

April 26, 2015

B.C.

The Shunammite Woman's Son

2 Kings 4:31-37

Opening words: Did you know that within 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'm looking at in my newest sermon series, *B.C.*

Today, we look at the second Old Testament resurrection, the resurrection of the Shunammite woman's son. As I said last week, it is hard to take a few verses of scripture out of an entire story and have it make sense. Let me try to summarize the storyline to this point. I will be quick. Elisha will always be remembered as both a prophet and a wonder worker for the northern kingdom, Israel. He was the successor of the prophet Elijah and came to prominence during the end of the reign of King Ahab. It was Elisha who asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. He would need it. He would serve as the prophet of Israel for six decades (892-832 B.C.).

The story for today really begins in verse 8. Elisha is in a place called Shunem, which is located near the Plain of Jezreel. One of the inhabitants of that community was, according to the text, a well-to-do lady. She recognized Elisha's holiness and befriended him. At first it started as a simple meal, then it turned into lodging for when he was in the area. To return her kindness, Elisha offers her whatever she desires. What she wanted was what everybody wanted in the Old Testament, a son. A year later, her quiet house was filled with the sounds of a crying baby. It is a great story to this point. It is too bad it has to continue.

Years later, the baby turned into a boy. He is out in the field working with his father, when the unthinkable happens. The child is suddenly stricken with some head-related ailment. Immediately, the boy is returned home and placed in his mother's lap. It is while he is there the boy dies. His corpse is placed on Elisha's vacant bed. The mother's only hope is Elisha. She pursues the prophet and convinces him to return to her home. That is where our story begins today. Our scripture reading this morning is Second Kings 4:31-37.

2 Kings 4:31-37 ³¹ Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened ³² When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³ He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴ Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm.

³⁵ Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes ³⁶ Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite." And he did. When she came, he said, "Take your son." ³⁷ She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

I love this story. Years ago, five young college students were spending a Sunday in London, so they went to hear the famed preacher Charles Spurgeon. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who asked, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw 700 people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman then introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon. Can I ask you a question? How much time do you spend in prayer?

Did you know 68% of all Christians pray more than once a day? Only 0.2% of people never pray.

Did you know 93% of all Christian prayer asks for God's guidance? 78% of all prayers include some health issue? 12% of our prayer are for a family pet?

Did you know 58% of Christian prayer is for a family member? Only 2.9% of prayer is for a stranger.

Did you know 27.5% of all Christians say their prayers are always answered? Only 0.6% say their prayers are never answered.

Did you know 79.5% of praying Christians do so at home? Only 4.4% pray at church.

Did you know 90.9% of praying Christians do so in silence? Only 8.4% use the internet.

Those figures came from U.S. News and Beliefnet. I believe they reveal to us something that we already knew. Prayer is important to us. How important is prayer to you?

Today, I want to ask you three questions about prayer. My goal is to help you understand prayer better so your prayer life can be more effective. The answer to each question comes from the story of the resurrected boy. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

What is prayer?

This is question number one: What is prayer? In the story for this morning, the unthinkable happens. The child his mother had been waiting for her entire life dies. I love this woman because she takes action. She begins to search for the prophet. When she finds Elisha, she tells him the sad news. She fights through her grief and says with her actions, it isn't over until God says it is over. You are just like the woman in the story. How many times have you reached out to God in prayer because you know it isn't over, until God says it is over?

One of the great privileges I have in my position is praying with people. About ten days ago, I was at the hospital. I was visiting someone who was fighting off pneumonia. She had been in for several days, but the pastoral care office only called the church that morning. When I got there she was dressed and was ready to be discharged. All she needed was a ride home. When she saw me, her eyes filled with tears and she reached out her arms. She said, "Russ, I need you to pray for me." I have visited countless people over the years. Every time I said, "If you need something, let me know." No one yet has asked for a candy bar. No one yet has asked for a loan. No one yet has asked for a magazine. When I say, "If you need something let me know", do you know how they respond? Everyone answers, "Pray for me." And I do.

Tony Campolo is a Baptist evangelist from the city of Philadelphia. One day as he walked out of church a woman stopped him and said, "You made three grammatical errors in your prayer this morning." He replied, "That is O.K. I wasn't talking to you." What is prayer? Prayer is communicating with God for the purpose of getting to know God. How well do you know God? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Do you ask God for the desires of your heart?

This is question number two: Do you ask God for the desires of your heart? In the story for this morning, the unthinkable happened. The woman's son dies. She goes to look for Elisha to tell him the sad news. If you read the entire story, then you learn the woman went to blame the prophet. This gift of a child was nothing more than a tease. She almost didn't ask for what she really wanted, her son to be resurrected. She is not the only one, we all do it. We filter our requests to God, when all God really wants is for us to be honest with Him. How honest are you with God?

In the year 2000, Bruce Wilkinson released a book that caused some excitement within the Christian world. You may remember the book or even read the book, *The Prayer of Jabez*. Selling more than nine million copies, it topped the *New York Times* best seller list. The success of the book led to a line of other products; there were the Prayer of Jabez key chains, mugs, backpacks, Christmas ornaments, scented candles and mouse pads. It was really something. The entire book was based on two Bible verses, 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. Those verses say:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.

Wilkinson said that prayer holds the secret to a successful life. I had a problem with the book because it was just prosperity theology wrapped in a new package. The faith calls us to be faithful, not prosperous. The faith calls us to give sacrificially, not hoard selfishly. However, Jabez's prayer does teach us to be honest with God. How honest are you with God? There is nothing wrong with being honest with God. We serve a great big God, so go to Him with great big requests. Ask for the desires of your heart, but be prepared for God to answer honestly too. If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

What is answered prayer?

This is question number three: What is answered prayer? In the Bible story for today, the boy was resurrected and there was a happy ending. I can't always promise you a happy ending, but I can promise you that God answers all of our prayers. Bruce Larson once said, God answers our prayer in one of four ways. There is yes, no, later, and "you have got to be kidding". The answer to every prayer is no, until you ask.

When I was young my sisters had a friend by the name of Jean. She was a frequent visitor in our home and at some level she was family. I do not know if she was physically beautiful, but she had a beautiful heart. It seemed like she was always helping someone. Years later, she became a foster parent to many children who simply lacked love. She was employed as a teacher in the Youngstown City Schools and had a passion for her students. If anyone deserved a good life, it was Jean. The problem was, she had a hard life. If it could go wrong, it did. All these years later, it pains me to say the next line. I will never forget the day I was told she was diagnosed with colon cancer. She had symptoms, but waited too long to go the doctor. She wasn't my friend, but I remember praying for her. I wasn't alone. Many prayed for Jean until the day she died. She wasn't my friend and she wasn't a family member, but I remember grieving at her passing. She deserved so much more. She is buried north of Warren. Some would say God didn't answer our prayers. Those people are simply wrong.

Our prayers for Jean were answered. Many experienced God through her illness. Friends reconnected after years of absence to pray for Jean. Strangers became friends as they prayed for Jean. Because of those prayers, Jean experienced the power of the church. She was not a regular church attender, but the church reached out to her. Our prayers for Jean helped us appreciate our health. Because of those prayers and her illness, we began to appreciate every relationship in our lives. On the day Jean died, everyone mourned and everyone's prayers were answered. We all experienced God. Answered prayer is experiencing God. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Sir George Adam Smith tells how he and his guide were climbing the Weisshorn in the Swiss Alps. It was stormy and they were making their climb on the sheltered side of the peak. When they reached the summit, they were filled with exhilaration. Sir George forgot about the fierce winds, leaped up and was nearly blown over the edge to the glacier below! The guide grabbed hold of him and exclaimed: "On your knees, sir. You are safe here only on your knees!" That is the story of our time. We are only safe when we are on our knees. How big of a part does prayer play in your life? Alfred Lloyd Tennyson once said, "*Nearer than hands and feet, even than breath, that is how near God is to us when we pray.*"

Will you pray with me?