

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

SAY THE PROMISE AGAIN

2 Kings 4.42-44

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Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

42A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." 43But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" 44He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

A few passages that will assist in understanding the scripture above:

Exodus 23:16 You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Exodus 23:19 The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God.

Exodus 34:22 You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year.

Exodus 34:26 The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the Lord your God.

Leviticus 2:14 If you bring a grain offering of first fruits to

the Lord, you shall bring as the grain offering of your first fruits coarse new grain from fresh ears, parched with fire.

Leviticus 23:10 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest.

Leviticus 23:17 You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering, each made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of choice flour, baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord.

DIAGNOSIS: A Promise Is Ignored

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We Try To Be Obedient*

An obedient man brings the first fruits of his or his village's harvest. He brings it from a place (a city where Baal, the god of rain and fertility, is trusted) where there is no famine. The man obeys the law of Moses. Or he brings his first fruits to Elisha who has performed miracles, even restoring to life a widow's son who had died. The man trusts that Elisha and Elisha's god are to be trusted.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *But Then We Balk*

But when Elisha tells the obedient man to give his first fruits to the people to eat—a people living in a famine and to whom food is a life-sustaining treasure—his obedience balks. He does not trust Elisha's promise that his food for twenty people is enough to feed a hundred people. The obedient man has become the disobedient man. We cannot on our own trust God. The law

requires us to “expect help from God in death and all afflictions” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, 121.8, Kolb and Wengert). And the very next sentence reads, “Finally, it [the Decalogue] requires obedience to God in death and all afflictions so that we do not flee or avoid these things when God imposes them.” To obey God in death does sound impossible, but to trust that twenty loaves can feed a hundred people, is that so hard to believe? It must have been. It did not matter what Elisha had done it before. God’s help was needed now. Past help was of no benefit for the present challenge. So God was not trusted.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *We Obey Death*

Without trust, the one hundred people would be left with nothing to eat and so would perish. And the disobedient man, how could he trust God at his time of death if he could not trust this little thing of giving twenty loaves of bread to a hundred people? It is so much easier to trust what we see and know rather than trust a promise from God. We know our worry, but not God’s help. We experience unemployment, but don’t see God’s help. We watch a spouse die, and do not see God’s help. We balk, and also do not trust God. We too are disobedient. When we do not trust God, we have no help when God’s word of death comes to us and to all the disobedient (that is, hearers of the wrong word).

PROGNOSIS: The Promise Is Given To Us Again and Again

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The First Fruit of Those Who Have Died Is Given to Us*

Only when Elisha, the man of God, gives the Promising Word of the Lord again does the disobedient man get made into the trusting man. The Promising Word of God that is spoken to us is also, “Give the first fruits to the people.” But now we are

given the first fruit of the one who has died, namely Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, raised from the dead, is God's Promise for all people, not just a certain hundred people. Just as the disobedient man needed to hear the promise again, so we also need to receive the Promise of God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Jesus' Promise Gives Us Trust in Him*

We need to be told the Promise of God—Jesus—so that the things we can see and hear are not the things we finally trust. We need to be reminded that it's not what we offer God, but the first fruits that God has offered us in his Son that are trustworthy. So again and again in the face of being asked to do what to us seems impossible, we need to hear the Promise of God to find courage. When we hear other promises (whether delivered by sports, entertainment, achievements, or hard work) all offering us life, we need to hear again the Promise that Jesus, not our trying and doing, makes us right with God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Speak Jesus' Promise Again and Again*

The Promise of Jesus to give us life is what we need to hear when our own dying makes us balk and fail to trust in Jesus' life everlasting for us. When at work and we are yelled at for not doing enough, not doing good enough, and we get filled with anger or despair, we need to hear the Promise of Jesus again, so that we trust his word and not the word of the one who has just yelled at us. When we are afflicted with hardship, having to beg to eat, we need to hear the Promise of Jesus. When we hear the promises of life offered by fun, entertainment, sports, by being a good parent, and by being busy (often to avoid feeling the emptiness of our lives), we need to hear the Promise of Jesus that we are good, and good to God, all because of him. His Promise makes us into Jesus-trusting people. God looks at Jesus-trusting people and "regards and reckons this faith as

righteousness" (Augsburg Confession, IV). So when someone is disturbed, we can say, "May I offer you peace?" If they say Yes, then give them the peace of Jesus. When people feel weak, give them Jesus' Promise that is for the weak. When people trust power, education, all the things that they do, for the goodness of their life, ask them, "How do those things help when affliction happens?" When they say they are of no help, ask if you may offer a Promise that does help them in the times of affliction. When people feel good from some evaluation, or when they feel despair from some evaluation, say to them, "I see how this evaluation has affected you. May I offer you goodness that does not depend on how well you do?" The one in despair will quickly answer Yes, and you can say to them, "Jesus makes you good." You will have spoken God's Promise again, and they will eat and it will be enough.