

“When Life Caves In”

SCENES FROM THE LIFE OF ELIJAH (PART 3): 1 KINGS 17:17-24

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
February 16, 2013**



Over the past several weeks, we have been looking together at scenes from the life of the prophet Elijah. Elijah, of course, is one of the most powerful and one of the most unique characters in the Old Testament. Several weeks ago, we learned that Elijah was a man of tremendous courage. He comes on the scene during the reign of King Ahab, a king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who did more than just about any other to pull the nation away from God and toward the worship of Baal. In that context, Elijah comes basically out of nowhere, he approaches the king, and he says (in 1 Kings 17:1), ***“As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”*** Elijah then leaves and lives by a stream in the wilderness. Over time, though, the stream dries up, and God commands him to go live with a destitute widow who is commanded to give Elijah her very last meal, which she does. So, last week, then, we looked at this single mother’s obedient faith. Her challenge was to give up something that was very valuable to her, just a few cups of flour and a little bit of oil. And we applied that passage to our lives today with a challenge: Let us also be willing to give up what is valuable to us for the cause of Christ. We do not always value a few cups of flour, but we do value our time. And so the question was: How are we using our time for the Lord? Are we visiting the widows? Are we caring for the orphans? Are we taking time to teach the word of God to the next generation? In an act of obedient faith, the widow of Zerephath gave up what was incredibly important to her, and in response, the Lord made sure that she was cared for with a miraculous supply of flour and oil for the duration of the drought. So, we ended our study last week on a fairly high note. The widow acted faithfully and was blessed for that decision. But then we come to what happens next.

This morning, I would invite you to return to this passage, to turn with me to 1 Kings 17:17-24 (p. 578). If you read ahead, then you know what happens next. Things seem to be going so well, but then we come to verse 17. If you will, then, please look with me at 1 Kings 17:17-24,

Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. So she said to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!” He said to her, “Give me your son.” Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. He called to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” Then he

stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, I pray You, let this child's life return to him." The Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. 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 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 in your mouth is truth."

As we let this passage sink in a little bit, I would like for us to move through this paragraph by looking at it from three points of view and by learning some very practical lessons from the three major players in this passage.

- I. **And as we begin, I would like for us to look back at verses 17-18 as we think about this passage from the widow's point of view, and what I want us to notice is that this woman is experiencing A CRISIS OF FAITH.**

We look at this from her point of view. She steps out in faith to help God's prophet, but some time later her only son gets sick and dies, and so she lashes out, *"What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!"* From her point of view, she saw this as some kind of punishment from God. From her point of view, God killed her son for something that she had done in the past. From her point of view, God was responsible. Instead of being rewarded, she was being punished – not only did she lose her husband, but now she loses her only son. Losing a child is not natural. Losing a child is hard. Losing a child has been pictured as a period at the beginning of a sentence. Right out of college, I had been preaching for only a few weeks when I was called upon to preach my very first funeral. That funeral was for a little boy who was only a few days old. There was not much we could say other than to pray that God would be with that family. The death of a child is not natural, and so this widow blames Elijah.

And this is where we remember that righteous people do not have a free pass on suffering. We think of Job, the most righteous man on the face of the earth at that time, generous to the poor – and yet we find that Job lost nearly everything – his possessions, his health, and even his children. We would like to think that there is always a direct connection between righteous living and an easy way of life. We would like to think that sin always leads to suffering. But that is not always the case. And when we see good people suffer, when we see those who are evil prosper, it sometimes causes us to question God, "God, why are you doing this? Why is life not fair?" I would love for us to study this in sermon form at some point over the next few months, but for now, the point for us is that this woman was going through a crisis of faith. Her faith was shaken by the death of her only son.

Have we ever been in that situation? Have we ever been in a situation where life seems to be going so well, but then everything falls apart? Have we ever questioned God about that? Have we ever tried really hard to be faithful, but then something horrible happens? Or, have we ever had one crisis after another? I know this is rather minor compared to what so many of you are going through, but maybe you can relate: Have you ever spent a lot of money fixing your car, and then a few days later you find that something else really expensive is broken? I think we have all been there – one crisis after another. Maybe you finally get a doctor bill paid off, and then somebody else gets sick. Maybe you get through a rough patch with your wife, and then one of the kids gets in trouble at school. Maybe you pay off the bill for the brand new tires, and then the transmission goes out. Maybe you conquer a bad habit, but then another sin seems to sneak up out of nowhere.

With all of these bad things that can happen, with all of the weight of the world that seems to press down on us, I want us to notice one thing that this woman did right. In verses 17-18, her reasoning was flawed; however, she did take her concern to God's prophet. She was wrong as to the cause of all of this, but she did take it to somebody who had a connection to the Lord. She took her concern to somebody who could intercede on her behalf. When life caves in, therefore, even if we don't have everything squared away, even if we are confused, even if we are frustrated, the Bible repeatedly tells us to lay it all out before God. And in her very limited way, that is exactly what she did. So, we learn something from the widow. No matter where we are in the process, it is always appropriate to take our concerns either 1.) to God, or 2.) to somebody who can intercede and go to God on our behalf.

II. As we look back at our passage, we find a second major player in this episode as we come to THE PROPHET ELIJAH.

And as we look at Elijah's response, we see a lot of wisdom there. We find, for example, that Elijah does not get angry. He does not lash out. He does not defend himself. Remember, in verse 18, the woman was blaming Elijah for her son's death, but in the heat of the moment, Elijah does not snap back. He does not argue. In fact, he doesn't even try to explain why the child died. Instead, Elijah simply said, **"Give me your son,"** and then he took the child's body to the upper room where he was living, and Elijah himself called out to God in prayer.

In verse 20, we find that Elijah also questioned God, **"O Lord my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?"** In other words, we find here that Elijah did not have all of the answers either. Even Elijah is questioning God. Remember, from the book of James, we learn that Elijah was a man **"with a nature like ours."** Elijah was like us, and as we studied earlier, we also have a way of questioning God. Sometimes we wonder whether God really cares about what we are going through. This past Wednesday, we sang a song, *"Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth and song, as the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long? Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear? As the daylight fades into deep night shades, does he care enough to be near? Does Jesus care when I've tried and failed to resist some temptation strong? When for my deep grief I find no relief, though my tears flow all the night long?"* In a similar way, Elijah was also questioning God: O Lord, how could you do this? Do you really care about what this woman is going through?

And yet when we get past the initial cry of shock and doubt, we find that Elijah's prayer was very specific. Yes, he questioned God, but then at the end of verse 21, we find that Elijah asked very specifically that the child's life would return. That right there is a rather bold request! As far as I can tell, Elijah had no reason for thinking that this might be possible. As far as the Bible is concerned, this is the very first time that anyone had ever come back from the dead. And so this is a bold and original appeal – a specific request for something that had never happened up to that point in world history. I think we see why James praises Elijah as a man of prayer. Truly, as James says, **"The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much"** (James 5:16).

So we have the reminder here, again, to take our concerns to God in prayer, even when we do not fully understand what we are going through, or why we might be struggling.

III. As we continue making our way through this text, we come to the last few verses and we find GOD'S ROLE IN WHAT HAPPENED HERE.

We find in the opening words of verse 22 that **"...the Lord heard the voice of Elijah."** The boy then came back from the dead, and at the end of verse 23, Elijah gave the boy back to his mother and was able to say, **"See,**

your son is alive.” When I see those words, I almost see Elijah saying it with the attitude, “See, I told you that God is good!” Yes, the boy died, but God cares. Yes, a terrible thing happened, but God was able to use it. Not that God caused the bad thing to happen, but when the boy died, God used that tragedy to accomplish something amazing. And the amazing thing is: At the end of this experience, this woman truly understood in a very personal way 1.) that Elijah was, in fact, God’s prophet, and 2.) that God cared for her personally. In today’s passage, something changed. Going into it, she knew something about God based on what was happening with the flour and oil, but by the end of it, she knew (without a doubt) that Elijah spoke for God.

We do not have miracles like this today, but we do have a written record of the miracles that took place in Bible times, and the written record serves as proof. As the apostle John said in John 20:30-31, ***“Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.”*** Today, the comfort that gets us through our times of struggle is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we believe in the resurrection because we have a written record. We have the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Conclusion:

And this brings us to the end of this passage. The widow faced a crisis of faith and took it to Elijah, Elijah took it to God, and God took care of it. When life caves in, it seems that the message from this passage, at least, is to take our struggles to God and his people and to let God share that burden. Tell it to a Christian friend and tell it to the Lord.

As we close, I want us to step back so that we can see the big picture in the entire chapter, and I want us to notice an interesting change that takes place between verse 1 and verse 24. In verse 1, Elijah is referred to as ***“Elijah the Tishbite.”*** In other words, he comes out of nowhere – no training, no resume, just a guy who is called upon by God to stand before one of the most wicked kings in world history. But then we come to verse 24, and we find that Elijah is now described as a ***“man of God.”*** What an interesting transition – from Elijah the Tishbite to man of God! Looking back over what happened here, it seems that God had a plan to strengthen and train Elijah for what is about to happen next.

In Chapter 18, we will find that God sends Elijah back to speak once more to King Ahab. Chapter 17, then, was a time of preparation. Everything up to this point has prepared Elijah for the challenge that is right around the corner. God is real, he loves us, and he can do some amazing things. At the dried up creek bed in the wilderness, Elijah learned that God could take care of him. In the widow’s house, Elijah learned that God could use him to help others. And from the death of the child, Elijah learned that God can do the impossible. Those lessons are very important for what happens next.

God had a job for Elijah, and God prepared him for it. It has been said that, “No one becomes a man or woman of God by chance, and no one becomes a man or woman of God overnight.” The Christian life is a long process. So as we close, I would ask: How is God preparing all of us here this morning? Are we facing any challenges that might put us in a special position to help others at some point? I’m not saying that God sends the challenges, but let us at least be open to the possibility that God can use what we are going through for something good over time. In the meantime, as brother Spencer read for us earlier from 1 Peter 5:7, we are to cast all of our anxiety on the Lord, because He cares for us. If our problem is sin, he can take care of it. If our problem is financial, or emotional, or physical, or spiritual – whatever it is – taking it to God is a great first

step. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation this morning, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front, and we would be honored to go to God on your behalf.

We worship a God who is able to raise the dead – that is why we are here this morning! This God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to suffer and die on the cross. In response to that sacrifice, we are commanded to repent and be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news about God's Son right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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