



The Message of Elijah

(4) A Dead Boy Brought to Life

1 Kings 17:8-24

Text: Verses 17-24

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The Bible teaches us about God and how human beings are to live in the light of the reality of God. Much of the Bible is in the form of stories – true stories that together make up the overarching story of God working out his purposes in the history of the world. The story line of the Bible is the story in the light of which we are to understand what life is all about, what really matters, and where God is heading as he directs the history of the world.

This morning we will consider this story from the life of the prophet Elijah and seek to learn what God is teaching us about himself and his purposes in this story. This story takes place in Zarephath and that is significant because Zarephath was not a town in Israel – it is a town in Sidon which was a pagan nation – a nation that worshipped the pagan God, Baal. Israel had been chosen by the true God to be his people and to witness of the reality and glory of this God to the world, but during the time of Elijah, Israel was not doing that – she was worshipping Baal – a pagan god. And so Elijah as God’s prophet, announced a famine that would not end until God decided that it would end. This famine was a sign of God’s wrath against his people, but there was also an aspect of mercy because, by it, God was calling his people to repentance.

One of the great themes of this story is that God, by his word, determines whether there will be rain or drought. The basic idea is that life or death come by the word of God. God and his word are very closely related in Scripture and life and blessing come through obedience to God’s word and death and cursing come through disobedience to God’s word.

So it is very significant that Elijah, as the one who was called to bring God's word, was sent outside of the land of Israel to bring the word of the Lord to a pagan widow in the land of Sidon. This pagan widow of the town of Zarephath is given the opportunity to obey the word of the Lord by giving the last of her food to Elijah and trusting the promise of God's word that if she did so, God would provide her and her son with food as long as the famine lasted. And she did so. A pagan widow was given the opportunity to do what Israel was failing to do and by receiving and submitting to God's word she received life and blessing.

This is a prominent theme in the message of the Bible. God speaks to us through his word and by receiving and believing and obeying the word of God we receive life and blessing and by ignoring and disobeying God's word we are under God's wrath which is a form of death even while we are physically alive.

But to be blessed through believing and obeying God's word does not mean that we are spared suffering. Those who live in submission to the word of God still suffer. God does promise life and blessing to his people, but what that means is that God will work everything in our lives for our spiritual and eternal wellbeing. And that promise does not preclude terrible suffering in this life.

And the reality is that the suffering of Christians often seems pointless and the opposite of what seems to make sense. There is something that is unfathomable about the way in which God distributes suffering. And that is what we see in the story that is before us this morning. This pagan woman had done what Israel was failing to do. She received the word of the Lord through Elijah. She did what he told her to do. She fed him first, trusting in God's promise that God would miraculously cause her jar of flour and her jug of oil to yield the flour and oil needed to sustain their lives in the famine. It is a wonderful example of trust in the word of the Lord and the Lord honoring that trust.

And then her son gets sick and dies. That is the last thing that you would expect. She had faced death because of the famine. Through his prophet God had come into her life and in a marvelous way preserved her life and the life of her son. And now – her son is dead. That sequence of events is just bizarre. It is really, really strange. Why would

God send his servant to this widow, give her the opportunity to believe and obey his word, miraculously supply her with food and then take away her son in death?

And yet such unfathomable events are fairly common in God's dealings with his people. Incredibly gifted and influential ministers or theologians die at the height of wonderfully fruitful ministries. Godly mothers or fathers are taken by cancer while they still have young children. Teenagers full of promise for fruitful God-honoring lives are taken by accident or sickness. You can multiply the examples. Many instances of early death or other forms of suffering, are impossible to understand and difficult to accept.

That is what happened in this story of the death of the son of the widow of Zarephath. God has brought life and blessing into her life and then "bam" he takes her son in death. God is revealing something of himself to us in this story and in similar stories. He does not act according to our expectations. There is much about God and his way with the world and with his people which is incomprehensible. There is much about God and his way with the world that is counter-comprehensible – it is the opposite of what seems to make sense. God's ways with his people are often the last thing that you would expect. They often seem to be the opposite of making sense.

The woman understands that God is behind the death of her son. And so does Elijah. She says to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" And when Elijah prays to God he says, "O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?" There is no question of who is ultimately responsible for this death. Both the widow and Elijah know that it is from the Lord. The Bible recognizes the reality and the significance of second causes, but it makes it very clear that God "works all things according to the counsel of his will." (Ephesians 1:11) In Deuteronomy 32:39 God says, "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me. I kill and I make alive; I wound, and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." Psalm 90:3 says

concerning God, “You return man to dust and say, ‘Return, O children of man.’”

The Bible is clear that the ultimate reason there is suffering and death in the world is sin, but when it comes to the distribution of suffering and its meaning in specific instances, we are usually very much in the dark. God’s ways are higher than our ways and many aspects of suffering are a complete mystery to us.

Now this woman thinks that she is being punished for her sin. She thinks that what has happened is that Elijah coming into her life brought her to God’s attention and now God was punishing her for her sin. This is often what people think when some calamity happens to them. It is fairly common for people to think that suffering is punishment for sin. But the Bible makes it clear that while sin is the ultimate reason for all suffering, the reason for specific instances of suffering is mysterious and beyond human comprehension.

Think of the story in John 9 in which Jesus’ disciples ask concerning a certain blind man that they saw on their travels, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” They assumed that the man was blind because either he or his parents had sinned. But Jesus says, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” So God had a reason for this man’s blindness that was not tied to any specific sin on the part of the man himself or his parents. And we can reason from that to other instances of suffering. There is no necessary connection between a specific instance of suffering and certain sins on the part of the sufferers. In some cases in the Bible God tells us or shows us the reason. But in other cases he does not. When it comes to God’s people, we just have to trust in the goodness, love and wisdom of God in the face of inexplicable suffering.

Now in the case of the death of the son of the widow of Zarephath, we know the reason by the end of the story. But neither the woman nor Elijah knew that reason at the point of the boy’s death. Elijah is just as perplexed as the woman is. And he is not only perplexed. He is deeply troubled. And so he cries out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing

her son?” Elijah turns to the Lord in his anguish, and he expresses his question to the Lord. This is an important facet of the biblical teaching about the suffering of God’s people.

We are allowed to grieve. We are allowed to lament. We are allowed bring our questions to the Lord. The Psalms are full of this kind of thing – people of God who don’t understand what God is doing – who feel abandoned by God – who feel that God is not treating them properly. The Bible is clear that God is good and always does good. The Bible is clear that God loves and cares for his people no matter what. But it is also clear that God does not expect his people to ignore the anguish and the perplexity that suffering brings.

Some of the religions of the world have approaches to suffering that involve a kind of detachment from the painful realities of life, but that is definitely not the case with the biblical approach. God does not expect his people to try to detach themselves emotionally from the realities of suffering. We have permission to grieve. We have permission to express our anguish to God in prayer. We have permission even to question God as Elijah does here. There is comfort for Christians in suffering, but it is not the kind of comfort that denies the reality of the pain of suffering.

Now what happened next is not something that the average believer can expect to happen. Elijah stretched himself over the body of the dead boy, three times and he prayed, “O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” And we are told, “And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again and he revived.” This is something that happened only few times in the whole story told in the Bible. This was not something that happened regularly in Bible-times. And it is not something that we can expect today. But it is relevant to us in our suffering today. The message here is not that if we pray God will bring our dead loved ones back to life. But there is a message and that message belongs to the heart of the biblical message.

Let’s first think about the message in the original context. Remember that setting of these stories of Elijah is the fact that Israel was worshipping another god, Baal, and looking to Baal to send rain and prosperity. The stories of Elijah all demonstrate in one way or another the impotence of Baal and the omnipotence of Yahweh, the true God.

The word of the Lord declares a drought and there is a drought. The word of the Lord commands ravens to bring food to Elijah by the brook Cherith and it was so. The word of the Lord provides food for Elijah and the widow and her son in the middle of Baal's territory. The stories together show that the word of the Lord is powerful in Israel, but that it is not limited to the territory of Israel. God is in control of the famine in Sidon and he is able to supply food for his servant in the middle the country in which Baal is worshipped.

But now God is going one step further. He is showing that not only is he not limited by the borders of Israel, not only is he Lord of rain and drought in Sidon, he is not limited by death itself. He is showing himself to be the Lord of death and the Lord of life. He is revealing himself to hold the power of death and life. This is very interesting.

It is interesting to think of what God expected to teach his people through this event. We must remember that these stories are not just factual descriptions of what happened, though they are that. But their purpose is not just to describe what happened. These stories were collected and persevered and then inserted into the documents that became what we have as the Old Testament and they were presented to the people of God as the word of the Lord to them – the word of the Lord with a message to them in their own historical situation. These stories would first have been read and heard in this format by the people of Israel long after these events had taken place. And so the story that is our text is both history and a sermon. What was God saying to his people, long after the events described actually took place?

The first hint is in the response of the widow. Verse 24, "And the woman said to Elijah, Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." In this case we are told the reason that this boy had to die: so that he could be raised from the dead in order to confirm that Elijah truly was God's messenger and that "the word of the LORD in [his] mouth [was] truth. Think of Israel, long after this time, reading and hearing this story. It was a confirmation that "the word of the LORD" in Elijah's mouth was truth – that it really was the word of the Lord and that it was the truth.

And that word of the Lord in Elijah's mouth spoke to Israel of later times, no less than it spoke to the people whom Elijah actually addressed. And that means that it speaks to us no less than the people who were alive when Elijah lived on earth. And the miracle of the bringing this boy to life speaks to us no less than it spoke to the widow of Zarephath. It confirms to us that Elijah was a man of God and that the word of the LORD in his mouth was and is truth.

And that message was a message about God and about life. That message was a message about the true God and about false gods. It was a message that the God of Israel is the God who controls rain and drought and thus plenty and famine, but also that to live in obedience to him is the way of life and to serve other gods is the way of death. And the miracle of the LORD bringing this young boy to life from the dead in answer to the prayer of Elijah was an incredible new revelation of the power and the significance of the true God, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible.

Think of later generations of Jews pondering this story and wondering at its significance and implications. The experience of the Jewish people through much of their history after this time was incredibly hard. They end up conquered by powerful empires. Most of the people are taken into exile. They are removed from the land that God had promised to them. They maintain their identity as a nation, but for most of their history, they are subservient to other nations and empires. The stories of Elijah were first collected and preserved to address a people looking back from the perspective of the exile.

So the stories would explain the exile. The stories of Elijah were part of God's explanation for the hardships that the Jewish people would endure. The stories of Elijah were about Israel's sin and God's response to that sin. The stories of Elijah revealed aspects of God to them. God requires obedience. God punishes sin. God and not Baal is the source of rain and prosperity and blessing. God's power is not restricted to the land of Israel. God is the God of the whole world. There is only one true God and he is the God of Israel.

And here in the story of the bringing of this son of the widow of Zarephath back from the dead, God was showing to his people that he

has the power of life and death. This is a fascinating thing to consider in the light of what this was meant to convey to the later readers of this story. The experience of Israel demonstrated how death is the result of disobeying God. The stories of Elijah powerfully made that point as the famine would have resulted in many deaths. But now here in the midst of the devastation caused by sin leading to death, God performs a miracle that reveals that he has the power over death. This is the first such miracle in the history of Israel. The second raising of someone from the dead is performed through Elisha not many years later.

This is not yet the full blown hope of the resurrection. But it is an early anticipation of that hope. It is interesting to consider Israel's understanding of the significance of death in the Old Testament. There are many passages that speak about death as the end. In 2 Samuel 14:14 an unnamed woman expresses the understanding of Israel about death, "We must all die; we are like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again." There is not much hope beyond this life in the Old Testament, especially in the earlier parts of the Old Testament.

But then you have stories like the raising of the son of the woman of Zarephath which reveal that the God of Israel is able to bring dead people to life. And we can imagine the people pondering this story and what its implications might be. There are truths about God and his promises and his nature that imply a hope beyond this life for God's people. And the truth conveyed by this story of the raising of this young boy is one of them. If God is able to raise the dead, there is reason to hope that perhaps death is not the end. It is through thoughts such as these that God began to reveal to his people that death will not have the final word.

And so we find passages in the Old Testament that reflect that hope such as Isaiah 25:8 which says, "He will swallow up death forever and the LORD God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken."

This story of God raising the son of the widow of Zarephath to life through Elisha is an early hint that death is not the final word. In the

beginning, Adam and Eve sin and the result of that sin is death. As the story of the Bible unfolds the devastation of sin and death is evident on every page. But alongside that is God's continued commitment to a plan to overcome sin and its consequences. The early moves in the revelation and unfolding of that plan are decidedly this-worldly. God's promises to Israel and to the world through Israel have to do with blessings in this life to those who obey. But there are hints along the way that God has something in mind that reaches beyond this earthly life. And this story of the raising of this boy from the dead, is one of those hints. God has the power of death and life. God is able to raise people from the dead. And slowly but with ever greater clarity God uncovers more of his plan to deal once and for all with sin and death.

When we come to the New Testament and Jesus God sheds more light on what he is working towards. An important incident is when Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain to life. That story is told in Luke 7:11 and following and it is told in such a way as to intentionally relate to the story of God raising the boy to life in our text. Elijah asks God to raise the son of the widow of Zarephath to life. Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain by his own command. So Jesus has the power of life and death just as the God of the Old Testament has the power of life and death.

And then of course, Jesus rises to life after being crucified. But there is something profoundly different about the resurrected Jesus. The risen and ascended Jesus speaks of that difference in Revelation 1:17-18, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." In Jesus, God has accomplished what he hinted at in the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath – he has conquered death – he has fulfilled his purpose to overturn the power of sin and death.

And because of that those who trust in Jesus now have hope in the face of death. Death is the greatest enemy of mankind. Sin and Death go together. Because of sin our lives are permeated with emptiness and suffering and because of sin we live in the shadow of death. We lose loved ones, one after and other and then we succumb to the inevitability of death. But we have hope in the face of death because

God has broken the power of death and has “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” This is what God has been working towards in his plan of salvation. This is where the stories of the Old Testament lead. They lead to Jesus and they lead to his victory over sin and death – they lead to life in Jesus which is life in the favor of God and hope for an eternal future with God.

The story of the raising of the son of the widow of Zarephath reveals the God who has the power to raise people from the dead. He is the Lord of life and death. And in that revelation is embedded a promise – a promise that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the gospel of Jesus’ victory over sin and death – a victory that is shared with all who believe in Jesus. And so we live in hope – in the certain knowledge of the resurrection of our bodies and of the life everlasting.

Table Meditation

We have seen in our text this morning, an early hint in the Bible that there is hope for God’s people beyond this life – beyond death. That hope is rooted in the power of God which is stronger than death. The fact that God did that miracle and made sure that the account of it was preserved as the word of God addressed to Israel long after it happened, revealed God’s love and covenant faithfulness to his people because it meant that even though most of Elijah’s generation were following another god, the true God was not finished with his people. He intended to fulfill his purposes through them in spite of their sinfulness and he did so. In the fulness of time Jesus was born – the Saviour promised throughout the Old Testament period.

The way that he would overcome sin and death was a surprise. It took having the power over life and death, but it also took Jesus, the Son of God dying. God himself in the God-man Jesus took the burden of sin upon himself and suffered its penalty which is death. But he did not stay dead. Once the penalty was paid, death had been defeated and so Jesus rose from the dead.

This is what we remember at the Lord's Supper. It is a memorial of Jesus' death. But it is also a memorial of the fact that by his death Jesus won the victory over sin and death. And so it is a memorial of the life that Jesus gives us on the basis of his death. We remember the death of Jesus, but we do not remember a dead Jesus. We are hosted at the Lord's Supper by the one who said, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." Jesus has the power over death.

And one day he is going to "descend from heaven with a cry of command ... and the dead in Christ will rise...." We still struggle with our sins and with the effects of sin in our lives. We still must die. But if we are trusting in Christ we know that Jesus has broken the power of sin and death and so sin and death will not have the last word in our lives either. That is our hope. And so let us eat and drink remembering the Lord's death until he comes.