

Momma's Oil

2 Kings 4:1-8 (KJV)

1 Now there cried a certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets unto Elisha, saying, Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen. **2** And Elisha said unto her, What shall I do for thee? tell me, what hast thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil. **3** Then he said, Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbours, even empty vessels; borrow not a few. **4** And when thou art come in, thou shalt shut the door upon thee and upon thy sons, and shalt pour out into all those vessels, and thou shalt set aside that which is full. **5** So she went from him, and shut the door upon her and upon her sons, who brought the vessels to her; and she poured out. **6** And it came to pass, when the vessels were full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said unto her, There is not a vessel more. And the oil stayed. **7** Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and pay thy debt, and live thou and thy children of the rest. **8** And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.

Put yourself in the shoes of the widowed mother for a second. Your husband has just died and you are left with a substantial amount of debt to pay off. In hopes to raise enough money to pay off the debt, you liquidate all of your belongings, besides what seems like a useless jar of oil, and you still don't have enough money to pay off the debt. On top of all of these circumstances, the bill collector needs the rest of the amount by the first of the month or your two children will be stripped away from you and sold into slavery. You can't fathom the idea of your two precious children being taken away from you, but it seems to be your only option. You decide to talk Elisha, hoping there is something he can do for you, but his hands are tied and he doesn't know how to help you. In devastation, you pick up your things and prepare to leave, but then Elisha asks you a question that will forever change your life, "What do you have in the house?"

The question of the prophet resounds across the chasm of time and space. It is as relevant for us now, as ever, especially on Mother's Day! If we would save our children, it begins with rightly answering Elisha's question: "What do you have in the house?"

As we embark on our journey into the text, remember that miracle stories exist to teach a lesson beyond what we see on the face of the text. The story before us is a bona fide miracle. Through the prophet Elisha, God does the impossible. God causes the oil in the jar ("Momma's Oil," if you will) to multiply. The point is not merely that the oil was multiplied though.

The point of the text is that the mother was able to save her children, provide for their future, and bless the larger community. It must be noted that this legacy was located in the house, in Momma's House, represented by a jar of oil – "Momma's Oil!"

The oil was "in the house" and she knew where it was. The message behind the miracle begins to unfold when Elisha poses the question that sets the tone for our sermonic inquiry, asking the mother in our text, "What do you have in the house?"

Having heard her say that a creditor had threatened to sell her children into slavery to cover her husband's outstanding debt, "What do you have in the house?" can only be understood as a loaded question.

Elisha would have been familiar with the process that brought this woman into his office. Upon hearing of her husband's death, his creditors came to the house to get the money he owed them. As his widow, she had to cover the debt from their assets. That meant she would have to pay the debt in cash or, when the money ran out, she would have to sell off household items.

To come to Elijah and to explain that a creditor was going to sell her children into slavery was an indication that she had sold everything of value. So, then, what does Elijah mean by asking, "What do you have in the house?"

The only reason for Elisha to ask that question was because he knew that she had something of value left in the house. The only way for him to know that is for God to have revealed it to him! So in asking the question, Elisha is letting the mother know that God has already seen her situation and is at work!

The mother already knew that she hadn't sold everything, but there's no way that Elijah could know that! That Elijah even asked the question is an indication that God had told him there was something of value left in the house!

But what could it be? I mean she had sold the Xbox, iPad, the laptops, the furniture, the appliances, the cellphones, and all the jewelry. Those things had market value, so the real question was: "What's left?" What did she have that she valued more than her worldly possessions? What was it that she couldn't bear to part with? That's what Elisha was asking about! He wanted to know what she had stashed away. What was worth keeping back?

The text says that it was a jar of oil!

The original language makes it clear that both the jar and the oil in it were special. This jar contained holy anointing oil; that special mixture of oil and spices the recipe for which was set forth in Exodus 30.

This holy anointing oil was to be used solely, exclusively by priests as part of worship. Under Old Testament Law, misuse of the sacred oil was punishable by death.

This mother (and recent widow) had kept back a jar of holy, anointing oil. Here's the thing, the only way for her to be in possession of that sacred oil was for her husband (whom the text says was a prophet) to have also been a priest!

Remember, in the cultural context of the text before us, this widow would not have had personal access to anointing oil, as only men could be priests. So the jar of oil that was in her possession was (to use Elisha's phrasing) "in the house" because her deceased husband had left it there.

Perhaps this jar of anointing oil is all that she has left to remember her husband by. To her, this jar and its contents represented her husband's legacy. She couldn't just sell it as if it were a chair or a set of dishes and her husband's creditor couldn't take sacred, holy anointing oil as payment for a debt. So, she stashed it away in the house: a keepsake, a reminder of her family legacy. And now, here comes Elijah asking, "What do you have in the house?"

Can't you just see the conversation unfold? Elisha's question had to make the mother nervous. She's got to be wondering, "Why is Elijah asking me about what I have in my house?"

Having been married to a prophet and priest, the woman in the text is sensitive to the moving of the Spirit of God; she knows when the Lord is speaking. And so, standing between joy and fear, between hope and doubt, she answers, "All I have left is a jar of oil."

The beauty of the story is that this jar of oil is more than enough to save her children! In fact, it is enough to ensure their future and to revitalize the community.

Listen! Can I tell you that what you need to save your children, ensure their future and help your community is in your house, too!

No! It can't be found among your assets. It is not your jewelry, or stocks, or expensive gadgets. It isn't among your "stuff!"

What's in your house is a jar of oil. A jar of oil that represents the legacy, the hopes and dreams and aspirations of those who have gone on before. It's already there, in the house, waiting on us to put it to use. And it is, in fact, more than enough to save our children!

It's stashed away in the house, but we must claim it. We must lay our fingers on it! We must lay hold to the legacy bequeathed to us by our forefathers and foremothers! We need to lay our hands on "Momma's Oil."

Let me ask you on this Mother's Day: What do you have in your house? That is the question of the text. Can you lay your fingers on your legacy? Do you know what you have? Do you know where it is? Can you identify the jar of oil bequeathed to us by those who have gone on before us? For only then can we follow the Divine Strategy.

Followed Divine Strategy – borrow empty vessels from neighbors!

Once the mother acknowledges that she has the jar of oil, Elisha shares with her the Divine strategy that will save her children, bless their lives and revitalize the community. Elisha says to her in verse 3 (I'm paraphrasing): "Go and borrow as many empty vessels as you can from your neighbors. Bring the vessels home and, behind closed doors, fill each one with oil from your jar. Fill them up. Fill them all."

Do you see it there, my brothers and my sisters? God's instructions, through the voice of Elisha, "Take your legacy and pour it out in to empty vessels, behind closed doors, with your children"

Remember, the "jar" was a special container, specifically filled with anointing oil. God's instruction through Elisha is to place the anointing oil, the legacy of the household, into regular, ordinary "vessels" borrowed from the members of the community.

The underlying Hebrew makes it clear that the "vessels" into which the oil was to be poured were ordinary vessels. Anything that could hold oil, a bowl, cup, or flask would have qualified.

Can I be honest and tell you that this part of the text caused me some concern? Why would God tell the mother in our text to pour the holy oil that is her legacy, into common vessels borrowed from her neighbors? Shouldn't the sacred oil be poured out into sacred vessels?

The answer to that question will be addressed later in the text, but listen; can I put a pin, here? We need to learn to follow God's plan, to yield to God's strategy and stop trying to figure God out. God will reveal what God is doing in God's own time!

The bottom line is this: "Do you want to save your children or not!" If we are going to save our children, we need to follow the Divine strategy. In fact, the text reveals that when we follow God's plan, God does more than we even ask for! God does exceedingly, abundantly above all that we could ask or think!

Think about this: the mother only wanted to have her bills paid and to keep her children from being sold as slaves. So she followed Divine strategy, without question. And because she yielded, the text reveals that she not only paid off her debt and saved her children by following Divine strategy, she also ensured their future and blessed the community!

We need to trust the Planner and trust the plan. "For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans of peace and not of evil, to give you a hope and a future." Trust the Planner and the plan!

The purpose of the plan will unfold later on in the text. But there can be no unfolding of God's plan, if we are busy questioning God instead of being busy following God's strategy. God has a plan! God's plan will work out, if we follow it!

Let me remind you: What we need is in the house and God expects us to do what He said, even when we do not fully understand what it is that we are to do! God has a purpose and a plan. There is a method to divine madness.

Let me give you a sneak preview. God intended that the mother share her holy legacy with the people from whom she borrowed the common vessels, because they needed her oil too!

The prophet told the mother in our text, "Pour the legacy out into common vessels."

We'll get to the "why" of Divine strategy in this text, but I don't want us to miss its unfolding.

Let's review...

The mother:

1. Put her finger on her stash (the legacy in her house); and she
2. Followed Divine strategy.
But before she sold the oil, and as a result, received the "more-than-enough" blessing of God, the mother in our text
3. Founded a school in her home that taught her kids in private and gave them responsibility.

That's what happened when, after gathering the empty vessels from her neighbors (at God's command), the mother began pouring her sacred legacy in to them. Hear again the instruction of the prophet:

He said, "Go outside, and borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside." So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring.

After the vessels were gathered, the mother brought her children inside and (along with them) began working with the family legacy.

Don't you see them in the kitchen? Momma's got out the jar of sacred oil and each child takes a turn bringing an empty vessel to her and watching her pour sacred oil from the jar into the vessel. No matter how big, or how small, the vessel, there's enough oil flowing from the jar to fill it. No matter how many vessels they bring, the oil of their legacy just keeps flowing.

I don't know about you, but I remember learning some life lessons in the kitchen with my Momma. Helping her do whatever she was doing in there. Momma and me would talk as she worked. Can't you hear them talking, as Momma pours out the oil?

I hear the mother telling her children, "You know this is our family legacy. This was your father's jar of holy, anointing oil. It was his father's before him. Your Daddy and your granddaddy took it to work everyday. Your Dad said it reminded him of the good old' days. He said having it eased his mind, when things got tense at the Temple. And when he was off-duty, it reminded him of the sacred trust that belonged to him as a priest."

As the children brought more vessels and as the mother poured out more oil, I imagine one of the kids asked, "Momma. Are they going to come take us away."

"Now, baby, let me worry about that. Just go get me another vessel. This one is full," says Momma.

It was their family's legacy and it spoke to them of past, present, and future. I can imagine that Momma used the time and the opportunity to teach her children.

Just look at the text. It was the kids who brought the vessels to their momma, as she poured out the oil! Momma taught her children to engage their legacy at home. She made them responsible and made them participate in the activity that would ultimately save them.

Don't miss this! The children participated in their own deliverance, because Momma taught them there to work with their legacy!

Can't you hear her talking with her children about the hopes and dreams represented by that special jar? As she filled the empty vessels with oil, she schooled her children about their legacy. She talked to them about the God, who promised to supply every need.

They were the kids of a prophet and a priest! Theirs was a legacy of hope and faith and trust in God!

Yes! You can learn some stuff about who you are and whose you are in the house with Momma!

Fully Satisfied – pay off the debt (take care of the problem); still left with more than enough.

The text doesn't tell us how many vessels they filled up, but we know that the momma had followed the prophet's instructions and gathered quite a few, because the text says that "they [the children] kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring" right up until the last vessel was filled and the oil (therefore) stopped flowing.

The children had plenty of time to become thoroughly familiar with their legacy. And now it was time for the final stage of God's plan...

God would grant her resolution and she would (therefore) be fully satisfied. All of the vessels are filled. The oil has stopped flowing. And, now, the text says that the mother then went back to Elisha to get her final instruction. Elisha tells her, "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest."

That's good news, y'all!

But before we shout over the fact that her children were saved and all of their futures' secured, let me ask you a question: Whom did the mother sell the vessels to?

Two principles guide the deductive answer to the question: (1) the vessels she used were "borrowed" and (2) the vessels all (now) contained holy, anointing oil. And there's a third cultural nuance that helps answer the question: at the time of the text, priests, and their families lived in communities with other priestly families.

Thus, the vessels of oil had to have been borrowed (in their empty state) from and then sold back (full) to the priests, who lived in the same neighborhood as the mother in our text.

In other words, the reason that the mother was able to save her children was that her family remained true to the legacy of the community, even when others in that same community ignored their legacy!

The reason that everybody bought anointing oil from the mother in our text was because in the enclave of priests in whom she and her children lived, she was the only one, who had any. The only reason she had any was that it was a part of her household legacy. A legacy that she passed on to her children, as she shared with them behind closed doors, while they poured the oil into empty vessels.

Momma had what her children needed. And when she shared it with the larger community, Momma discovered that her oil was more than enough to meet the need!

God did it! God did it like God always does it! He takes our little and, when we follow God's instruction, God makes it more than enough!

Is there anybody in here that can testify with me? God will do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ask or think?

Momma, hold on to your oil! You need it! Your children need it! Your community needs it!

Yes, it was the oil of the legacy of our people, a legacy of dignity and integrity and community, but that oil was also sacred! Momma's who raised children. Momma's who disciplined children. Momma's who changed their communities. Momma's who knew Jesus!

Those were mommas. Those are mommas who have some oil!

Hold on to your oil! Whatever you do, don't give up the Presence of God.

"What do you have in the house?" You need to have some oil!

See, in this modern age, we done got too cute. We're trying everything, but the Presence of God! But it's the Presence of God, momma's oil, that will save our children and revitalize our communities.