

September 19, 2021

God's Prophets – Elijah & Elisha

II. The Widow's Son

I Kings 17:17-24

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Last week, we watched as God, through His prophet Elijah, declared judgment upon King Ahab of Israel for his idolatry with the false god Baal, and for leading the people of Israel into idolatry along with him. Through Elijah, God declared a drought over all the land – which was an especially appropriate punishment given that Baal was understood to be a rain god. In declaring a drought, God was not only punishing Ahab and Israel to bring them to repentance, but was also demonstrating to them how useless Baal really was. We also watched as God made special provision for His prophet Elijah, first providing food and water for him by the brook Cherith; and then, later, at the home of a certain widow in Zarephath, in the land of Sidon which was Baal's home territory. We watched also as this widow, through her encounter with Elijah, and through him with the Living God, confessed faith in the God of Israel over and against the false god Baal.¹

This morning, our story takes a rather harsh and unexpected turn. Elijah is dwelling in the house of this widow and her son – and, by God's provisioning, the jar of flour never runs out and the jug of oil never runs dry, even though the drought has crossed the territorial lines into Sidon. But, suddenly, the widow's son falls ill and dies. The widow is beside herself with grief as she confronts Elijah with anger: *"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!"* In her grief and anger, the only explanation she can think of for what has happened to her son is that having a prophet in the house has meant that God has been taking a closer look at her, has seen her prior life worshipping Baal, and has now decided to punish her for that sin. Kind of like if you had an IRS agent move in next door, became friends with him – and then, out of the blue, one month later you get a letter that your taxes are being audited. Like the widow with Elijah in her house, you'd be pretty quick in your anger to draw a connection between the two.

Elijah, interestingly enough, doesn't answer the widow's accusation. Instead, he just takes her now lifeless son, carries him to the upper chamber where he has been staying, lays him out on the bed, and then begins to pray – two separate prayers, in fact. The first prayer is this: *"O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?"* Elijah is almost indignant with God – he is saying to God, in effect, "Is this really true? After everything this widow has done for me, your prophet, did you really go and kill her son?" Notice, here, that Elijah and the widow are now basically asking the same question. They both are asking why this tragedy has happened. And they both are asking God is He is the One behind this tragedy.

We have seen it so many times, in times of unexpected, unexplained suffering and sorrow – that question “Why?”. It just springs up instinctively out of a broken heart – “Why did this have to happen?” And for those who belong to the Living God – like this widow, like Elijah, like you and me – it is a question which rapidly becomes focused upon the Living God: “Why, God, did you let this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this suffering, this sorrow?” It’s even a question we find all through the Bible itself. Think of Job crying out of his misery, “*Why have you made me your mark?*”² Or David, in one of his more troubled moments, crying out, “*Consider and answer me, O Lord my God.*”³

And the very frustrating thing about all of this is that God only very rarely, if even ever in this world, answers our question of Why. Neither Job, nor David – nor, here in our story, Elijah and the widow – receive an answer to that question Why from God. When Jesus comes, He thankfully affirms for us that God does not cause bad things to happen to us. But that just pushes our question back one level. If God doesn’t cause bad things to happen to us, there is still the question of, “Well, why then did He allow these bad things to happen to us?” Why didn’t God prevent that bad thing from happening? But to that question, also, we are met with a great silence. As Paul puts it, here on earth we are left able to see nothing more than but dimly in a mirror.⁴

But maybe I am saying this wrong. Because, in fact, God does actually always answer our question Why – He hears our cries and does, indeed, answer us. He just doesn’t answer our question Why with the answer, the explanation, that we are seeking. He answers our question Why, in fact, with something even better than an explanation. He answers our question Why with His presence and with His power. Look at the second prayer Elijah prays over the widow’s son. Elijah stretches himself three times over the body of the boy and cries out to God: “*O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.*” “*And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.*”

God doesn’t tell us why – but God does tell us that nothing, not even death, shall be able to separate us from His love.⁵ God doesn’t tell us why – but He does tell us that when we pass through the chaotic waters of sorrow and suffering, He will be with us to bring us safely through.⁶ God doesn’t tell us why – but that desperate prayer in time of trouble is always answered by His presence to guide and to comfort us, and by His promise to strengthen and to deliver us. Even to raise us from the dead. We know this, we believe this, because we have seen Him upon a cross for our sake, taking all our suffering and sorrow upon Himself.

As one theologian puts it:

*Christianity does not answer the question, Why? God provides no answer to the intellectual dilemma – but He does give the resolution to the problem. Christ-followers look to the cross. There, in the midst of Jesus’ own grief and sorrow, we see God with us and believe that He is able somehow to take our burdens upon Himself and deliver us from our despair. He is not distant from our pain. He understands our suffering because Jesus Christ – God in human flesh – suffered.*⁷

And we know this, we believe this, also because we have seen His resurrection from the dead. How even death, that which we fear most, is no match for the power of our God. How, even should life do its very worse to us, bring us into the valley of the shadow of death, we don't have to be afraid, because He knows our death and He will meet us in that valley.⁸ And He shall raise us up into life again. God doesn't tell us why, but our God will always deliver us from evil. Our God will always bring us through the storm.⁹ Our God will always raise us up into new life – maybe not always exactly in the way we are asking, but always into new life. There is nothing we suffer, nothing we will ever undergo in this world, that He will not in the end bring round to good – by His presence, by His promise, and by His power.¹⁰ We shall always, like the widow's son, be revived:

And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives."

I love how matter-of-factly Elijah seems to declare what can only be understood as the earth-shattering, Sheol-emptying good news of life being brought out of death: *"See, your son lives."* But the response of the widow to this good news is anything but matter of fact. She exclaims, out of her awe, out of her great joy: *"Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true."* It is tempting for us to overlook this last little bit, the widow's response. I mean, the miracle is so great, we can be excused for thinking that everything that follows the miracle is just anticlimactic, just a tying up of the story's loose ends. But, in truth, the widow's response to her son's resurrection from the dead is almost as important for us as is the miracle itself.

Let me explain. When we came to the end of the story last week, the widow had come to a confession of faith in the God of Israel – over and against her prior faith in the false god Baal. It marked the beginning of new and living faith in her – akin to when we, to use the southern evangelical nomenclature, "accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior". It is a good and important beginning. But it is also just that – a beginning. What we see here at the end of this story is faith's next step – the deepening of her faith into a true and trial-tested trust in and commitment to the Living God. This story, this widow, illustrates something which the Bible readily teaches – that faith, in order to be more than a mere confession of our lips, must be tried and tested, in order that it should become also the true desire of our hearts and the true direction for our lives. *"Now I know,"* says the widow, as she holds her now living son, *"Now I know that the Word of God is really true."*

Faith, in order to be more than a mere confession of our lips, must be tried and tested. I think that is what James meant when he wrote, *"Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet trials of various kinds"*¹¹ – a sentiment that, at first hearing, makes us wonder if James had lost his marbles. But listen to what he says next: *"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."*¹² And Paul says basically the same thing in his letter to the Romans.

After talking about the marvelous grace of God in which we now stand through Christ Jesus, he says this:

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.¹³

Now I don't think this means that we should seek out sorrow and suffering just so we can grow in our faith – life will take care of that, sorrow and suffering will find us just fine without our seeking them out. And I also don't think that this means that God sends us specific times of suffering and sorrow just to help us grow in faith. That just takes us back to that question why, to which God does not supply the answer. No, what I think this means can be understood in light of Paul's statement, also in Romans, that God brings all things round to good for those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.¹⁴ What I think this means is that God's presence and power not only will always safely bring us through the suffering and sorrow of the trials life brings upon us – all things being brought round to good in the end. But that also God works in us, in and through these sufferings and sorrows, in such a way that our experience of them can bring us into the good of a deeper faith, of a greater trust in God, of a life more deeply rooted than before in the Word and Spirit of our God.

Think of the difference between a water trough and a well. Both hold water just fine. But when a drought comes, say in Israel and in Sidon, the water trough is quickly dried up and becomes useless. But the well, possessing deeper sources, remains filled and useful. So with our faith. God not only delivers us through our trials and tribulations, but God can also use those trials and tribulations to take our trough-sized capacity for faith and dig down deeper into our souls until we have come to possess a deep well of faith – with His living water, the water of Life, welling up in us continually, in bad times as well as in good.

Or, to change the image completely, we can think of this same thought through a very different picture – in terms of a really provocative verse we find in Isaiah. In Isaiah 45:3, we read that God will give us *“the treasures of darkness,”* so that we *“may know that it is I, the God of Israel, who calls you by name.”* In other words, there are some gifts which God can impart to us only by way of the dark and difficult days in our lives. One of which, as we see in our story, is that gift of a deeper, truer, stronger measure of faith. Through the darkness, we learn how to cling ever more tightly to the Light – to the One who is the Light of the World.¹⁵ *“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.’”*

¹ I Kings 17:1-16.

² Job 7:20.

³ Psalm 13:3.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:12.

⁵ Romans 8:31-39.

⁶Isaiah 43:1-3.

⁷Trevin Wax, Counterfeit Gospels (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011), p. 96.

⁸Psalm 23:4.

⁹Mark 4:35-41.

¹⁰Romans 8:28.

¹¹James 1:2.

¹²James 1:3-4.

¹³Romans 5:3-5.

¹⁴Romans 8:28.

¹⁵John 8:12.