

Elijah and the Raising of the Widow's Son

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 March 2010

Preacher: Alex Cowie

[0 : 00] Let's turn then to our study in 1 Kings, chapter 17.

1 Kings 17. 1 Kings 17.

1 Kings 17. Now, it happened after these things that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick, and his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him.

So she said to Elijah, What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to kill my sin?

And he said to her, Give me your sin. So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed.

[1 : 34] Then he cried out to the Lord and said, O Lord my God, have you also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodged by killing her son?

And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and said, O Lord my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him.

Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived.

And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room in the house and gave him to his mother.

And Elijah said, See, your son lives. Then the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know, that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.

1 Kings 17 and verses 17 then to 24. And obviously we want to consider this in terms of Elijah and the raising of the widow's son.

[2 : 52] But before we get into this particularly, let's just remind ourselves that that last time we saw that that God had worked at a time of crisis to provide for both the widow and her fatherless son, and also for his servant Elijah.

And he did it as we saw by ensuring that there was always a supply of flour in the barrel and there was olive oil in the jar, sufficient to ensure that they were fed all the time of the drought and the famine that followed on to it.

And the Lord himself, as the Lord God of Israel we saw, underscored the truth that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from his mouth.

And he also reassured his servants that he would provide for them, that he keeps his promises to provide for his people. But we try to show as well in that study that God used his adversity to bring his people nearer to himself and to enable them to trust him all the more.

In other words, the difficulties are there to draw us nearer to him and not to discourage us away from him. Well, it appears from the story that life after the provision of the flour in the jar and oil in the jar, that things settled down nicely and they had ample provision.

[4 : 41] And then we're told that verse 17, now it happened after these things. Actually, a better translation of it shows that there was a fair lapse of time here.

After some time, things changed. Life appeared for a while in Saraphat for the widow and her son and the prophet to go on fine.

And then suddenly and unexpectedly, we read that disaster struck. Death visited the widow woman's home and all became dark and sad.

And it clearly amounts to, although the prophet gets the blame here, it clearly amounts to what are you doing, God? How can you do this? How can you bring this great tragedy?

How can you devastate a widow woman in this way? I want us then to look at this together and to draw out some important lessons for ourselves as regards how we deal with these crises, with the most serious crises.

[5 : 55] First of all, in the death of a son, verse 17, now it happened after some time that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick and his sickness was so serious that there was no breath in him.

Actually, literally it is that he stopped breathing. Not simply that he died, but that he stopped breathing.

We're not given a name for the young lad's condition. We're not told what illness he suffered from, but it seems to me, faith, that the way it's put, not simply that he became sick, his sickness grew worse and he died, rather his sickness grew worse and he stopped breathing, that he probably had some respiratory problem and he eventually, his lungs stopped functioning and he died.

We can't be sure of that, but it's revealing that it's put this way in the text, not simply that he died, but that he became so bad that he stopped breathing.

He couldn't breathe. He breathed no more. But what we can certainly say that his illness in this case was into death.

[7 : 23] And this sudden illness, this descent into a weak and weakening state until he eventually died, was a devastating thing for the widow woman.

It was calamitous, it was painful in the extreme, and in a sense it was totally crushing to a young believer, young in the faith, that is.

It was baffling as we can easily imagine, it was shocking, it left her utterly devastated and desolate.

And if you think about this, and some of you may know this first hand, of course, for any parent the death of a child, be he infant or in boyhood or teenage or adult, for a mother, he's still my boy.

Or if it's a girl, my girl. There's always that time. Someone said, I can't remember which commentator I read, but someone said that no one feels the pain of a child's death like a mother.

[8 : 47] And that's probably true. And it's true for those who trust in the Lord as well. They're not in a category that's different. They feel the pain as well.

And here is this woman, young in the faith, and had seen the power of God at work to provide. And then all of a sudden, suddenly, her son becomes ill and he becomes so bad that he stops breathing and dies.

And here she's left with excruciating and devastating pain. The anguish of it bursts forth as we see in the passage.

When she cries out to Elijah, we'll come to that in a moment, what have I to do with you, O man of God? What's all this about? How can this be?

She's in anguish of spirit. And she feels the pain of what's happened. And so here then we have her trying to come to terms with what God had done.

[10 : 06] Trying to figure out the ways of God. Wondering he had become her savior. He had provided for her and the sin that he's suddenly taken away. That he's taken away in a bitter blow.

How does she understand it? How does she reconcile it with the hand of love? With the saving hand? God's need to love?

My dear friends, it's good for us to dwell on this. It's good for us to ponder this, the reality of it, whether we have children or not.

It's good for us to dwell upon it. But it's good for us who have children, and for our young ones too, to ponder the reality of the thing. Young people think they've got all the time in the world.

And sometimes we're a bit slow in reminding them they don't have all the time in the world. They only have the time that God allows them to have. And some of us have seen in recent times the reality of that.

[11 : 16] And we're still reeling with it. Who can easily say the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away?

Blessed be the name of the Lord. I say, who can easily say it? Job said it, we have it recorded in chapter 1, verse 21. But at the death of a son or a daughter, it's not an easy thing to say.

Few, few believers, if any, can say this. But let's consider in this extreme situation that's presented to us in our study, let's consider, let's recognize that we have to stand before God's ways and simply humble ourselves and confess these are too high for us.

we cannot attain to them. We don't need to feel we have to have an answer when frankly we can't have an answer other than his hand has gone out in this way.

A death of a son. Secondly then, and leading on from that, a widow's despairing cry, verse 18, so she said to Elijah, what have I to do with you, O man of God, have you come to me to bring my sin

to remembrance and kill my sin?

[12:56] Actually, the word for kill there are several words in Hebrew, and the one is used here is to slay him, to strike him down. Here again, remember, she is young in the faith.

She is being brought down. As much as her son was slain, her faith is shaken. She is come crashing down. She is come crashing down from a spiritual high where she saw God make provision in that barrel and in that olive jar.

And suddenly God, that same God, that God of miracles, has taken away her sin, her only sin. And her cry is a despairing cry.

What's going to happen? It's not so many months ago we were studying in the book of Ruth, you remember, and you will recall that when Naomi eventually came back to Bethlehem, they asked the question, is this Naomi?

And she said, call me not Naomi, call me Mara, don't call me pleasantness Naomi, but call me bitterness, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.

[14:30] And you see, the woman's despairing cry to Elijah is one that really implicates the Lord, because what she did know was that God was sovereign.

God was the sovereign God over all. As the Lord your God lives, we saw. She wasn't saying he wasn't her God, she was just deferring to the prophet, as the Lord your God lives.

And she knew that the Lord God was sovereign. And ultimately death came at his appointing.

Ultimately the bitter blow was dealt by him.

And of course the widow woman turns on and rounds upon Elijah as one sent by God to call her sin to remembrance. Have you come to bring my sin to remembrance and to slay my son?

Now some expositors think at this point that this is the beginning of her conversion. They don't take the line that I've been putting forward to you that she's already a believer.

[15:49] And I'm only telling it to you because it's simply the way it is that some take the view that this is her coming to faith because she's beginning to have knowledge of her sin.

But it seems to me that the woman knew very well about her sin. And she was sensitive and she had that lively awareness of being a sinner who has been changed by God's grace.

And she was sensitive. And she began immediately to think, well, what sin is being probed at here?

What am I being confronted with? What is God punishing me for here?

The modern Hebrew scholar Dale Ralph Davis, an American Hebrew scholar and preacher, I think has it spot on here because he says in regard to his comment on the widow at this point, many Christians know her mind.

Many Christians know her mind. In other words, we've said the same when something's gone wrong. What is God bringing to remembrance here?

[17:08] What sin have I committed and he's confronting me with it by this or that tragedy? Many Christians know her mind.

You see, when things go well in Providence, we are well. But when disaster or difficulty strikes, we immediately begin to trawl our minds.

And trawl our minds for past sins. Like in my mind's eye, coming from a background that was very much a fishing background, to me it's like trawling for clams or shellfish.

You put on the right gate to get them, to hook them up from the bottom, from the sandy bottom. And if you want the best, you put on heavy chains so that you dig deeper.

And sensitive Christians are a bit like that. They're not contentious with trawling the surface of conscience. No, they put on the heavy chains. And there's a few of you like me, we put on the heavy chains.

[18:17] And we dig deep into our hearts, into our minds, to rake up, to find the sins that maybe God is punishing us on account of.

We're being chastened sorely here. Well, the woman says, what do you have against me? Have you come in God's name to remind me of my sin?

What sin is it? Now, this is the right way of taking it. One will help by showing that's exactly what God did in the case of King David.

Do you remember? When he entered into that really bad venture with Bathsheba, and he abused his power and took her, and then had to get rid of Uriah, when Uriah wouldn't do things David's way.

And eventually poor Uriah died, and Bathsheba was taken into the king's palace to become a wife.

And Nathan went, the prophet of God, God sent Nathan, and Nathan told him that parable, you

remember, about the little lamb that was taken by the rich man to provide a meal for friends who came.

[19 : 49] And David was furious. The man who did this shall die. You are the man, said Nathan to David. That's what you did.

You had no mercy on poor Uriah. You took what you didn't need to take, and worse, he took his life. And so, you see, it's in that vein that we can understand why the woman would think like this. She was switched on to the reality of sin, and how God views sin in his people. He chastises them, he corrects them by applying the rod.

There's an interesting story, not very far from this, in 1 Kings 14, it has to do with Jeroboam the second, Jeroboam king of Israel, and his son had become ill.

And Jeroboam sends his wife in disguise to the prophet, and this was an old prophet. And God told the old prophet that Jeroboam's wife was coming disguised, and she was coming to find out, would the son live or die.

[21 : 09] And the old prophet told that, he just said, I know who you are, you're Jeroboam's wife, I know where you've come, and I've got bad news for you, because of the sins of Jeroboam, the child will die.

so it's in this vein that we can see the woman sensitive to the reality of God dealing even with his own people in a serious chastening way.

And so she comes to the prophet, her soul full of bewilderment, yes, of sorrow and anguish, and she utters her despairing cry, what have I to do with you, O man of God?

Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and slay my sin? Is this what it's about? My dear friends, we may never understand God's ways with us.

we may not understand at a given time when he's applying his chastening hand upon us, and we may be confused and distressed, but we must always remember that whatever he brings to pass, he brings ultimately for our good.

[22 : 39] He's working in love and grace. He, after and all, took us from the fearful pit as we were singing, as indeed he took that Canaanite woman from the fearful pit.

He left widows in Israel in their sin, and he took this woman and made her a chosen vessel, and yet he brought this calamity on her.

And the point I'm making here is that whatever comes our way, however difficult it is, we need to remember God himself brings us from the fearful pit, and he places us upon that rock which is Christ, and he will never allow us to sink in utter despair, he'll never let us slide back into that pit. And so, the third thing we want to look at is Elijah's cry to God for life. verse 19.

And Elijah said to her, give me your sin. So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed.

[24 : 01] Then he cried out to the Lord and said, O Lord my God, have you also brought tragedy on the widows of my lodge by slaying her son?

Now, those of us who have studied the Bible over many years, and the life of Elijah, too, we never think about Elijah as a caring, compassionate fellow.

We tend to think of him as a pretty hard case, with his coarse camel skin, tunic, his leather belt, his sandals, he's a pretty intimidating kind of fellow.

That's the way we tend to think about Elijah, a no nonsense fellow, bold as a lion, and so on. But I think we do him a disservice in that.

It's perhaps a simplistic way of looking at him, because here you see, here we see a side of Elijah. Elijah, we see him as compassionate and understanding, yes, even gentle.

[25 : 15] He doesn't answer her a word of rebuke. He could have scolded her. He could have faced her with her sin. He could have faced her with her impudence to him, the prophet, the man of God.

He answers not a word. He doesn't defend himself or God either. Not a word. But rather he responds in this kindly and tender way, simply give me your sin.

And a little bit of imagination, he simply puts his arms out, give me your sin. The prophet is tuned in to her anguish, and he can understand a mother's grief.

he can understand it very well. He sees this as a young believer crushed by this blow in anguish of spirit.

And actually it is clear from the passage that Elijah himself shares something of her bewilderment that God would do this, that God would allow this, that God would actually act in this way to bring such a tragedy upon him.

[26 : 38] You see what he says there? He says, verse 20, he cried out to the Lord, O Lord my God, have you also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodged by slaying her son?

You notice how this is put. You brought provision to her. You brought her back from the brink of starvation.

We looked at that last time. Herself and her son were going to eat their last meal. And that was them finished and they would wait to die. And you brought them back from the brink. You provided for them, Lord.

And now after all these months, you slew the son. So the prophet is switched on here to this tragic happening.

And he took the lad in his arms and he took him up the outer stairs, up to his room on the roof, we would call it. And he lays him down on his own bed.

[27 : 46] And it seems to me that at this stage in the process, the woman is hoping that the prophet is going to do something wonderful, that he's going to act on our behalf.

It's an interesting insight, you know, perhaps one for looking at later on, but in Hebrews 11, verse 35, where it's talking about the champions of the faith, it talks about women who received their children back from the dead.

And clearly, the writer of the Hebrews has in mind, this widow woman, perhaps the Shunammite later on, for sure. But it's interesting, you see, that it was the faith of the women who received their children back from the dead.

By faith, women received their children back from the dead. And it would seem to me that by the time the prophet went down the stairs with the child in his arms, she entertained the hope of a recovery for her son of resurrection.

And once the body is laid on the bed, as we read here, the prophet cries out to the Lord. Now, I'm not sure that I altogether agree with Ralph Davis on this one, but he regards the first part of Elijah's prayer as an accusation.

[29 : 25] Have you also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge by slaying her son?

Certainly, there's an element in this of you have done this to the very widow woman that you rescued from death by starvation, and you've done it to the woman whose son you saved from death by starvation.

You provided for them, and she provided for me. Why have you done this then? Seems to me he's more that he's probing the mind of God for the why of it.

Even against this widow, how can it be? And it seems to me that there's a lesson in this, not to be accusing God so much as trying to probe the why of it, trying to get close to him as we pray to him. and it seems to me that when we look at Elijah here, Elijah is working himself up into the very spirit and fiber of prayer, if I can put it that way.

Why have you left me the way I am, Lord? Why am I following? Why am I professing faith? Why am I going on with Jesus? You see what I'm saying to you?

[31 : 01] We mustn't be languishing and we mustn't be unmoved by the position we're in. The prophet is saying, here's something that matters to me.

And I'm getting alongside the Lord and I'm asking, I'm probing, I'm questioning before I get down to the business of pleading. how can this be?

But you see, the prophet, the prophet's at work, he's preparing for prayer. And then he gets down to the business. Verse 21, and he stretched himself out on the lad three times and cried out to the Lord and said, O Lord my God, I pray, let this child's soul, that is breath come back to him.

Now it may be true to say it, that the time of that kind of miracle has passed. The apostles had it, doubtless.

Peter and Paul certainly, we have record of it, where they brought people back. But the fact is, and we mustn't miss it, that when the prophet gets down to praying about this, he gets down to it as one who has really come to the Lord, close to the Lord, asked him for an understanding of what's going on here, before he asks for the child's life.

[32 : 45] prayer. And when we're praying about anything and about ourselves too, that's the way we've got to be. We've got to take prayer seriously.

And we've got to do things that are perhaps sometimes, in prayer context, it's a little bit out of the box, it's a little bit out of what we're used to in our set ways of praying. the great prayers of the Bible are often full of energy and activity. Our Lord himself, in Gethsemane, the Son of God, to whom all things were known from the beginning, Jesus knowing all things that were to happen to, didn't stop him praying the way he prayed in Gethsemane. Not a bit. We might even dare to say it established why he prayed the way he prayed. But you see the point of making, there was activity, there was energy in it, he was about business. We're told that there was three hours worth of praying. We're told that he went there and he got down on his knees and went down on his face and he even sweated until the capillaries on his forehead were seeping blood and sweat. [34 : 21] Father, if it be possible, that's just telling us what he was about. Let this cap pass from me.

The prophet says, the prophet says to the Lord, Lord, oh Lord, my God, have you also brought tragedy on this widow with him, my lodge, by slaying her son? And he gets down to the business of seeking that a recovery be made, that his life is given back. And this adult is stretching himself out. Don't ask me how this figures out in reality, but he stretched himself these three times on the lad, almost as if to impart life to him. Oh Lord, my God, I can't do it. Oh Lord, my God, I pray, let this lad's breath come back to him. Let his soul return. There's real energy and activity here. [35 : 31] He's about the business of asking for the boy's life to return to. It's a serious business that requires his whole souled effort, no facing two ways about it.

And as James tells us in his letter, the effective fervent prayer of this righteous man availed much. God allowed it to prevail. God allowed the prophet to have an answer. God and with a little bit of sanctified imagination we can sense how the prophet began to feel the life beginning to come back to the lad. The body warming, the muscles twitching, the breath suddenly is there, it's stirring the body. And there's something in this that's relevant to us in our own ministry of prayer, in our own intercessory work.

Always to be eager and energetic when we come to prayer. Yes, of course, we preface everything we ask for with your will be done, of course. [36 : 58] But you don't see the prophet here approaching this situation in any other way than his whole soul, he's energetic, he's begging and pleading with the Lord.

Oh, Lord my God, I pray, let the child's soul come back to it. He's under no illusions. It's got to be the Lord. But you see, he goes about the business of pleading for that and believing to see it. And when we think about ourselves, those who have never just come to close in with Christ or who have never said amen, and I need to say it out loud, we need to be serious in the business of prayer.

We need to take seriously. We want grace from the Lord to believe the report or to know we've believed the report. We want to put energy into it as we ask him for the help and grace we need. And it's the same for us who pray regularly, daily, and weekly at the prayer meeting for answers to prayer. The enemy would simply discourage us and say, what's the point?

[38 : 33] What's the point? Nothing's happened. Years have gone on. Friends, we're all in this together. And the first thing the enemy wants to do is give up.

And the last thing the Lord wants us to do, the very last thing, so far down the road we don't even see it, is to give up. It's not honoring to him.

It's not honoring to the faith he has put in us. Elijah shows us the more excellent way. we are not saying here that we can see somebody literally, physically brought back from the dead. No, but what we're doing is we're taking this and we're reminding ourselves that people by nature are dead in trespasses and sins. And the only way they come to life is by the power of God in answer to prayer.

In answer to prayer. God and we are involved in something that requires energy from us and belief in the power of God to raise those who are spiritually dead.

[39 : 55] The prophet Ezekiel was confronted by that reality. God alone could put the spirit in them and raise them up and make them his people.

And it's true in our own day too. God alone does it. God alone can effect that spiritual resurrection. You who were dead in sin, said Paul to the Ephesians, has he made alive in Christ? And so the prophet cried out to God for life. life. And then lastly, the Lord gave life to the lad. the Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his men. And Elijah said, see, your son lives.

[41 : 05] here we have, of course, to bear in mind that any answer to prayer from the living God is his own sovereign answer.

He chooses to do it. He is gracious to do it. He condescends. He stoops down to do it. But he does it in answer to the prayer of his believing people, to the answer, to answer the afflicted, to answer the distressed, to answer those who cast their burden upon him, to answer the cry of Elijah, the man of prayer, the man of faith.

And you see, in all the answers we receive from God, we are to give God the glory for it. If Elijah were here tonight, he would be saying, give God the glory.

Not Elijah. Elijah was given that faith to rest in the Lord's power to do.

And any manifestation of the mighty power of God requires us to give God the glory. God the apostle Paul was witnessing, testifying to King Agrippa, who was very well versed in the Jesus things, he was extremely erudite as regards Jewish history, both political and religious history, and Paul knew it.

[42 : 57] Even to the extent that he could say to the king, I know you believe the scriptures. And when Paul is presenting Jesus as the one who was crucified, who died, and who was buried, and who was raised again, he said, why do you think it a thing incredible that God should raise the dead?

And when we are confronted with those who are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, why should we think it a thing incredible? What went on here is a literal resurrection, the child lived again, the young lad lived again, he was picked up by the prophet and brought down to his mother, and given to her.

But you see, in the spiritual realm, the spiritual resurrection is something that God alone can effect. He brings us into newness of life.

Those of us who have perhaps come from a darkness to light experience in this way, we remember it well. We were as dead as dead could be spiritually, and God made us alive.

Like Mary would say, we often heard with pleasure the verses from the Bible, whether it's John or Isaiah or whatever, perhaps we knew them off by heart, we learned them in Sunday school or Bible class, but they never got to the heart of the matter.

[44 : 46] The Lord was still far off, we didn't know him, and when he brought that truth to bear upon us and we became alive, we knew that God had worked.

And you see, when we're praying that that might happen to us, or we're praying for others that it might happen to them, we can't be half hearted, we can't be almost unbelieving about it.

We have to believe he is able. We have to put forth our energy, as if it really mattered. Not simply waiting, but pleading.

McShane himself said, pray helplessly, but pray.

Pray that he will work, and that's the spirit that's required of us. Learn from Elijah.

[45 : 59] Learn to draw near to God. He that comes to must believe that he is, not that he exists merely, simply, though he does, but believe that he answers prayer.

That's what it's about. He that believes, he that comes to God must believe that he is, that he is the answerer of prayer. That's what the writer of the Hebrews is saying.

O thou that hearer art of prayer, we sing it in Psalm 65, all flesh shall come to you. That's the way we're to think about it, as the answerer of prayer.

And you see, the woman declares in verse 24, now I know, she said, by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth.

It confirmed to her in a wonderful way, and my dear friends, it has confirmed to countless people down through the generations, that God is the God of truth, and that those he sends to us with a message of truth are appointed by him.

[47 : 14] And this was a wonderful illustration, a powerful illustration, a miraculous illustration, of the truth that God is the God of resurrection, that he gives life to those who are dead.

Let us remember from this what he is like. His voice commands and it is done. When Ezekiel saw the valley full of dry bones, as we were reading, and the question was posed to him, son of man, can these dry bones live?

What did the prophet say? maybe, possibly, could. Lord God, you know. You know the answer. I don't need to tell you.

You know they can live. God made them live. God put his spirit in them. And in this connection, we remind ourselves as we leave this tonight, that Jesus said of himself, I am the resurrection and the life.

He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. There's a wonderful passage there in John 5, from verse 25.

[48 : 40] In fact, in verses 25 and 28, you have two things made clear. One is that we need to undergo a spiritual resurrection. We need to come out of a death-like state, as sinners, dead to God, switched off into life, living towards him.

John 5, 25, though the time is coming, and now is, when those who hear the voice of the Son of God shall live. Rabbi, except you be born again, you cannot experience the kingdom of God.

We need that life imparting word from Christ, through the word. If we are to experience the blessedness of resurrection and to everlasting life with him.

So let us not be faithless but believing. Jesus said, he who believes in me has everlasting life.

And as to what we have traveled through tonight, well, we can humbly and quietly ask the Lord to give us grace to learn from the tragedies of life, to learn from his messenger of death, as it impacts upon our own situation, when we know that he will never reverse it.

[50 : 14] and we have to live with the pain of it, that maybe takes long enough to pass, or to ease at least. Let us be assured that he will give us what we need to endure the afflictions that he brings in our way.

But let us maintain our confidence in this, that he is the resurrection and the life.

Amen.