

April 19, 2015

B.C.

*The Zarephath Widow's Son*

1 Kings 17:17-24

**Opening words:** Within the pages of the Bible there are nine resurrection stories. Including Jesus, six are found in the New Testament. Jesus resurrected three: the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:13-15), Jairus' daughter (Matthew 9:25) and Lazarus (John 11:43-44). Peter resurrected Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42) and Paul raised Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). That leaves three in the Old Testament. It is those three resurrections I want to look at in the next three weeks. I have called this sermon series *B.C.* because each resurrection occurred before Jesus's birth.

The first comes from the seventeenth chapter of First Kings. During the summer of 2001, I spent the summer looking at the life of Elijah. If you remember the storyline, then you have an excellent memory. That was fourteen years ago. If you don't remember, or weren't present, then you need to recall his life to this point. It is impossible to preach on a single story without hearing the whole storyline to that point. I will try to be brief. Elijah, whose name means "My God is Yahweh," was raised in the hill country of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The king and queen of Israel at that time in history were Ahab and Jezebel. Through the eyes of God, they were the worst of all the royals. Turning their backs on the one true God, the God who lead their ancestors through the wilderness, they introduced the people to Baal worship, which can be used as a generic term for any other god. Obviously, God was not pleased with their leadership, so he sent Elijah to speak on His behalf. For their unfaithfulness, a great drought will come to their land, causing great hardship. That news is not pleasing to Ahab and Jezebel. However, instead of accepting responsibility and correcting their ways, they decide to punish the messenger, Elijah. Much of his ministry was spent on the run. At first, God sends Elijah to the wilderness, which is where he drinks from the stream and is fed by a raven. Daily, the bird arrives with bread and meat. At my house, we call bread and meat a sandwich. The problem is, in time the stream dries up. With the brook gone, God sends Elijah 100 miles to the city of Zarephath. It is while he is there that he receives help from the neediest of all people, a widow. By definition we know her husband is deceased, but the scriptures give us one more piece of information; she has a son. She sacrificially cares for the prophet, and the three exist at a low level. That brings us to today's scripture, 1 Kings 17:17-24.

**1 Kings 17:17-24** <sup>17</sup> Sometime later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. <sup>18</sup> She 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?" <sup>19</sup> "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. <sup>20</sup> 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?" <sup>21</sup> Then he stretched himself out on the

boy three times and cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" <sup>22</sup> The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. <sup>23</sup> Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" <sup>24</sup> 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."

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One of the great names from history is Sigmund Freud. He was born in 1856 in Austria and was trained as a neurologist. However, he will always be remembered as the father of psychoanalysis. At many levels Freud was a success. However, he never really enjoyed that success because he was so negative. In 1918, he wrote these words, "*I have found very little good in human beings as a whole. In my experience most of them are trash.*" Many blame his poor attitude on the fact that he struggled with jaw cancer for years. He was a chain cigar smoker. Some say his negativity was caused by his lack of faith. Most of his life he was a devout atheist. However, he did discover some value in religion at the very end. Maybe it was the combination of the two. Let me ask you this question. When you have a problem, do you lash out at others, or do you turn to God? It is painfully obvious to me. Believers handle their problems better than non-believers. Believers turn to God. Non-believers lash out at others. When Freud died in 1939, he was friendless and alone. You cannot be surprised. That leads us to a question with an obvious answer.

Have you ever had a problem? Let me answer that question for you, "Yes!" I have never met a person who didn't have a problem. I have problems. You have problems. The people sitting next to you have problems. The people in front of you and behind you have problems. It is sad but true. Problems are part of the human experience. Albert Einstein once said, "*It is not that I am so smart, it's just that I stay at my problems longer.*" How long have you been working on your problems?

People ask me, "What is the most difficult part of your job?" The answer is not preaching. I love to preach, and look forward to those early mornings where I get to wrestle with the text. What does God want me to say this week? The answer is not administration. We have some wonderfully skilled people who handle it. The answer is not fundraising for the next mission trip. I have been humbled by your generosity. The answer is not meetings, because we have pared them down to a few and they don't last long. The answer to that question is not constant phones, text and emails. You can contact me anytime. I need to be needed. The answer to that question is not being criticized or held accountable by everyone. It just means you are interested. The answer to the question, what is the most difficult part of your job, is pastoral care. I find it to be absolutely exhausting. It is not that I don't care about you. It means I care too much. I think of you as you were when I came, twenty-one years ago. It is hard to believe you and I are twenty-one years older. Time is not always our friend.

Easter was two weeks ago. I had outpatient hernia surgery the next day. I really didn't feel like myself until Tuesday. I spent the second half of this week reconnecting with our shut-ins or institutionalized church members. There are more people than you think. During the entire season of Lent the church was extremely busy. Lent was really busy for me because I was writing two sermons a week. Don't get me wrong, I love to preach, but good preaching takes time. Right now, I am a one-man show, so something had to give. What gave was pastoral care. As I reconnected with those people I learned one thing. Everyone has problems. We are facing some incredible things. I heard about diseases where there is no cure. I heard about divorce before the marriage really began. I heard about young people facing a pile of student debt who have no prospect of a well-paying job. I heard about loved ones being addicted to alcohol and drugs. I heard about incarcerated grandchildren. Has anyone here surrendered to the reality of their existence? It was a hard week. However, my last visit on Thursday is the one I can't get out of my mind.

Her name is Ruth, some of you know her. I have always liked her. In her own way, she was fun. She is in a local facility that is very nice. But, it is what it is. She is fortunate because her son and daughter-in-law visit regularly. Twenty-one years ago she had a clear opinionated mind. On Thursday, her mind was cloudy at best. I didn't recognize her sleeping in her chair. When I walked near her she woke up. I was relieved when she called me by name. She said, "Russ!" I dominated the conversation for a few minutes and updated her on the church. I told her about Lent and Easter. She responded, "That's nice." Out of the blue she looked at me and said, "Do you know who I'm really mad it?" I was afraid she was going to say me. I said nothing. She said, "My father. Have you seen my father? I have been in this place all this time and my father hasn't come to visit me once." Ruth is 87 years old. I scrambled for something to say, then she said, "Now that I think about it, my mother hasn't come to see me in a couple of weeks." I was devastated. I emotionally limped to my car and called her daughter-in-law. We swapped stories and ended by talking about happier times. The hardest part of my job is pastoral care. Your problems are so great. I don't know how you can have a smile on your face. At the very heart of this scripture lesson is a problem.

The story is about a woman who is no stranger to problems. She did nothing wrong. However, hardship seemed to be her best friend. She had already buried her husband and now it looked like she was going to have to bury her son. There is an unwritten rule that says parents will die before their children. It doesn't always happen. His death is painful for two reasons. First, the boy was one of the last strings back to her former life. Life was not always hard; there must have been some good times in the past. Her son reminded her of those good times. Perhaps, he had his father's eyes or laugh. Perhaps, the boy gave her the strength needed to survive her husband's death or an excuse to keep living. The joy she felt at her son's birth was now balanced out by the pain of his death. Some never recover from the death of their children. However, there is more. Second, the boy represented future security. She lived in sexist times. Women were not permitted to own property. Without her son, she would just become another

faceless beggar. The reality of his death hits her hard. She did what all faithless people do. She lashed out at the prophet and blames him and his god. Verse 18 quotes the grieving widow, "*What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?*" Those words must have pierced the prophet's heart. How many people do you know blame God when troubles come their way? Never forget, we may live in God's creation, but we also live in Satan's playground. However, this is a resurrection story. Elijah did what people of faith do during hardship; they turn to God. He takes the boy's lifeless body and retreats to a quiet place. He turned to God with his problem. According to the text, verse 20, he cried out to God and God heard him. The boy was resurrected and returned to his mother. We can all relate to this story because it is about an innocent woman with a problem, and I have never met a person who didn't have a problem. If you have ever had a problem, say, "**Amen!**"

Years ago, Dr. Raymond Edman wrote a little book called *In Quietness and Confidence*. He says every time a Christian faces trouble we must do two things. First, we must face the problem head-on. Second, we must remember four clear statements. These are the statements:

- 1. I am here by God's appointment.** In other words, God wants you in that situation for some reason. That statement is important because it reminds us that God has not forgotten us. In the story for today, the widow's son died so the power of God could be demonstrated to the whole world. I cannot promise you a resurrection, but I can guarantee you that God has not forgotten you.
- 2. I am in God's keeping.** In other words, God will care for your needs. I didn't say extravagant living, I said basic needs. Elijah drank from the brook and existed on sandwiches. During my time at the church, we have never had a single church member die of starvation. I could lose a few pounds. God cares for our needs.
- 3. I am under God's training.** In other words, God has a plan for your life. Your troubles are molding your heart for something special. What sensitivity have you gained because of your hardship? How have your problems changed you? Elijah was cared for by a widow. The lesson of humility is hard to accept.
- 4. God will show me the purpose in God's time.** I would like to say the purpose for your suffering will be revealed in this world, but I don't want to lie to you. When I get to heaven I have a great list of questions for God and so do you. In God's time, we will get our answers.

Don't let your problems just be a problem. Accept the fact that your problems are an opportunity to witness to your faith. Non-believers, like the widow, blame God and

others. Believers turn to God. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let me end with this story.

In 1985, Bruce Goodrich was training to be a cadet at Texas A&M University. One day, Bruce and the others were expected to run until they dropped. It seemed like an innocent hazing prank. The problem was, Bruce did, but he never got up. He died from heat stroke - he died before he went to his first class. Shortly after his funeral, Bruce's father wrote a letter to the university. What kind of letter would you write if your child had just died in a senseless way? This is what Bruce's father wrote:

**I would like to thank the university for the kindness you showed my family during our time of need. I am pleased Bruce had a Christian witness on the campus. While we may not understand the events of the past few weeks, we know God does. God does not make mistakes. We know that Jesus is caring for Bruce now.**

Can anyone here question that father's faith? Your problems will fan your witness to its greatest and brightest potential. The faithless widow looked for someone to blame. The faithful prophet turned to God. What are you going to do the next time hardship visits your house?

Will you pray with me?