

## Chapter Nineteen

# The Helping Hand

*Elijah finished the work God gave him to do, and a man called Elisha replaced him.*

*To tell you a bit about him, our scene is back at the top of mount Carmel, where two old ravens are addressing a large crowd of birds.*

‘End of the Learn-About-Elijah Tour, folks. From now on, it’s all downhill.’ The greying raven turned to his companion. ‘Well, from the top of Mount Carmel it would be. I’m hoarse. I think this is the last tour we ought to do, Sis.’

‘You shout too much, that’s your trouble, little brother.’ Over the years his big sister had hardly softened. She turned to the assembled crowd, who looked more like an undertaker’s outing than a group of birds on an educational tour. ‘Any questions?’ she snapped.

‘What happened to Elijah?’

‘Trained his successor to be a prophet in his place and then God whisked him away.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘Elisha.’

‘Well-known public figure. Advisor to kings. Deliverer of Israel. Great prophet,’ added her brother.

‘I don’t think I really know what a prophet is,’ confessed one bird to another, in a whisper loud enough for everyone to hear.

A large sigh reverberated through Big Sis’s rather overweight carcass. How many of them had been through the Tour and still didn’t have a clue? ‘May I remind you,’ she announced, ‘prophets are men or women selected by God. They speak for God. They tell the people how they live. They warn the nation of what God is going to do, because of how they are behaving. They tell them what good things God’s got planned for the future. It’s a special calling.’

‘It’s a risky business,’ added Little Brother. ‘You can end up dead. Remember Queen Jezebel? She killed the prophets of God and she tried to kill Elijah. Elisha’s had a close shave too. He’s a prophet known for his miracles. Did you know that?’ The ravens shook their heads. ‘Want to know more?’ he croaked, with what was left of his voice.

Miracles are always interesting. The birds nodded. No one had said anything about money and this looked like being extra and free.

‘It’s not part of the tour,’ whispered Big Sis urgently.

‘Who cares. You can see they want to know.’ Without waiting for a reply, the raven lifted his voice to reach even the back of the crowd. ‘This is the story of a woman, money, and some oil. From Samuel’s days have been groups of followers who supported and learnt from God’s prophets. One unhappy day, one of these men died. He left debts that his widow couldn’t pay. Soon the creditor...’

‘That’s the person she owed the money to,’ barked Big Sis quickly.

‘Yes, well, whoever he was, he was at the door, threatening to take her two children and make them his slaves, to pay off the debt. The woman ran to Elisha for help. He asked her what she had in the house. All she had was a pot of oil. That’s all she had left.’ The bird tried a sob or two.

‘Cut it,’ hissed Big Sis.

‘All right, all right, just adding colour,’ the bird hissed back, and raised his voice again. ‘Elisha told her to borrow jars from all her neighbours, - empty ones - and lots of them. When she’d finished collecting them, she had to shut her front door, her sons had to pass her the empty jars one by one and she had to fill them from her own pot of oil.’

‘But she’s only got one pot of oil.’

‘That’s what I like. A good grasp of reality, sunshine. Our widow did exactly what Elisha told her to do. She kept filling till there were no more jars to fill. That’s when the oil stopped flowing from her own pot. Now she had a house full of jars of oil.’

‘That’s no substitute for children,’ muttered a small raven at the front of the crowd. Big Sis peered at the bird. At last, someone who was sillier than her own brother.

‘Elisha told her to take the oil and sell it, silly. The money paid the debt with enough left over for her and her children lived on,’ replied the raven with a decided snap of the beak.

Murmurs rose from the attentive crowd like frosted breath on a cold day. ‘Ohhh!’ ‘Aaah.’ ‘Very kind.’ ‘Compassionate.’ Soon there were stirrings in the crowd. The separate mutters wove themselves into a unified desire to hear more: What other miracles? Where? How many?’ Little Brother started counting but ran out of toes.

‘It’s not part of the tour,’ repeated his sister loudly.

‘One or two won’t hurt you,’ bellowed a large bird from the back.

‘Come on, Sis, they right, one or two won’t hurt and we can show them where they took place on our way home,’ said Little Brother, backing up the enthusiastic audience.

‘Who said he was hoarse, glad the tour was over, and didn’t want to do any more?’

‘Well, you can’t say no, can you?’

‘Oh, all right,’ sighed the tired bird, ‘just a couple, on the way home, but no more, mind you.’

‘Good old Sis! What a sport.’ The bird turned to the waiting crowd. ‘Next miracle happened to a woman who lived at Shunem. Come on you lot, let’s go.’ And with that, the birds took to the air, and wheeled round through the sky, like a big black rash. Heading south east from Mount Carmel, they followed the blue trail of the river Kishon, and sped on through the great plain of Megiddo

A track, wide enough to take a couple of carts side by side, sliced its way through the fields of the valley near Jezreel, heading for a small town on the rise of the distant hills.

'Road into Shunem,' announced Little Brother, as if everyone present should be overwhelmed by the sight of such a nondescript roadway. 'This is where she lived, folks,' he continued, waving a wing wildly in the direction of some deserted houses.

'Who?'

'This lady we are going to tell you about,' snapped Big Sister. 'One day Elisha was passing Shunem and she persuaded him to stop for a meal. After that Elisha always broke his journey at her place for a meal. Elisha did a lot of travelling, and the woman believed he was a man of God, so she suggested to her husband that they build an upper room on the roof, which Elisha could use as his own, and get some proper rest when he passed.'

'Did they build it?'

'Can you see it from here?'

'How big was it?'

'Yes, they built it,' replied the bird, ignoring the other questions.

'That's nice.... Kind.... Nice gesture,' responded the crowd.

Big sister continued quickly. 'Elisha asked the woman if he could do anything for her - he had influence - he could talk to the king or the commander of the army on her behalf, but she said she needed nothing. But he found out from Gehazi, his servant, that she hadn't a son and her husband was old. So Elisha called her and told her that the next year she would be holding a son in her arms. She didn't believe him. Perhaps she didn't dare believe him. But the next year she gave birth to a fine baby boy.'

'That's wonderful... Good news... Where next...? What's for lunch?'

'Oi!' shouted Little Brother. 'We have finished yet.'

'There's more?'

'Of course there's more - the boy died.'

'What? That's tragic... A miracle followed by disaster... How come? The crowd's muttering was turning slowly into a fully-fledged debate.

'Order. Order!' shouted Big Sis, taking matters in hand again. 'This is what happened. During one harvest the boy was out with his father when he collapsed with head pains. He was taken home and died in his mother's arms. She carried him up to Elisha's room and laid him out on his bed. Then she raced off, as fast as her donkey could race, to Mount Carmel to find Elisha. When she found him, she fell down and grabbed his feet. Elisha saw how distressed she was, but God had not told him the reason. "Did I ask for a son?" she sobbed. Now Elisha knew. "Go!" he ordered Gehazi. "And no stopping. Place my staff on the face of the child." Gehazi dashed away. Elisha and the boy's mother followed hard after Gehazi. When Gehazi reached the house, he laid the staff on the boy's body. There wasn't a sound, not a movement. He left and returned down the road to meet Elisha. It's no good, he said. When Elisha reached the room, he shut the door and prayed. Then he lay on the child, mouth-to-mouth, eye-to-eye, and hand-to-hand. He got

up and walked for a while and then lay over the body again. He did this seven times. Suddenly the boy opened his eyes. Elisha opened the door and called his mother. "Here is your son!"

'Back from the dead! No more tears! Good news!' and other similar expressions mingled together to form an enthusiastic and appreciative babble. As the chatter died down, one big old raven stepped forward; 'On behalf of all of us,' he said formally, 'thank you for telling us of these things. It is so encouraging to see that God doesn't just deal with the nation, but cares about people. However, both these miracles were very private. Were any, how shall I say, out in the open?'

'Of course there were...' Big Sister was about to recite a list, but was rudely and loudly interrupted by her irrepressible brother. 'A miracle with an individual, out in the open? Just follow me! As the old crow flies, and the ravens too, we'll be there in a shake of a wing.' Looking like a pile of coal defying gravity, the whole flock took to the air, eastwards.

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'Why are we looking at this muddy river?'

'Because we've got an absolutely wonderful tale to tell you.' This didn't quite answer the question but the bird rattled on unconcerned. 'Listen. There was a man called Naaman who was commander of the Syrian army. He won lots of battles,' said the raven appreciatively. 'He'd even fought against Israel and God had given him victory. The Syrian king thought a lot of him. One problem though,' sighed Little Brother. 'The man was a leper.'

The crowd sighed back in response. 'Sad... Very sad... Talented man...But he was the enemy... did it matter?' Little Brother looked pop eyed. What was the answer to this one?

'Get on with it,' said a sharp voice at his side. So he did.

'Now, on one of their raids on Israel, the Syrians had carried off a young girl who became a servant to Naaman's wife. She told her new mistress that if only Naaman would go to see Elisha, he would cure him. His wife told Naaman, he told the king and the king said: go! - I'll give you a letter to the king of Israel. Well, Naaman set off on his chariot, with a large escort and heaps of gold and silver, and expensive clothes to give in gratitude for this cure he was going to get. He rolled up at the palace of the king of Israel and requested an audience. He presented his letter to the king.' The bird paused, for dramatic effect.

'Go on.... What did it say...Don't leave us waiting.'

"I am sending my servant Naaman, with this letter, for you to cure him of his leprosy." The raven started laughing. He laughed so much he couldn't say anymore.

Big Sis gave him a withering look. The crowd was puzzled: 'What's so funny?'

'How could....' Little Brother spluttered, 'how could the king...how could the king cure the man? Of course he couldn't! He knew that. He tore his clothes - "Am I a god?" he shrieked, "that this king can send a man for me to cure?" He came to the conclusion it must be a clever way to pick a quarrel and start a war. Oh,

happiness,' chirped the bird, having recovered from his giggles. 'Elisha heard about the scene the king made and sent a message to him - tell this man to come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel. Soon Naaman and his escort of soldiers were charging down the rutted roads of Israel, bags of gold and silver bouncing in the back of the chariots, geese and goats scattering as they careered past.' Little Brother was enjoying himself. 'Dust clouds rose behind them leaving a twisted trail as the road wound through hill and vale. People stopped opened mouthed as they watched the cavalcade clatter on without stopping, till it reached Elisha's house. Stop! ordered the general. Whoa! cried the charioteers. Halt! bellowed the general's aide. The snorting horses came to quivering halt. The exhausted escort panted quietly...'

The crowd waited motionless and expectant. But little brother had run out of breath. As usual, his sister came to the rescue. 'Elisha sent out a message to him. He told Naaman to go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, which is this river below us, and his flesh would become clean once more. '

Her brother cleared his throat. 'Ok. Sis, I'm back. I love this story. Let me tell - please.'

'Never mind who's telling...Get on with it... What happened? Did he charge off and dive in?' yelled the listening crowd

'Whoa!' croaked Little Brother. 'Not so fast now. Our great general got his message and he was furious. I mean he was incandescent...'

'What's that mean?'

'He was so cross he seemed to be on fire.'

'Oh, he was cross, wasn't he?' The crowd thought for a moment. Then someone said it - 'why was he so cross?'

'Naaman's words: " Here I was thinking he would be sure to come to me and stand there and call on the name of his God and wave his hand over the spot and cure my leprosy. Surely the rivers of Damascus are better than any water there is in Israel? Why could I not bathe in them and become clean?" And he turned round and stomped off in a rage.'

The tour looked down at the slow waters below them. They had to admit they'd seen finer rivers. Yes, they said to one another, this was not a fine specimen of a river.

'Oi!' said Little Brother.

'Attention, you lot!' bellowed his sister, with rather more effect. 'Don't you want to hear what happened?'

'Of course we do,' said the group. 'Why are you waiting?'

Big Sis took up the tale. 'Naaman marched down the road fuming. His servants ran after him. "My father", they called to him. "If the prophet had told you to do something difficult, wouldn't you have done it? All the more reason, surely, if he just says 'bathe and you will become clean.'" My friends, he listened to them, and changed his mind. The company made their way here to this river Jordan and this commander of the army of Syria got down from his chariot and stepped into the water, bathed, and climbed out. Then he turned round and stepped in again...'

'What did he do?' interrupted Little Brother, turning to the flock.

The crowd hesitated for a moment. 'Stepped in again,' they repeated.

'...as I said,' continued Big Sis, 'for the second time he stepped in, bathed, climbed out....'

‘And then what did he do?’ interrupted her brother again.  
‘Stepped in again!’ The crowd was getting the hang of it.  
‘...and for the third time he bathed and left the water...’ persisted Big Sis.  
‘Then what does he do?’ yelled her brother.  
‘Goes in again!’ the crowd yelled back.  
‘...for the fourth time - in and out.’ The bird paused, knowing what was going to happen next.  
‘And then what?’  
‘In again!’  
‘For the fifth time Namaan steps into the water and out.’  
‘And then...’  
‘In he goes again!’  
‘For the sixth time he bathes and....’  
There was no stopping the crowd now. ‘In he goes again!’  
‘For the seventh time Namaan enters the river and bathes and leaves...’  
‘And then what?’ screamed Little Brother.  
‘What?’ asked the crowd, stopped in full verbal flight.  
Little Brother let out an ear-splitting, vocal-cord-destroying whoop. ‘His skin is clear, it’s like a child’s, he’s clean, and he’s healed!’  
The crowd too let out a collective harmonic whoop. ‘Clean! Healed!’  
‘But he was an enemy of Israel,’ stated one of the crowd after a moment.  
‘God loves everybody,’ said Big Sis, tartly and smartly. ‘And his prophets go where he says and do what he says. They speak to whoever he tells them to speak to. They say what he tells them to say. Although,’ added the raven, ‘I do hear there was one who didn’t want to go to Assyria when he was told to. But that’s another story.’  
Another story, thought little brother! But he said nothing. He had lost his voice.

