your house?" the prophet asked. And the woman took what she had and used it. God blest that act of obedience and the oil was multiplied and the need was met. Was it not a sling – a stone – and a lad given to God that slew a formidable giant and delivered the Israelites from defeat? Think back to a great hungry crowd of people, five thousand besides woman and children that needed to be fed. It was an impossible task. But a small lunch in the hands of



Jesus, the impossible task was accomplished. There were 12 baskets of food left over. Shamgar had an ox goad, Rahab had a scarlet string, Gideon had a trumpet, David had a sling; Samson had a jawbone; Moses had a rod; Dorcas had a needle; but all were given totally to God and were used of God. J. Wilbur Chapman said "I learned from William Booth that the greatness of a man's power is his measure of his surrender." William Booth was asked by Dr. Chapman "What's the secret of your success?" He answered, "I was so concerned for London, I gave God everything." It was because this woman placed all that she had at God's disposal that the oil was multiplied and there was more than enough for her need. Her storm was over.

Conclusion

In this dramatic event God is central. It says to us that God stands in the shadows of our lives watching and reaching out to us in our storms. His promise to Moses and to His children is firm and clear "My Presence will go with you and will give you rest." Jesus said "I will be with you to the end of the age." Side by side and step by step He will be with us. Even though trials, pressures and storms assail us, He is there. The story is told that once a Roman ship, a man-of-war, with Caesar aboard encountered a terrible storm at sea. But not a man was afraid. Sail on said the captain, "the ship that carries Caesar cannot sink." That may have been a bluff but when Jesus is aboard in the ship of our lives it cannot sink.