

THE LIFE OF ELIJAH PT.3 5-30-10
The Widow's Son

(I Kings 17) where we will continue our look at the adventures of Elijah the Tishbite. When we wrapped up last week our hero was living in the land of Sidon with a widow who, thru faith, provided for him and was blessed with food for her and her son during the awful drought that God had imposed upon the land of Israel as judgment for their idolatry. Last week we looked at how God provided for the widow and for Elijah in supernatural ways - as they obeyed. We also talked about the Elijah diet, which I expect none of you have been on since it did not allow for chocolate. Alas, we come today to the story of the widow and her son. We pick up the reading in verse **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. 18 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! 19 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. 20 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?" 21 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. 22 The LORD heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. 23 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. 24 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."

What a wonderful and dramatic story! The drama of it is found in the context of this poor woman's awful distress. The death of her son would elicit an overwhelming grief in this woman. It apparently happened quite suddenly. Had the disease been slow in taking his life I expect Elijah would have been brought in on it before death. It was a severe and sudden illness that took him, so the woman is dealing with her shock over this turn of events. She is also facing the prospect of living completely alone since this was her only child and she was a widow. For her this boy was her pride and joy, her strength and her hope. You can imagine how tender her relationship with her son would be after going thru the loss of his father, and living alone for several years. When I was a young teenager my parents divorced and I lived alone for several years with my mother and we drew terrifically close. I thought of what it would have been like for my mother to lose me in those years and yet she still had 4 other children. This poor lady had nothing and no one. Can you feel her pain, her agony of soul as she held tight to her boy's lifeless body and flooded her face with bitter

tears? This was a situation sufficient to break anyone's heart. In our meditations this morning we'll look first at the response of the widow to her son's death and then secondly we'll look at the response of Elijah.

The first response of the woman, mentioned in verse 18, is anger. She was grieved and probably somewhat hysterical but she was outwardly angry. **18ab** *So she said to Elijah, "What do I have to do with you, O man of God?"* The New International Version renders it, "*what do you have against me, man of God.*" This was a verbal hit against Elijah. She is angry and taking out her anger against the prophet. She implies to him. "It's your fault that my son is dead. You are the instrument of his death." Now, why do you think she would do that? Why would she blame Elijah? (pause) I think its because he was close. Quentin Crisp wisely said that *People do not confine themselves to the emotions to which they are entitled.* No they don't, and anger is not usually guided like a smart bomb - it tends to just seek out the closest and most vulnerable target. That is one reason we shouldn't take it as personally as we usually do. Elijah was living with them. He was supposedly going to bring divine blessing on their home, so he is an easy target. But who really is the woman upset with? Is it not God? I think so. She is angry with God and so often God **is** the object of our wrath although we don't want to admit it. It sounds so awful and wrong to be angry with God so we look for someone else to blame for our problems. Husbands blame wives, wives blame husband, children blame parents, and yes, parents even blame kids. We blame the government and the school system and the referee but in our hearts our anger is toward the Lord and that anger will distance us, not only from other people, but also from God. As a pastor I've seen on several occasions people vent their anger at the church or specifically at me or another church leader. After all, we represent God don't we? And so when God lets you down you go after the man of God. I've learned to detect that in myself and others. I encourage you to do the same. If your beef is with God, confess it is so, and talk to him about it. He can take it. But be careful how you complain. Its okay to complain to the Lord with a broken heart but not with a bitter spirit. In our baptism vows parents pledge that they will not complain against God if He should take their child thru death. Few things are as painful as losing a child. Complaining to God in that instance would be understandable, but not appropriate. It is never entirely okay to be angry with God. It is never sensible or right. In our reactions to this kind of loss we are to acknowledge God's love and sovereignty, as well as His sufficiency to meet all our needs.

The second emotional response of our widow to her son's death is guilt. Guilt. She says to Elijah **18c** *You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!* She's saying, God sent you here to judge me for my former sins. Maybe she was a pagan idolater like her countrymen, maybe it was something else she was feeling guilty over, but she was distressed that her sin may have cost her the life of her son. And this is a very ordinary reaction to a crisis. We begin to wonder, "what have I done to deserve this?" When my daughter Sarah was diagnosed with leukemia 20 years ago this was a question I had to deal with. Was her sickness a judgment on my sin? Now what do you think? Is that a healthy question to ask or an unhealthy one? I believe it is worth asking, but I don't think we should expect a clear answer. Sometimes sickness of self or child does come as a punishment for sin, but not always. Here are two facts of Scripture: (1) David lost a son at birth, had a child die, as a judgment of God on his sin. It does happen. (2) Second fact: Job lost all ten of his children at one time and it had more to do with his righteousness than with his sin. What's our conclusion then? It's often hard to say why tragedies occur and how they relate to our guilt. But Job's friends thought they knew didn't they? Job's friends came from far away to tell Job he must be an awful sinner to suffer like he was suffering. To them there was always a direct connection between my sin and my suffering. The disciples of Jesus had the same misunderstanding. In John 9 they saw a man who had been blind from birth and they asked Jesus **9:2** *And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"* See the assumption? Blindness is a punishment. Jesus says to them, "Not so. Not so" And in the case of the man in John 9 He said **3** *"It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him."* The same could be said of the widow's son. His death was to set the stage for a miracle of God but before it happened the widow was flogging herself with self-accusation. And mothers often do that. "If my child suffers it must be my fault." Dads more often blame it on the kid, but Dads suffer like this too. Maybe you feel guilty about a divorce you took your child thru, or your yelling and nagging or your general inadequacies as a parent - those can be very painful emotions. What do you do about them? I can't tell you that your child isn't suffering because of your sin - I don't know; but I can direct you to the cross. God says that if you confess your sin He forgives it. So confess it. Admit it. Shed some tears of brokenness before God. If you've sinned against your child confess it to your child. And then take steps to correct your behavior. True sorrow over sin means you will strive to change. And then finally I direct you to meditate on the promises of God that He will forgive. The

devil will seek to drive you crazy with guilt. He wants to pull you under with the rip-tide of remorse but you must fight him off with the pure word of God such as Hebrews 10:17 *THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE*. Bathe your soul in the cleansing waters of God's word and let God take your guilt away.

The third emotional response of the widow occurs after her son is given back to her alive. We can assume she would be overcome with great joy but we'll look at what she said 24 *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.* We see her assurance. She says, "I know!" And how did she know? The miracle persuaded her. Oh, she believed in Elijah before but now she knew with greater assurance that he spoke God's word. And that, my friends, is the major purpose behind the miracles we read in Scripture. God gave miraculous powers to Moses and Elijah and Jesus and his apostles in order to confirm their testimony. That is why a prominent New Testament word for miracles is the word

Slide 2 "sign." Now take a look at this (show pic). Go ahead and read it. What strikes us as funny about this

sign is how it points to itself. The sign is about the sign, and that conflicts with the purpose of a sign. Signs are intended to point to some other reality aren't they? Miracles are called signs because they point not to themselves, but to the authority of the one behind the sign and they persuade men to believe. In John 2, after Jesus changed the water to wine 11 *This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.* John 2:23 *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing.* John 3:2 *this man (referring to Nicodemus) came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.* Not always did God do this for his spokesmen.

Many prophets, like John the Baptist, did no miracles but some God chose to confirm in this manner. Acts 2:22 *Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just*

Slide 4 as you yourselves know. That word attested means "accredited" by God, who often confirms his servant's message with the miraculous. Some of you may have seen the ABC documentary from a

few years back, with Peter Jennings examining the relationship of the Apostle Paul to Jesus and the Christian church. Basically, Jennings provided a platform for a group of unbelieving scholars to spout their nonsense. In the piece I saw, Jennings is talking to this alleged scholar about how Paul managed to spread the message of Jesus so effectively. Jennings asked the right question, I think,

“Why would pagan idolaters in non-Jewish cultures hear the story about Jesus dying as a criminal and decide he must be God and build their lives and cultures around Him? Why wouldn’t they just dismiss the gospel?” That is a real good question because none of the answers of unbelief make any sense. Well this “scholar” looks at Jennings and said, “Yea, well, that’s hard to understand isn’t it?” You bet it is. Unless you take the time to read the book of Acts without prejudice. Because Acts tells us that this happened largely through the impact of apostolic miracles. What got the attention of unbelieving people? Bodies were healed. Demons were cast out. Even dead people were raised.

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God confirmed his word through signs. In Acts 14:3 the apostles were in Antioch and it says **3 they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands.** Paul wrote to the Corinthian

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church and said this in **I Corinthians 12:12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.** No liberal scholar will tell you this. You have to go to the source to get it. And unlike theirs, the Biblical story of how Christianity spread makes sense. Like Elijah, and like Jesus, the apostles were attested by God with signs.

Now, let's move on to study the response of Elijah to the death of the widow's son. Elijah comes home, learns what has happened to this young man, is undoubtedly grieved himself, but in addition, is confronted by the accusations of the widow. How will he respond at such an emotional moment? He responds with prayer. (R) What a lesson there is just in that alone! When you are hurting, weary, anxious, angry, disappointed - what do you do? You take it to the Lord in prayer. Remember the biography James wrote of Elijah? Chapter 1 was entitled: "He prayed." Chapter 2 was entitled, "He prayed again." *Have we trials or temptation? Is there trouble anywhere? Are we weak and heavy laden, cumbered with a load of care?* What do you do? Take it to the Lord in prayer. That's what the man or woman of God does. We don't try to hustle our problems away. We don't try to worry our problems away, or complain them away. We pray about it. Now, Elijah's prayer is not just any old prayer. Elijah decided he is going to pray for this child to come back to life. That's pretty heavy isn't it? Is that something you should do? Next time someone you know dies should you take the body to your room and pray? Probably not. You need to master droughts and healing before you get into resurrections. Resurrections are extremely rare in the Biblical record. Elijah raised someone, Elisha raised someone. Jesus raised three person; Peter and Paul raised one each but that is all. The Lord never tells us to pray for deceased persons. This is never encouraged by Jesus or anyone else. In New Testament history we read of many bringing sick

friends to Jesus or the apostles but never dead friends. Resurrections are remarkably rare. And without a clear word from God you are probably best to concern yourself with other ministry. But Elijah prays for the boy to come alive again and we can learn from his prayer about how to pray - no matter what we are asking God to do. I want you to see three principles of prayer in the example of Elijah.

Principle #1 is to pray alone. Elijah had no interest in being theatrical here. In verse 19 Elijah took the boy and went up to his room. There is a place for group prayer certainly. This is commanded and expected. But Jesus also told his disciples to pray in the inner room, in solitude. In groups there must always be some sensitivity to others, but alone we are free to be more sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

Principle #2 is to pray earnestly. The earnestness of Elijah is expressed in the words of his prayer, "Oh Lord." ® This is the language of inner groanings. His earnestness is expressed also in his posture for we read that he stretched himself upon the child as he called out to God. You can just feel the passion in this man! And I wonder, when is the last time you prayed like this for anything? When do you get passionate in prayer, really crying out to God with groanings of soul? Prayer does not require a phony pretense of feeling, but it certainly should be emotional since it is spirit crying out to spirit.

So, we see Elijah's earnestness in his language and his posture and in one other way. We see his intensity in the way he pleads his case before the Lord. And here I would have you learn an important lesson about prayer. When you request something of God its okay to accompany your request with reasons. Tell God why he should do as you ask. When Elijah prays he implies, "Lord, this is a tragedy for this poor widow. It would not be good to take the son of someone who is providing for me." He appeals to God's compassion and to his justice. he supports his request. Another great example of this is found in the praying of Moses in Exodus 32. This is after the people made a golden calf to worship while Moses was away, and God had threatened to destroy them all except Moses. Exodus 32:**11** *Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Here Moses reminds God as it were that these were His people. Surely you didn't bring them out of Egypt in vain. **12** Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about*

doing harm to Your people. Moses points out the negative consequences of their being destroyed - how the Gentiles will mock. Then Moses appeals to God's word **13** *"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.* That is the kind of thing we need to be doing in prayer. Support your petitions with Scripture. Touch the tender heart of God by appealing to his mercy. You do this by mentioning the needs and the pain of those for whom you pray. You appeal to your position as a child of God and ambassador for the kingdom. You petition God for the good of others. You show how answers to your prayer will benefit others. Then you appeal to God for His own glory's sake. You argue that if He answers your prayer He will be honored and praised because of it. When I pray for God's help in writing and then preaching my sermon I do all of these things. I request his assistance because of my inadequacy for the job. I am pitiful without his help. I ask His blessing because it is His word that I come to teach. I petition Him for power not just to make my day but for the sake of those who hear me and who need the truth to set them free and make them strong. I petition Him to bless His word so that He would be glorified among His people. I could just say, "Lord please bless my preaching. Amen" But as I build a case my mind and heart is more engaged in my prayer, my spirit lays hold of God for a longer period and, I'm convinced, the Father is more moved to answer my request. Building a case is a biblical way of presenting your petitions to God.

There is one more thing to note about how Elijah prayed. He prayed alone, He prayed earnestly, and He prayed persistently. Verse 21 says Elijah stretched himself over the child three times and prayed for his life. Three times. I can only assume that the first two times saw no results. But Elijah was persistent in prayer. Now, you too. You don't just pray once for something and then conclude, "It must not be God's will." You keep asking. There are parables about this in the New Testament aren't there? Luke 11:**5-8** *Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything. ' 8 "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.* What is Jesus telling us here? To be persistent in prayer for the very next verse

says **2** *So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.* The reasons why we obtain our requests thru persistence is that persistence communicates real sincerity and depth of feeling. It shows more than a surface passion but a real longing for God to move and the Lord responds to that. God is our Father and I think of how I respond to the requests of my kids. If they ask for something just once and then forget it I conclude they don't want it very bad. If they really want something what will they do? They'll bug you to death won't they? Dave Barry writes, *You can get almost anything you want from your parents, provided you're not afraid to whine. I remember when I was 12 and really **needed** a BB gun. My parents didn't want me to have one on the grounds that I might shoot my brother. But I put together a string of about 35 days during which I was, without question, the most sniveling, obnoxious child in the entire world. It got to the point where, to preserve their sanity, my parents had to either give me a BB gun or hire someone to kidnap me. They eventually elected to buy me a BB gun, mainly because it was cheaper. I was so grateful I didn't shoot my brother for four days.* (p.89 Bad Habits) Nagging works with sinful parents. Showing how much you really desire something, thru persistent prayer, impacts our perfect Father. I thought here not so much of my kids as my wife. Many times Beth has asked me to do something I didn't really care to do and I refused. But she would come back to it again and sometimes again and again and she wouldn't nag me into doing things – no-no-no- but when she repeats her desires I come to realize how important something is for her. And I love her. When I understand that something is important to her, even though, I can't relate or appreciate why, I try to do it. But you see, it is persistence that reveals to me her heart. Tears do the same thing don't they? Persistence and passion move me, and they move the heart of God as well.

Sometimes I've been asked about how long we should keep praying for something we haven't yet seen an answer to. The Bible does not say. And my opinion is that this is a very subjective matter. We have to let the Holy Spirit move us to pray as we should. There are some things I just keep praying God would do that I've prayed for for years. Other requests I've dropped. I think the best answer may be that if you still feel the burden you keep praying.

So, we continue to learn about prayer from Elijah. Will we see dead children restored to life? Physically? Likely not. But I have every reason to think God plans to quicken unto life many who are spiritually dead. I heard on James Dobson's radio program the story of pastor David Jeremiah and his wayward daughter. He shared the grief of watching his child choose the paths of sin, and

there are so many Christian parents going thru what he went thru. There are a lot of grieving moms and pops out there, grieving not because a child has no physical life but because the child has no spiritual life. To a believing mom or dad, a child in rebellion against God is just as lost to them as a child deceased. I remember the words of the prodigal son's father in Luke 15 when his son returned home he said 15:24 *For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. And they began to be merry.* Some of you sitting here are lost to your parents because you've run away from God. To you I say, "Come home." (R) There is life to be found in Jesus; there is forgiveness for your sin. Don't come to Christ because your mom's a Christian but come because He is the Way and the Truth and the Life and you have been lost and deceived and dead. To the rest of us I ask, can you be an Elijah? Can you pray for spiritually dead children like the prophet prayed? Are you willing to carry that burden for some grieving parent? I want to challenge the members of our church this morning. If you are a visitor you apply this as you will but I ask you members today if you would be willing to commit yourself to pray for some hurting mother's prodigal at least once a week for the entire summer. Would you do that? In a moment I'm gonna ask you to raise your hand to affirm that you will. Now you mothers and fathers who long to have a child restored to you in a spiritual sense - consider asking one or two Christian friends to be your Elijah's and to pray with you for your child. Tell them of your hurt and of your need and let them support you in prayer. Now, if you would be willing, if you would consider it a privilege to pray for a wayward child in this way would you hold up a hand for about 10 seconds. Mom, Dad, do you see those hands? Ask one or two after the service to join you in your prayers. If you are too shy to do that write a note for the church staff and we will find you a prayer partner to intercede for your child. (you may put your hands down, thank you.) -Now let's **all** join together in prayer-

"Father, raise up among us men and women to be Elijahs, to pray with passion and persistence, with compassion and power for the needs of hurting people. We think especially this day of the dear mothers and fathers among us who grieve because a beloved son or daughter has left them physically and spiritually. Give comfort Gracious Lord and give hope. Bring glory to your name by renewing to life and wholeness those who now live as prodigals that there might be rejoicing in heaven and in our church and our homes, for we ask this in Christ's name - Amen.