

I Kings 17:17-24:

Elijah the prophet approached King Ahab and told him that because of the sins of the nation God was going to withhold rain from them. Elijah then went to the Brook Kerith and remained there until the brook dried up. God sent Elijah to a widow and her son living in Zerepath. This passage opens with the words. "Some time later". The incident happened after Elijah had gone to live with them and after Elijah had brought God's blessing to them. It was a time when it would have seemed like everything was going to be perfect. It was then that we come to this account of tragedy.

Why did this happened when God was meeting the needs of this family? A closer look shows us so much about the reality of the world we live in and some of the causes of the hurt we all go through as God seeks to lead us to spiritual maturity. She had, sometime before, prepared herself for death but she was spared, only to see her son die later on, and die with the prophet of God living in her home.

One problem that we often face is the tendency to hope that when things are going well it will always be that way, even though we know is not likely to be the case. We are not in the millennium. We still live in a cursed world where sickness and death reign. Not only do we still live in a cursed world but God redeems us, in part, so He can mold us into Christ-likeness. That process often involves, according to John 15, pruning of what must go in our lives and, according to Hebrews 12, loving discipline when that is needed.

We not only tend to think that once we have fully committed ourselves to God all should be going well, we tend to forget the tremendous value and even the necessity of suffering as a part of God's ongoing process of making into the likeness of Jesus. Both Paul and Peter tells us that there are lessons that cannot be learned except in hardship. Read I Peter 1:6-7. The presence of trials, hardships, and hurts, both physical and emotional, are not occasions to curse God but to see Him work and to learn from Him.

Right at a time when one might have expected all would be perfect, the widow's son died. Note her reaction. First she blamed Elijah and secondarily herself. Read verse 18.

Her reasoning was that until the man of God arrived she was ok with her sin. When he came, her sins became exposed, at least to God, and God was accordingly judging her. Her theology was wrong in one sense but raises an interesting question. Does our faith and behavior reflect God sufficiently that sinners feel uncomfortable in their sin when they are in our presence?

One common reaction to hardship is to assume it is judgment from God. One of Satan's most common tactics is to convince us when things are not going as we wish they were it is because God is judging and perhaps our relationship with Him is broken. If Satan can convince us that God is against us, he can prevent us from turning to God in faith when we so desperately need Him. Satan convinces us to look down and not up where we need to look.

There are a couple of major problems with such thinking. First, for Christians it ignores the promise of God that He will forgive all of our sins so those done in the past are of no consequence today. Secondly it pictures God as if He were a vindictive Being anxious to punish us. God is primarily a God of love and mercy. God will judge repeated sin in His children as loving discipline but He is not sitting on the throne waiting to get even for sin. To imagine that is to misunderstand Him.

One question is “Where was Elijah when the boy became sick?” If he was there, why didn’t he pray for him and have God heal him before he died? We must never forget that God does not act on our timetable. There are times He chooses to wait or even to say “No!” because His ways are not our ways and He always does what is best for us and His glory. Read John 9:1-3, especially 3, John 11:1-4, especially verse 4.

Verse 19 tells us a lot about Elijah and how he related to this widow and her son. Elijah took the dead boy in his arms and went to an upper room. Leviticus 21:1-4 forbid priests, and by extension prophets, from touching a dead body except that of a relative. This widow and her son had become like his family and he could, therefore, take the dead body unto himself. This pictures the work of Jesus who, while sinless, took upon himself our sin. He became our sin that He might bring life back to us. It is also a picture of how God reaches down in our deepest sorrows and says, “Turn them over to Me and I will take your pain upon myself.”

Elijah prayed according to verse 20 “Lord, my God.” Elijah approaches God as Lord. He acknowledged the greatness of God. The One before whom he was coming was the Lord, the Almighty, the Creator of the universe, the All Powerful one, the “I am that I am.” Before anything was going to happen, God had to be recognized for who He was. Elijah’s God was the Lord of the universe. Elijah knew nothing is impossible for God, and His love compels Him to meet our needs when that is in our best interest.

Elijah also acknowledged Him as “My God.” Elijah came to God at as one who believed in Him and knew Him personally. There is a combination here that is essential to a meaningful prayer life. We must know God as the one who can answer prayers and we must know that because we are His children by faith He wants to answer them. He has both the power and desire to answer us when we pray.

Now what? Unfortunately we know that God raised the boy from the dead. That can cause us to too easily miss the faith involved in this for Elijah. This was the very first time in the Bible when anyone was been raised from the dead. In all the Bible tells us of 8 cases when the dead are raised, including a couple by Jesus, but this was a first. How did Elijah even dare to hope for such a miracle? Because the Lord was the almighty one and He was his God. God could do so if He wished. Elijah totally believed God and trusted Him for the impossible.

We read that Elijah stretched himself over the boy. This seems to be a symbol of total identification with him and probably is filled with imagery that can be applied to Jesus' death on the Cross for us.

Verse 21 tells us that Elijah prayed 3 times asking God to do something. Why three times? Elijah was persistent in prayer. On Mt Carmel, Elijah prayed once for the fire to come down and it did. Elijah followed that by an extended time of prayer for the rains to return. Persistence in prayer is often a key. It is not a guarantee that we will always get our way, but often God looks for persistent prayer, perhaps as a test to see our sincerity or perhaps as a test of our faith.

Verses 22 and 23 relate not only the miracle but the actions of Elijah as he brought the living boy to his mother. What a time that must have been. So much was wrapped up in those few words, "Your son is alive." Such a simple statement yet filled with so much.

I cannot but believe that this widow woman, who had been a recipient of God blessing, now understood that the God of the blessing allows suffering. In suffering God is allowed to display His power and care and because of this He is glorified.

Elijah was also encouraged by seeing God at work. The purpose of praise is to remind us how good God is. Right after this Elijah returned to Ahab, who wanted him killed. Elijah was asked by God to confront the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel and he boldly stood before all of them and declared God's power. I think this was possible in part because Elijah had seen God's power in giving life back to that boy who had died. This whole incident was not a case of how sad that this widow suffered but a case of seeing what great things God did for her and His servant because of the suffering.

None of likes to suffer. We would all prefer that life be a bed of roses. Unfortunately the sin cursed world we live in eliminates that possibility. The good news, however, is that if allowed and desired, God takes the tough times and turns them into blessings for us so that all things ultimately work for our good and in the process brings great glory to Himself.