

Lessons from the life of Elijah

5. The death of the widow's son (1 Kgs. 17:17-20)

Stephen Whitehouse

IT IS KNOWN that just before a hurricane devastates an area there are periods of tranquillity and serenity. Due to the cyclonic rotation and the low pressure of the approaching storm, all is caught into the swirl, leaving only clear and beautiful skies. For the widow, the period of experiencing God's grace through the never-emptying jars of oil and flour was the calm before the storm. This time of peace was soon to be abruptly disturbed by the untimely death of her son.

"The mistress of the house"

Notice that the widow is described as "the mistress [*ba'alalah*] of the house" (1 Kgs. 17:17). This is of particular interest since the Hebrew noun can be rendered as 'sorceress' or 'necromancer' (cf. 1 Sam. 28:7; Nah. 3:4). Was this widow still partially coupled with Baal worship and its accompanying witchcraft? Though she was a widow, was she 'married' to this evil religion?

Both Israel and Judah dealt faithlessly with the One to Whom they were espoused, for "Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem . . . Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, and hath married the daughter of a strange god" (Mal. 2:11). If she were "married" to "a strange god", she would likewise have to learn that God only was the One she should desire and follow (Ps. 38:9; 45:11).

A sudden turn of events

Some considerable time transpired after the initial conversation between Elijah and the widow. The relief of her bodily necessities became the preparatory means of supplying her spiritual wants and bringing her to a clear knowledge of God and a firm faith in His Word (Lk. 4:25, 26). Yet, though the doors of heaven had been opened, and they had been showered with miraculous blessings for "many days [mg. a full year]" (1 Kgs. 17:15), her son "fell sick" (v. 17) and died.

Some time would have elapsed between the child being sick and the tragic moment when he was finally dead, though the disease must have

spread rapidly, for his sickness is described as being "sore". Nonetheless, there would have been sufficient time for the widow to beseech Elijah's help; so why did she not seek the mighty prophet's assistance when the lad was still alive? Was it because her faith was not yet mature? Would it therefore take the death of her son for her finally to seek the God of Israel? Her faith was being tested.

The narrative now quickly gathers pace: "there was no breath [*neshamah*] left in him". The account is brisk, describing the boy's sickness through to his eventual death in one verse. But this is how the Father views mortality. Job declared: "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (14:1); and Isaiah: "All flesh is grass . . . the grass withereth, the flower fadeth . . . but the word of our God shall stand for ever" (40:6-8).

The Hebrew for "breath" is the same word used in the beginning, when "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the *breath* of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7). The Father had withdrawn His Spirit and the boy had perished (Job. 34:14,15). Yet both the young lad and his mother would soon realise that the God of Israel is the One Who "giveth *breath* unto the people" (Isa. 42:5).

"For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth"

Prior to her son's fatal illness the widow would certainly have believed that her sorrows were now well behind her. She had been blessed by this mighty Jew, who had been the vehicle of Divine blessings. She would never have foreseen that the life of her son would vanish in the midst of such blessings. How confused the widow would have been! "The barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail" (1 Kgs. 17:16), yet his life had gone.

We too can be amazed and astonished at affliction and loss; yet does not the apostle encourage us by exhorting: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you" (1 Pet. 4:12)? Similar experiences have

been had by many of God's servants. Abraham had received the promised son Isaac but was then commanded to offer him up in sacrifice upon Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:2). Job was "perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1), and was "the greatest of all the men of the east" (v. 3), but soon lost his family, servants and livestock, and suffered "sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (2:7). Lazarus, the friend of Christ, was brought back to life, yet immediately found himself to be a hunted man and an outcast (Jno. 12:10).

Why would such a continuing miracle be followed by the death of a lad who had been on the receiving end of God's grace for such a long time? Our Master asserted: "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (Jno. 6:48-51). A powerful principle is being taught here.

Though this boy had been figuratively eating of the daily manna—the dough and oil—he would not be sustained forever. He would eventually die. Life can only be maintained by partaking of "the bread which cometh down from heaven", through feasting upon "the Word . . . made flesh" (1:14). This is the only hope man has, and, even though the life of this lad was taken so many years before our Master would eventually speak these words, the observer is being shown the shortcomings of the Law.

"What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God?"

It would appear that the child died rather suddenly, and we now find the woman holding the child in her bosom (1 Kgs. 17:19) in a state of great anger and pain. The bereaved parent, in grief and anguish, the dead child firmly pressed against her chest as if she could warm the stiffening corpse with her troubled heart, reacts with the words: "What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God?" (v. 18). She believed that Elijah was personally responsible for the termination of her boy's life, dismissing all that had been wrought in her home over so many days, and pointed to Elijah as the culprit, as if the prophet had been commissioned by God to inflict pain and distress upon her home.

Nevertheless, let us observe that the widow refers to Elijah as a "man of God" (v. 18). Intriguingly, the phrase had previously been used to describe the prophet Moses (Deut. 33:1; Josh. 14:6), the man who on God's behalf had led the children of Israel out of a spiritually dark Egypt, through the onerous and loathsome wilderness, into the glorious Promised Land. She would have been aware of the great miracles revealed under the leadership of Moses, and how her life mirrored that of the children of Israel in the wilderness, partaking daily of the manna. So aware was she that she connects these two great prophets, for both men had come in the Name of the God of Israel into a Gentile land, and both were men of miracles and wonders.

The widow directly questions Elijah, "art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance?". She carefully chooses the verb *zakar*, rendered here "call . . . to remembrance", a word which can alternatively be rendered as 'recall' or 'call to mind'. She believes that her past life, whatever that may have been, has been brought to remembrance by the Father. The widow is not referring necessarily to any specific sin in her past life, but to the idea that the prophet, while residing with her, had become aware of her sinfulness and had called it into remembrance with the Almighty.

This question from the widow demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding on her part of the work of redemption by Almighty God. Throughout Scripture, when the Hebrew word *zakar* is used, it illustrates that the Father focuses on that which He intends, not the respective failings of the individual under consideration (Gen. 8:1; 19:29; 30:22). But though God at all times remembers His faithful ones, He expects them to remember His most excellent love and grace. In particular, He commanded the children of Israel "to remember [*zakar*]" all that He had done for them in their deliverance from Egyptian bondage (Deut. 24:18). We likewise must do the same, always remembering that "in time past" we were "Gentiles in the flesh" and "were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise . . . but now in Christ Jesus . . . are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:11-13).

With such a calamity unfolding, she brought her former sins to remembrance. Such a dramatic event focused her mind on her past sins and her previous way of life. Yet she was about

to learn that sin is not always the immediate cause of suffering (Jno. 9:3; Heb. 12:7-11). She firmly believed that the death of her son was a penalty for her former sin, and that he had been taken as the price. But this was a major misinterpretation on her part, for every believer appreciates that atonement, a covering for sin (Rom. 4:7), can only be provided through the Lamb of God's offering, namely the Lord Jesus Christ (5:11). She would shortly learn the truth concerning this fundamental matter.

The lesson of accepting Divine providence and not opposing the hand of God is difficult to learn. However deep and painful their loss or affliction, true servants of God must learn to declare within their own heart, "I know, O LORD, that Thy judgments are right, and that Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Ps. 119:75). But what was to be learnt from the death of this boy? The widow would soon understand that "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God" (Jno. 11:4).

"He cried unto the LORD"

The woman had wrongly accused Elijah, so how did this man of God respond? The Spirit informs us that he simply replied with a few words: "Give me thy son" (1 Kgs. 17:19). This composure on the part of the prophet must have been comforting to the distressed woman. Surely a ray of hope must have gleamed within her. Yet he would have been well within his right to scold this woman for her harsh and unfair attack, to remind her of his stature in God's presence, of the numerous blessings he had wrought through his God. Instead he chose not to demonstrate the mind of the flesh but the mind of the spirit (Rom. 8:5), an exhortation for us to heed.

Elijah separated himself from the wailings of the woman, from an emotionally charged environment, and stood alone in quietness, just him, the dead son and his God in the loft of the widow's house, and "cried unto the LORD" (1 Kgs.

17:20). He could not emotionally remove himself from this domestic crisis, for he had been living with this little family, and would have developed strong feelings, even fatherly, for the lad, and would share in the grief and anguish of the widow.

This man of the wilderness, a man of harsh outlook and presence, was a man of "like passions as we are" (Jas. 5:17)—hot-tempered at times, yet when necessary soft and gentle. The intimate relationship he enjoyed with the God of Israel is illustrated by the way he humbly approached Him in prayer: "O LORD my God". The prophet directed his prayer to Yahweh, the One Who is described as "merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Ex. 34:6). Such an intimate expression in prayer was the culmination of a lifetime speaking and listening to his God, meditating upon that which had been spoken and contemplating that which he had experienced. Let us also likewise develop an intimate relationship with our God. He is our Father, we His children. But is it the "LORD my God", or merely the God of others?

Elijah does not hesitate to enquire of God as to whether He had "brought evil [ra'a'] upon the widow" (1 Kgs. 17:20). Elijah was repeating the words of Moses in Egypt: "Lord, wherefore hast Thou so evil entreated [ra'a'] this people? why is it that Thou hast sent me?" (Ex. 5:22). Moses was asking God why He had afflicted His beloved children, and suffered them to continue to be so afflicted. Is not this a sentiment we all occasionally wrestle with? Once we come into covenant relationship with the God of Israel, we often presume that our lives will be marked only by God's blessings. When troubles come we cry, "O Lord, why us?". But our Father is all-knowing, and uses a variety of means to try the faith and patience of His children, in order, ultimately, to fulfil His purpose, as Elijah and the woman were to discover.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

Elijah . . . took [the widow's son] from her bosom and . . . laid him on his own bed. In truth, it was not a time for teaching by words, but by deeds. And Elijah himself was deeply moved. These "many days" had been a happy, quiet resting time to him . . . as day by day he had been the dispenser of God's goodness to the widow and her household, and had watched the unfolding of her faith, it must have been a time of strengthening and joy to his heart . . . Elijah had to learn compassion in the house of the widow of Sarepta before he was sent to preach to his own people.

Alfred Edersheim, *Old Testament Bible History*