

Raising the Widow's Son

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[0:00] Am I on at all? Can you hear me? Ah, very good. Okay, good morning. My name is Graeme.

I'm one of the members of the church here. I've got the privilege of talking to you this morning! and bringing the next episode in the life of Elijah, who had an amazing, dramatic, intensely dramatic life. Now, this is a very short story, but it's a good graphic, isn't it? I like this.

This is really nice. So what I'm going to do is I'm going to read you the story, but I've got some friends to help me. Where are they? I've got some dramatic friends here who are going to help me do this.

Yes, oops. Good idea. So this is Christian, also known as Elijah. This is Rebecca, also known as the widow, who is the poor widow, with the widow of Zarephath.

And this is also an unnamed son, whose real name is Digby, but he's going to be her son today.

Okay, so I'm going to read this out. Let me put it on the screen as well, actually. There we go.

Remind me halfway through to move that over. So I'm going to read the story out, and you're going to see it active because it is a very, very powerful story. Here we go. This is, if you want to look in your Bibles, it's 1 Kings 17, 17 to 24. Okay. And it starts sometime later, which means after the story we had last week, which was about the never ending oil that God supplied to them. I'm ringing a bit here. We don't know what sometime later means. Let's say it's months later. This drama starts to happen. Sometime later, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse and finally stopped breathing.

[2:00] She, the woman said to Elijah, what do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son? Give me your son, Elijah replied. He took the boy from her arms.

He carried him to the upper room where he was staying and laid him on his bed. Then he cried out to the Lord.

Lord, my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with by causing her son to die. Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the Lord, Lord, my God, let this boy's life return to him.

And the Lord heard Elijah's cry. The boy's life returned to him and he lived.

Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room in his house where he lived.

[3:43] He gave him to his mother and said, look, your son is alive. Then the woman said to Elijah, now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth.

Wow. Thank you. Thank you.

Wasn't that great? Oh, I forgot to flip that on. Never mind. Okay. So let's just stand back a little bit and look at the scene. Where was this? I love maps.

Because it helps you know where you are. And these things really did happen in a real place called Zarephath. And Zarephath, as you can see, is up on the coast there between Tyre and Sidon.

Phoenicia is nowadays Lebanon. Okay. And the bottom part, Galilee, that's northern Israel.

And Zarephath is still there. It's got a different name now, but you can go there. It is a real place. But the point really being that Elijah was up living in Zarephath with this widow because he was away from Ahab, who was the king of Israel.

[4:58] And Ahab was out for him. Quite probably if Elijah had gone back, he would have probably been killed or stabbed in the back, found himself falling out of a window, strangely. A bit like Putin's Russia. You know, it was a very tense situation.

So Elijah is living at Zarephath. And God had been looking after him. He'd had ravens feed him. He'd had unending oil. Dramatic things.

But then suddenly, in this apparent peace and provision, there's suddenly this huge challenge. Okay. This boy, who'd been kept alive by God and the amazing provision, was dying and just died. Now maybe this morning you've suddenly found yourself with some huge challenge. Just out of a clear blue sky, something has gone badly wrong. It disturbs your peace.

Maybe God was providing for me and now he's stopped providing for me. So something has gone wrong. So hold that thought and we'll see what happens. The woman's son gets sick and he dies. [6:06] That's absolutely tragic. The death of a son is tragic. Terrible. She's lost her family. She's already a widow, so this woman has no future. She has no future.

In the particular society she was in, she was going to be impoverished for the rest of her life. She lost absolutely everything. So she responds, really, with, I guess, anger.

Did you come to remind me of my sin? What sort of man are you? She's, you know, she believes Elijah is a man of God and that she's supplied him.

She has a kind of faith in this God of Elijah's. But now disaster. And in what she says, did you come to remind me of my sin?

Now, that's a common response. Something's gone wrong. Oh, I must have sinned, particularly amongst religious people. I must have done something wrong. Because God has done this terrible thing.

[7:04] And, you know, sometimes God does judge in this world with sickness. But actually, I believe that if God is going to do that, he will tell you.

He will convict you. There are prophecies in the Old Testament, clearly, that say to the Jews, if you do this, there will be blessing. And if you do this, there will be cursing. And the reason for the cursing is to bring people back.

So it's ultimately because of God's love. But if you do this from a bad thing, you will be cursed and things will come. But you will be brought back to me as a result. But actually, in this story, we're not told any specific thing like that.

So I think it's probably best to say this is just a tragedy. We live in a fallen world and sometimes children die. It's nobody's fault. We live in a fallen world and there are diseases and things go wrong.

If you look in verse 24, right at the end there, after this wonderful resurrection, she says, I know that you are a man of God and the word of God from your mouth is the truth.

[8:12] She's moved on in her faith massively. Previously, she kind of spoke to Elijah and said, well, I know about your God and maybe your God has supplied me. But now, there's a dramatic increase in her faith.

Her son has been brought to life. So it's hardly surprising. She now says, I know you're the man of truth. You have the truth from God. She is fully turned to God.

She's gone from a sort of second-hand experience to a first-hand experience of God. Now, maybe you're in that position.

You've got some experience of God, but it's kind of a bit second-hand. It's a bit, I believe it because somebody else believes it. I believe it because it kind of looks good. But you don't have a direct heart experience of turning to God.

That may be where you are this morning. That's where this woman was. My own experience, it took about five years to make me a Christian. I don't know if I'm a bit dim or I'm stubborn or I'm cautious, but it took five years because God, first of all, with me, first of all, I read a whole load of C.S. Lewis books which convinced me that God was real.

[9:24] There was a really, there was a God there, but as for the other stuff, I didn't get the Jesus stuff. Then it wasn't until a year or so later that suddenly I was confronted and challenged to actually put my faith on the line and turn to Christ in baptism.

So I became a Christian. But then it was several more years until I learned about the work of the Holy Spirit because in my defense, nobody told me anything. And it was several years, so it's five or six years, in several kind of stages where God took me through, very graciously took me through increases in my understanding.

And as my wife wants me to point out, I have not yet or become perfect yet. And she would know, wouldn't she? But anyway, people go through stages sometimes.

The graphic is the one the kids have got. Do you recognize that? Kids, anywhere out there, do you recognize your graphic? Has anybody coloring that in? Silence. Okay.

You know, let's talk about Elijah now. We talked about the woman and how she responded in her situation. Let's talk about Elijah. This great man of God actually doesn't respond with sort of immediate faith.

[10:36] He doesn't say, child, be raised from the dead. You know, he could have prayed for resurrection immediately. He could have prayed for the boy, but actually he's not quite there yet. He doesn't know what to do.

So he just takes the child to a quiet place and he cries out to God. He doesn't know where this is going, but he cries out to God.

You know, it's okay. It's okay to yell at God. Okay. Now notice that God, he said, oh Lord, my God, have you brought tragedy upon this widow I was staying with by causing her son to die?

He lays it out. This is terrible. A terrible thing has happened. He doesn't blame God. He doesn't accuse God of wrong. He is respectful. But you know, it's okay.

It's okay to cry out to God. In fact, our faith is shown by crying out to God, isn't it? Even if you don't think, I don't know where this is going. This is a bad situation, but I'm going to cry out to God.

[11:37] You can kind of, it's much better to cry out to God than have no faith at all. Something terrible has happened and I'm not even going to, I'm going to ignore God. I'm just going to try and fix it myself. Or, even worse, I'm going to say God doesn't care.

God does care. Cry out to God. Notice also that he prays and acts and then he repeats himself. He lays on the boy three times.

He's showing that he's praying persistently. He's making intercession repeatedly. The number three is kind of significant in scripture. And that's another lesson to us.

I think pray and pray again and pray again. Persistent, you know, passionate prayer brings answers.

And you keep praying until you get an answer. Now, let's go and see what Jesus had to say about that.

[12:35] Because if you look in Luke 18, Jesus tells a very, as he often does, a very earthy sort of story about praying.

This is all about prayer. So this is Jesus speaking. In a certain town, this is not Zarephath. This is just a story made up by Jesus. There was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with a plea. Grant me justice against my adversary. For some time, the judge refused. But finally, he said to himself, even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because of this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually wear me out with all her asking.

And the Lord Jesus said, listen to what the unjust judge says. But will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

Will he keep putting them off? No, I tell you, he will see that they get justice. He will answer their prayers. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[13:50] So there's two big things Jesus says there. One, he says, cry out to God and keep crying out to God. Okay? And there's a little warning there. Will he find faith? Will he find us crying out when Jesus returns?

Let's think about the impact of this boy being raised.

I guess it's obvious with the woman. But why did God answer the prayer? There's actually at least three reasons I can think of why God answers this prayer. The first is God is a compassionate God. He does miracles because he wants to bless people. He wants the boy to be raised from the dead. He wants to give him back to his mother. God is compassionate. Secondly, listen to this carefully. I think it confirms Elijah's calling and status. He is the one who prayed. He is the one who saw the boy being brought back. He is the true prophet. But this is a very private act.

[14:53] This just happened in one little house in Zarephath. So it wouldn't have been an international thing. But to Elijah himself, it would have been a massive encouragement, wouldn't it?

And he needed it. He knew that at some point he's going to have to go back and see Ahab, this dodgy king. And there's going to be something bad going on. And quite likely he's going to be killed. And he's probably fearful of that.

But God can raise the dead. But if God can raise the dead, ah, if I'm Elijah, I think, well, okay, I'm going to be fearless and go to Ahab because if God can raise the dead, he can raise me.

It must have been a tremendous encouragement to him. And he is strengthening Elijah for this battle to come.

Spoiler alert. There's a huge battle coming, which some of you know about. There's another reason, actually, this is interesting. Because this is the first time anybody has been raised from the dead in Scripture.

[15 : 56] And it was a kind of wonderful thing, an amazing thing, but it happened very much in private. Now, it's a bit like a signpost. I don't know, at the end of this road outside, as you go into Maltings Close, there's a sign on the far side that says, Alton, that says AMC, okay, Alton Maltings, this way.

And as you come up there, eventually you get to the big sign over there that says, Alton Maltings, the home of the Harvest Church. And then you come in. Now, I think this resurrection, this miracle, is a bit like a signpost.

It indicates God's future intention. Resurrection is something God really is into. It's God's future intention.

Now, again, we look at the life of Jesus in Luke 7. I'll just tell you the story quickly. There's a place called Nain. Nain. And Jesus was turning up at Nain, and he came across a funeral going on.

A boy had died. Okay? And he has great compassion for the woman who has lost his son. And he just goes up and says, young man, I say to you, get up.

[17 : 08] That confirms he's a bit like Elijah, isn't he? He's a true prophet. But actually, he's greater than Elijah because he just authoritatively says, get up.

He does it. He goes one step, or several steps further than Elijah. Elijah. So that's one thing. And then we can look at... There's another instance, isn't there?

Just before Jesus died, there was a final resurrection of a man named Lazarus. If you don't know about Lazarus, let me just tell you briefly, he was a friend of Jesus.

He had two sisters. He fell ill. And his sisters sent to Jesus and said, they're knowing that Jesus could heal the sick. And they said, quick, come and heal him. And Jesus didn't come quick.

In fact, he left it some days. And Lazarus died, which, as far as the sisters were concerned, was a total disaster. Then Jesus turned up, and he went to the grave, the side, where it was all sealed up, and Lazarus had been in there four days.

[18 : 16] So as they said, he probably smells by now. And Jesus just said, Lazarus, come out. So he was showing he was a great prophet.

He was also showing he was God, because only God can raise from the dead. And Jesus did it directly, by his own command. And of course, Lazarus' resurrection actually precipitated the final attack on Jesus.

Because Lazarus, the resurrection meant that Jesus was becoming even more popular, which the Pharisees didn't like. They therefore engineered this false accusation against Jesus, and he ended up crucified.

Then he came back from the dead. Yeah? And of course, by his resurrection, Jesus won a great spiritual battle. Great spiritual battle.

Against the... Anyway, death was defeated. Okay? And of course, those that follow Jesus, we will be resurrected. Who wants to be, when you die, resurrected from the dead?

[19 : 34] Who's looking forward to a resurrection body? Okay, particularly the older ones. Seriously, as you get older, you think, really, I need...

It's wonderful. Think about resurrection. It is the great Christian hope. A new body in a new heaven and earth. And this little signpost in Elijah's...

The miracle that we've read, kind of points us forward to the resurrection of the dead. Isn't that wonderful? And of course, I'm going to spoil it a little bit again.

And then, after Elijah saw the boy raised from the dead, he then went back. He was able to face Ahab, and it was a huge spiritual battle. Which is a parallel to the spiritual battle that Jesus faced.

So the Old Testament and the New Testament are wonderfully integrated, aren't they? The Old Testament points us to the New Testament. Okay, so let's try and pull some application out of this.

[20 : 40] Challenges will come to your life, okay? Inevitably. Jesus said you will have problems and troubles. And sometimes they'll come out of a clear blue sky. If we respond well, by prayer and in faith, you know, saying, I don't know what's going on, Lord, but you're with me, and I'm going to bring this to you.

I'm going to cry to you. That would mean God can move you on. The woman from Zarephath was moved on in her faith. Elijah's faith was massively built up. And God gets glory.

We pray passionately and say, answers to prayer, God is glorified. We can respond badly, of course. We can say, oh, this big problem has hit me. God doesn't care.

God's not even there. I'm not even going to bother. I'm just going to try and fix it myself and complain like crazy. That's a bad response. But, you know, God still loves us. He will draw us back. And he will keep working for our good. You know, don't assume, God is punishing me. No. He often works through tragedy. Show at least some faith.

[21:45] It's not a faith that Elijah showed. It's the sort of faith that I have, which is, I don't know what to do here. Lord, I'm going to give this to you. Pray persistently. Pray persistently. You know, when we pray, the Father gives us what we need.

Although he knows what we need before he asks. But he invites us to ask because he wants us to speak, to converse, to walk with him. There's a man named Tom, Tim Keller, who's a very well-known American preacher and teacher.

He sums up Jesus' teaching like this, which is very wise. God will either give you what you ask for, or he gives you what you would have asked for if you knew everything he knows. So sometimes you don't get the answer you ask for because God actually knows better than you.

But he will answer you. But sometimes he knows better. And of course, as we pray, the Spirit in us guides us in our desires.

It says, in the Lord's Prayer, it says, pray thy kingdom come. And the Spirit in us leads us to pray for things of the kingdom. And then Jesus himself intercedes for us with the Father.

[23:06] So if you compare that to Elijah, our spiritual position is wonderfully stronger than his ones because we have a full understanding. We have the Spirit in us.

We have Jesus who intercedes for us and who was a man with us. And he intercedes with the Father. We have the whole kind of trinity, the whole Godhead is involved in our prayers.

That's tremendous, isn't it? So then, actually, where's the band gone? Yeah. Well, the band's coming up.

Ask yourself this question. Are you facing some immediate challenge? Some crisis that hits you that you haven't expected? If you want somebody to stand with you, we do some ministry at the end over in the yellow mustard-coloured flag over there.

Please go over there and somebody will pray with you. Okay? Somebody will pray with you. Or perhaps you might identify as that woman in Zarephath. Or like me, 40-odd years ago, who said, well, I get some of this stuff about faith.

[24:16] I get some of this stuff about God. But there's a whole stuff I don't get. Well, again, prayer. Move forward. Hmm.

Okay, should we just pray and commit these things? Father God, when sudden troubles come, help us to cry out to you.

Give us Elijah's faith and his persistence, even if our faith isn't as strong as we'd like. A faith that keeps crying and keeps going repeatedly.

Lord, strengthen us in quiet places where no one sees us pray. Lord, and show your compassion, Lord, by answering our prayers as is best.

Amen. Amen.