



## Sermon

9<sup>th</sup> June, 2013

### ***God makes a way where there is no way***

**1 Kings 17:17-24; Acts 20:7-11; Luke 7:11-17**

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Last week we started the current sermon series on Elijah and Elisha. These are two Old Testament heroes of faith. These two servants stood against the tide when the people of God turned away from their faith.

Elijah's name means "My God is Yahweh" and his mission was to stop the total loss of faith in Yahweh from the Northern Kingdom. Last week, Elijah confronted the evil King of the Northern tribes and pronounced God's judgement of a long drought because they had turned away to worship the pagan fertility god Baal. We left Elijah last week boarding with a widow and her son with the promise that her miniscule stocks of flour and oil would not run out until the rains came again.

A long time has gone by when the widow's son took ill and died quite suddenly. Her reaction was to accuse him and (by association)accuse God of punishing her, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"<sup>1</sup>

How often we hear God blamed for misfortune! She has forgotten in her distress that if Elijah had not come to her, she was expecting to die of starvation. She had been provided for since his arrival and by a miraculous means that she could be amazed by each day.

But in a very human way she has forgotten that and blames God. It is common in our day too even amongst Christians. But God is not the author of her misfortune nor of ours.

The problem of suffering directly relates to the problem of human sinfulness but not with the direct relationship that she imagines. The Bible is clear that human sin is the reason that suffering has entered the world. But God reserves judgement for the next life for the most part. The sufferings we see now are because we are part of a fallen world and people. We hurt others, they hurt us. We are out of harmony with ourselves, with each other and with nature. As a race, we have handed dominion over to evil and evil reaps its harvest.

If God is all powerful should he not stop that? No, God will not just stop all evil, because he also values free will. To stop all suffering, he would have to direct our actions and so make us little more than robots. So highly does he value our freewill that he was prepared to suffering appallingly to carry the consequences of it personally on the cross. And he did that to start the process of forgiving us and freeing us.

Does God will all that happens? The Bible says, "It is not the Lord's will that any man should perish." Yet we know some will perish.<sup>2</sup> So some things happen which are not his best will. Not everything is the will of God.

On the positive side, Paul says in Romans, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."<sup>3</sup> So he will take whatever happens and rework it for good in your life as you are committed to him.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 17:18

<sup>2</sup> 2 Peter 3:9; 2:12

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:28

I taught some weeks ago on our adoption in Christ. God makes us his children and heirs when we put our trust in Christ. We need never doubt his love and commitment to us. He has promised, "I will never, never, never leave you or forsake you."<sup>4</sup> When tough times come we need to turn towards him not away from him. God is good all the time!

And that is what we find Elijah did. The woman comes with her accusation to him. She is grief-stricken. He doesn't argue but takes the child up to his room and prays.

Why does he go to his room. I suggest it is the same reason that Jesus put the mourners out of the room where the daughter of Jairus lay dead, and Peter put the mourners out of the room where Tabitha lay. The widow's distress and lack of faith would be a barrier to his faith.

Do you remember that when Jesus went back to his hometown he could do no great miracle there because of their unbelief? There is a corporate faith in our communities however much one person believes, the unbelief of others affects them. When Helen and I first went to my curacy, we had just come from a church where exciting healing miracles were happening. When we got to the next church, where previously they had been taught that miracles had ceased – our prayer hit a brick wall. Nothing happened! It was stunning. It was about six months before we saw healings again as we overcame the unbelieving climate.

The woman had assumed that Elijah and his God were punishing her for some sins. What does Elijah do? He asks God what is happening. It is easy to misread this. He doesn't say, "Why have you done this?" He asks, "Have you brought tragedy also upon this widow?"<sup>5</sup>

He is honest with God. He doesn't know, so he asks. I have found confessing my ignorance to God is helpful in learning from him. I remember having a vision in prayer which I did not understand. After puzzling for a while over it, I said, "Sorry, Lord, I don't understand- ... Oh, is that what it means!" Revelation had come!

God apparently tells Elijah to do something and he does it. He prays for life to be restored. He stretches himself out on the boy three times and life is restored. How we want instant answers! He had to do it three times. There was a need for persistence. I wonder how often we give up too soon in prayer?

This is the first restoration to life recorded in scripture. There are two more in the Old Testament with Elisha and five in the New Testament besides the resurrection of Jesus himself. Are these real deaths? It is easier on ourselves to turn them into metaphors. You have to be careful with that though. In 1979 I was in hospital paralysed up to my chest, not knowing how much further the paralysis might go or what the cause of it was. The curate from my parish came to visit me and rather too cheerfully, I thought, said, "Of course, you are in a death and resurrection situation." I was shocked for a moment, thinking he knew I was dying and then realised it was an unfortunately chosen metaphor!

Could it be possible that the widow's son really did die and was restored? Let me read to you a portion of Don Piper's experience from his book, "Ninety Minutes in Heaven."<sup>6</sup>

Don Piper is a Baptist pastor. He had attended a conference and was driving home when a large truck and trailer unit collided with his car and went right over it. The emergency crew found him dead in the car when they arrived. He had been killed on impact. That was 11:45am. Another pastor, Dick Onerecker, who had been at the same conference, walked half a mile up the queue of traffic and asked if he could pray for anyone. That was around 12:30. The policeman pointed him towards a car where the occupants were a bit shaken, but his attention was drawn to a red car. He asked about it and was told the man was dead.

Dick said, "God spoke to me and said, 'You need to pray for the man in the red car.'" In spite of the officer's insistence he was dead, Dick persisted and was dismissed to do whatever he wanted. So he crawled into the wreck, laid a hand on the body and started to pray. He prayed and sang and prayed and sang.

Don wrote:

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<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 13:5

<sup>5</sup> Verse 20

<sup>6</sup> Pages 42-46

“Not only did Dick believe God had called him to pray for me but he prayed quite specifically that I would be delivered from unseen injuries, meaning brain and internal injuries.

“This sounds strange, because Dick knew I was dead. Not only had the police officer told him but he also had checked for a pulse. He had no idea why he prayed as he did, except God told him to. He didn’t pray for the injuries he could see, only for the healing of internal damage. He said he prayed the most passionate, fervent, emotional prayer of his life. ...

“Then he began to sing again. ‘Oh what peace we often forfeit, Oh what needless pain we bear; All because we do not carry, Everything to God in prayer.’ “

At that point, the body began to sing with him! It was 90 minutes after the accident.

There are many, other, modern, well-documented accounts of people being restored to life after being declared medically dead even for quite long periods in response to prayer.

Elijah hands the living boy back to her mother who responds, “Now I know you are a man of God and that the word of Yahweh from your mouth is the truth.” You might have thought miraculous provision of food under her hands everyday would have been convincing but we get used to the everyday and fail to see the wonder of it. Now she believes in Elijah’s God rather than the local pagan deity. She has come into the fellowship of faith.

God made a way where there was no way!

The story of Paul and Eutychus is important because it addresses the issue of long sermons. Some people want short (very short) sermons but just be grateful – in the reading from Acts Paul preached all evening until midnight when Eutychus fell asleep. After his fall, death and restoration, they then started the communion service and Paul taught on until dawn. Now that is serious preaching! I’ll make a deal with you: If you don’t sit on a third floor window ledge and fall off to your death, I won’t preach all night, DV!

Seriously, there are parallels between this account of Paul and that of Elijah. Actually, Elisha who was Elijah’s disciple had a similar situation to Elijah with the son of his hostess dying. He too lay on the boy as he prayed for life to return. Paul follows the model of Elijah and Elisha. He too lies on the body and life is restored.

In the succession of Elijah, Elisha, Jesus, and Peter, Paul here too restores someone to life.

God made a way where there was no way!

The gospel reading tells of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain. For both the widow Elijah boarded with and this one, the only son would be the hope of a pension in old age. They would be desperate from the loss with natural sorrow and grief but there was also the issue of future livelihood.

Remember the Old Testament widow was quick to blame God. I said, we need to hold firmly to our trust that God is good all the time. In 1 Kings, God is invisible. Here he is visible because Jesus is the image of the invisible God. It is obvious that God has not done this to punish or maliciously afflict the poor widow because Jesus (God) was moved with compassion at the sight of her. That is a very strong word it means “moved to the inmost”. Being deeply moved, he stops the funeral procession and simply commands the dead man to get up - and he does!

Jesus made a way where there was no way.

Do you remember what we heard from James last week? “Elijah was a man just like us.” This is not about superheroes.

But don’t start with the hardest miracle. It is not harder for God but more of a struggle for us to believe than lesser things. David learnt faith in battle first against the lion and the bear before facing Goliath.

So where is there no way for you at present? Ask him about it. Command or do what he says. Let God make a way where there is no way.