

A Study of the Life of Elijah;

A Man Like Us.

Sermon # 4

“What To Do When Life Caves In!”

1 Kings 17:17-24

You will remember that when the brook dries up that Elijah is told to “go to Zarephath which belongs to Sidon.” Zarephath was a small village in Sidon, in what is now modern day Lebanon. The command to go to Zarephath is important for several reasons. First the location is important because Sidon is also birthplace of Jezebel, Ahab’s pagan wife and is quite literally the center of Baal worship. In addition the name *Zarephath* comes from a Hebrew word for “*smelting place*,” meaning a place where a furnace was used to produce iron by heating ore until the iron separated from the dross. The noun form of Zarephath means “crucible.” This was to be a place designed by God to refine Elijah and make a major difference in the remainder of his life.

Secondly, the command to Elijah is remarkable because he will have to travel over 100 miles while the King has his men actively searching for Elijah over the entire country. But the safest place in the world was right in the center of Baal homeland, because the safest place in the world is always where God had told you to be.

Third, the command to Elijah is remarkable in who Elijah is directed to. A widow would have been among the first to feel the hardship in a time of drought because her resources were generally much less than most people to begin with. A widow could hardly be considered a good source of providing for Him in a time when even the well-to-do have very little.

The story begins in verse seventeen begins with the words, “*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.*” Note the use of the phrase “*Now it happened after these things.*” The Hebrew literally says, “*after these things it happened.*” The point that is being conveyed is that this boy’s sickness and death are a part of the overall plan of God. Pastor Tony Evans has said, “*Everything in the Universe is either caused by God or allowed by God, and there is no third category.*” Sometimes we look at a heartbreaking tragedy and we would dearly love for there to be a third category called “*bad things that just happened for no reason.*”

After many weeks or perhaps even months of God miraculously providing for Elijah and the widow and her son, suddenly and inexplicably the boy gets sick and dies and this no doubt percipates a crisis of faith in the poor widow,

First, Tragic Circumstances Can Cause A Crisis of Faith. (v. 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.”

You have to wonder if the widow of Zarephath thought somewhere in the recesses of her mind that by taking in the Prophet of God, and because of the incumbent blessing of His presence (a continued supply of food) that she and her family would somehow be exempt from further hardship and tragedies. Don't we sometimes think that because we have rendered some kind of service to God that he owes us?

Many Christians have somehow come to the erroneous conclusion that if we live right we will be exempt from problems. It is however, very important for us to realize that the obedient are not exempt from trials, for doing so it will keep us from making wrong and injurious conclusions and decisions when trials do come. It will also keep us from concluding that it does not pay to do right or from concluding that trials always indicate sin in our lives.

In the case of the poor widow, she has already lost a husband to death, now she loses not just a son but her only son. Of all the sorrows of life I know of no sorrow greater than the death of a child. This is nothing that seems more unnatural. It is the privilege and the honor of children to bury their parents. Parents are not supposed to bury their children. It is not supposed to be the other way around. *The death of a child is like a period at the beginning of the sentence.*

As one reads the text, a natural question comes to mind that I cannot answer. When the child first became ill, where was Elijah? Was he there and did he pray for the boy? I assume the answer is yes, but the Bible doesn't tell us.

Not Only Do Tragic Circumstances Cause A Crisis of Faith but...

Secondly, Tragic Circumstances Can Cause Us to Blame Others (vv. 18-19)

“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 son?”

The widow's reactions were predict-able, she looked for a reason for what has happened and her thoughts turned inward. In verse eighteen she says, *“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 son?”* In a way she is blaming both the prophet and herself. The widow in her anxiety concludes that Elijah had discovered some sin in her and was calling on God to judge her for it. Thus she blamed both the prophet and herself.

Elijah responds to the widow in verse nineteen, *“And he said to her, “Give me your son.” 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.”* I find his response very instructive when the mother accuses him of coming to her house just to kill her son,

Number one: He doesn't get angry.

Number two: He doesn't try to explain why her son died.

I would like to add just a word here about how to comfort someone who is grieving. As a father who lost his twenty-five year old son in a climbing accident reflects; *"Some people are gifted with words of wisdom, For such, one is profoundly grateful... But not all are gifted in such a way.... The heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken. And if you can't think of anything at all to say, just say, "I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know that we are with you in your sorrow.... If you think your task as a comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit by me on my mourning bench.... Some ... fear they will break down. So they put on a brave face and put a lid on their feelings – never considering, I suppose, that this adds new pain to the sorrow of their suffering friends. Your tears are salve on our wound."*

[Nicholas Wolterstorff. Lament for a Son. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). p. 34]

Number three: He doesn't argue with her.

Number four: He doesn't make any excuses.

When the widow makes her unkind accusation, Elijah responds very simply. All he says is, "Give me your son" (v. 19a).

Not Only Can Tragic Circumstances Cause Us to Blame Others but ...

Third, Tragic Circumstance Can Confuse Even Choice Servant's Of God (vv. 20-21)

"Then he cried out to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?" (21) 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."

When Elijah cried out to God it was more a puzzled question than an outright accusation of wrongdoing. Elijah questions whether or not God is acting justly in His actions toward the widow (v. 20).

The best thing that a confused believer can do is take that confusion to the Lord. Elijah's prayer is a good model on how to pray in times of trouble. Notice with me four things that are revealed about his prayer.

- He prayed earnestly.

In both verse twenty and twenty-one we are told that Elijah "... *cried out to the LORD.*" We will look specifically at the earnestness of his prayer in just a moment.

- He prayed specifically. (v. 21) "...*Let*

this child's soul come back to him." The prayer was very specific in what he was asking; he wanted life restored to the boy!

- He prayed boldly.

Elijah had no scriptural precedence upon which to base his request for the restoration of life. Before this moment, no one had ever been brought back from the dead. This is the first case in biblical history of anyone who died and came back to life. Where did he get the faith to pray like this? He simply based his request on the great-ness of the God whom he served. He based his request on the character of God as revealed in His word.

- He prayed privately.

There is no scriptural support for the practice of a public healing service. Verse nineteen revealed that Elijah took the boy to his room to pray from him.

There is no easy way to explain what happens next. Elijah lies down on top of the body of the child. Foot to foot. Leg to leg. Chest to chest. Arm to arm. Hand to hand. Face to face. He does it not once, not twice, but three times. No one really knows exactly why he laid down even once, much less why he did it twice or three times. It is interesting to consider that since the boy was dead, he was now unclean under Jewish law. It was wrong for a prophet of God to touch a dead body, but extreme cases call for extreme measures. And so by lying down on the body of the child, it is as if he is saying "*Oh Lord, take some of the life from within me and give it to this boy.*"

In verse twenty-two we read, "*Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived.*"

"*The Lord heard Elijah's cry*" (v. 22) I love that. The text does not say the Lord heard Elijah's prayer, though he prayed. It says, "*The Lord heard Elijah's cry.*" James 5:17 says Elijah was a man with a nature like ours. He had the same fears, the same doubts, the same worries and the same concerns. The previous verse in the King James Version says that "*the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*" The word "*fervent*" comes from a Greek word that means "*boiling.*" *The boiling prayers of the righteous avail much with God.* What's a boiling prayer? It has nothing to do with standing or sitting, kneeling or lying down or any other posture. It has nothing to do with lifting your voice or speaking in a whisper. It has nothing to do with how loud or how long you pray. But rather than trying to define it let me try to illustrate it. You discover this if as a parent you are ever faced with a sick child. When they take your son or daughter away for surgery, you'll discover what a boiling prayer is. When your

children are in trouble, you'll pray boiling prayers to God. It's what happens when you pray like there's nothing else in the world really matters. That is what a "fervent" or boiling prayer is!

Not Only Can Tragic Circumstances Confuse Even Choice Servant's Of God but....

Fourth, Tragic Circumstances Reveal the Character of Believer's (vv. 23-24)

"And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives!" (24) 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."

Charles Swindoll observes, *"All over this world, around us every day, are people who are looking for the truth to be lived out in the lives of those who claim it. Just as the widow watched Elijah, there are people watching you. They hear what you say you believe, but mainly they are watching to see what you do."* [Charles Swindoll. *Elijah: A Man of Heroism and Humility*. (Nashville: Word. 2000) p. 69

Conclusion

Everything that occurred in his Elijah's life were part of his training to make him ready for the work God has for him to do. What did Elijah learn from these three episodes?

At the brook he learned, "God could take care of him."

From the empty barrel he learned, "God could use him to help others."

From the death of the child he learned, "God can work through him to do the impossible."

At the beginning of 1 Kings 17 Elijah is called "*Elijah the Tishbite*," (v. 1) but in verse twenty-four the widow calls him a "*man of God*." Elijah is now ready for the ultimate challenge. Let me just close with this statement. *No one becomes a man or woman of God by chance, and no one becomes a man or woman of God overnight*. God must bring us to the end of ourselves so that we learn it's all about Him and not about us. When that truth finally breaks through, we are ready to be used by God in a mighty way.