

Dear Friends,

Few Old Testament lessons captivate our minds like the lives of Elijah and Elisha. Our study passage for this week likely stands near the top of the list of memorable Old Testament lessons on life, especially life in faithful service to God through serving His people. The Lord sent one miracle to the mother of this lad when she bore him after years of being barren. He died in her arms, but some time later Elisha comforted her, and the Lord raised the lad back to life. When Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life," (John 11:25) He did not say, "I shall be the resurrection, and the life." He spoke to her of a present reality that she would soon witness in her brother's actual resurrection, despite being dead for at least four days.

Like Lazarus, this child restored to life would return to living his life, and he would eventually face death again. I wonder. Having briefly tasted the glory of the world to come, were both these men disappointed or frustrated to be brought back to this life for a season?

We have just completed a trying year, one unlike anything we've witnessed in our lifetime. We stand today at the beginning of a new year. People who spend too much of their time and mental/spiritual energy looking "Horizontally," looking at the problems, instead of looking up to our Problem Solver, will likely grieve that 2020 was one of the worst years of their life. Sandra and I have had more than one discussion recently. Despite the disruption and confusion of the year, we have experienced many blessings, as good and as encouraging as the pandemic and the social chaos was black. I wouldn't put 2020 high on that list of bad years at all. Do I pray for a better year in 2021? Yes I do. I especially pray for the vaccine to begin controlling the virus so that our churches can resume safe restoration of face-to-face gatherings and fellowship.

One thought to consider. What is "Church"? Is it the wood, bricks, and mortar of the building where we gather? If so, we haven't had "Church" in over ten months. However, if "Church" is the people and their function as believers who interact with each other, encourage each other, study their Bibles, and hear preaching, I suggest that we've been having "Church" all along, albeit with the deficit of personal gathering. Thank the Lord for each time we've been able to "Meet" and visit with each other by Zoom or other electronic media, we've been able to hear preaching by Zoom or by Facebook or similar media. Many of us have had more time than in recent years to study our Bibles. Have we spent that extra time with our Bibles?

The God who raised a child from death has no problem taking good care of His people through a pandemic or through any other trial we may face in this life. What a caring, gracious Savior we have!

God bless our New Year,

Joe Holder

A Prophet Prays—A Life Restored

And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed. He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord. And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands: and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. (2 Kings 4:32-35 KJV 1900)

Death is a frightening thing to contemplate. As much as we think believers should not fear death, Scripture reminds us that we live with that fear much of our lifetime. (Hebrews 2:14-15) Some 18 years ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Having lost my mother and several other dear people to cancer, I had prayed often to be delivered from that disease, but it knocked on my door and came into

my live with no invitation. As soon as possible, I made an appointment with a specialist surgeon. I saw him within a few days, but his schedule required me to wait just over 3 weeks for surgery. During that 3 weeks, try as I might, I lived almost constantly with the “Fear of death.” After the surgery, the Lord delivered me, but that 3 week memory will stick as long as I live. I’m old enough to know that far more of my life is behind me than before. I’d like to say that every time I ponder what lies ahead, including death, I anticipate it with no fear, but that is not the case. Hebrews 2:14-15 often reminds me and gives me comfort.

Normally, when we die, our bodies must wait for the Second Coming to be raised by the miracle of God’s loving grace. But Scripture records a few occasions when the Lord sent His loving miracle early to one particular child of His. They were revived to continue their lives here, likely with a different perspective than before the experience, and to face death a second time. Our study passage records one such rare event from the Old Testament.

We cannot doubt that the child was dead. Verse 20 in this chapter states that the child died in his mother’s lap. Our study text repeats the point. Modern man, especially folks who have a strong scientific background or bent, struggle with wrapping their minds around a literal bodily resurrection. The more they understand the intricate systems of the human body that all interact with each other to sustain life the more they struggle with the idea of those systems shutting down, shutting down completely, and for some length of time, but then being restored to their full function.

I recall many years ago, preaching the funeral of a relative. Another relative present was a medical doctor. When I mentioned the idea of a real, bodily resurrection, I saw his facial expression and body language. He just couldn’t accept the possibility. God transcends science and natural possibilities. Within the world of nature and the ordinary workings of nature, he was right. But the God who formed man, specifically all those intricate systems that must interact in order to sustain life, originally created that whole intricate first man from dust! And that God can raise the dead and restore them to life.

Elisha and this woman had an extended history. Through her kindness to Elisha, the Lord blessed her to bear a son when the natural process had failed. It was this “Miracle child” that now died! How tragic.

When Elisha heard the news, he went to the home. Even before praying, Elisha started to do some unusual things. An observer would immediately understand that, in Elisha’s mind, something was “Afoot.” No one would have expected a revival of the child. After all, he was dead, and, by this time, had been dead for some time.

In the midst of all the unusual preparations that Elisha implemented, our study passage tells us in the simplest way possible, he “...*prayed unto the Lord.*” What would soon occur was not by Elisha’s unusual preparations or Elisha’s power. This wise prophet fully understood that any good outcome to the tragic situation must be the Lord’s doing, not his. He trusted the Lord, and he prayed.

When we face intimidating situations that are clearly out of our control (COVID-19 is one such example), how do we respond? Do we immediately start doing what the Lord directs us to do, despite the people around us not understanding what we do or why? Do we immediately go to the Lord in prayer, and listen for His response? Or do we panic and forget the faith way? During the last almost ten months, I’ve seen quite a lot of both reactions. One path creates more trouble for us. It makes us more part of the problem than the solution. The other gives us peace through the storm and enables us to encourage others through the trial. It may not remove the storm, but our God gives us His peace through the storm, and He often sends His faith-walking people into the fray to comfort and encourage His people till the storm passes.

In over 65 years of ministry, I never missed more than two or three consecutive Sundays of church; a rare family vacation now and then, and illnesses along the way. At the beginning of March, 2020, I

could not have imagined missing church for ten months! Never! But it happened. When the news came that public meetings, including churches, were being closed, I started looking for ways to continue some form of preaching/teaching to our church. Instead of preaching one message a week to them, I started preaching two messages a week. And instead of only the folks at the church I serve hearing those messages, a significantly larger number of people started listening. ***What could have proved a tragic disaster turned into a blessing!*** We continue to pray for the Lord to bless the distribution and effectiveness of the vaccine, so that we can soon resume our church gatherings. So now we add prayers for the Lord's blessings on our resumption of gathering whenever that occurs, with the confidence that the Lord who blessed us through the pandemic shall also bless us to heal its wounds and restore His people to the collective blessings of face-to-face gatherings again.

It is interesting that the passage says nothing about the content of Elisha's prayer, only that he prayed. And perhaps that point may have its own instruction to us. When we face our calamities and disappointments, we need not play prayer games and recite memorized prayer forms. Just get on your knees and talk to the Lord. Thank Him for blessings past, present, and even future. And ask for His help and guidance in whatever course He may direct for how we deal with the present problem. I recall an interesting experience from my early childhood. In the church my parents attended in my childhood, there was an old man who was an elder. To my knowledge, he never pastored a church. From the times he spoke during my youth, one could understand why. His words were not edifying. However, he often included an unusual petition in his prayers, "Choose out our changes for us." That simple comment often caused me to ponder spiritual things; I thank him belatedly for it.

One lingering question lies at the heart of every answered prayer, both in the Bible record and from your personal experience. Does prayer change anything, even answered prayer? And ***every answered prayer quite clearly answers the question.*** I wonder, if you asked the mother of that young son who was restored to life after he literally died in her arms, how would she reply to the question? If you asked Peter after he stepped out of the boat into stormy waters, but then started sinking in doubt, how might he answer the question? The question grows far more out of bad philosophy than out of sound Biblical study. Perhaps the next time someone asks the question, we should reply with our own question, "If prayer changes nothing, why does the Bible teach us to pray, including multiple promises of answers that require change?" If prayer changes nothing, the Bible's repeated promise of changes in answer to prayer, and the numerous examples of actual change that occurred because of prayer renders the Bible an unreliable book that fails to teach us the truth about our God. He promises such change in His Book. His Book records multiple examples of prayer that dramatically changed people's lives, including a child being restored to life from death, so how can it then teach us that prayer changes nothing? Simply stated, it does not teach this idea, ever. The idea actually contradicts Scripture's repeated, consistent teaching. When the Lord makes a promise in Scripture to do something, or to change something, Scripture's record reports God's faithfulness in every example, no exceptions. I choose to believe my Bible and my God, not bad philosophical reasoning that rejects and contradicts God's clear teaching in His Book. We can take great comfort and encouragement from Jesus' words.

1. John 14:6, "*I am...the truth.*" Jesus not only said that He spoke truth, but that He is truth personified.
2. John 14:17. Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the "*Spirit of truth.*" He repeated this description in John 15:26 and 16:13.

The God who so describes Himself shall not, under any circumstance whatever speak or act deceitfully. He who is truth personified speaks only truth to His people. When my God says in His True Book that He shall hear ***and answer*** the prayers of His people, and when that Book reports multiple examples throughout its record of just such answers that dramatically change things, I can only believe that He fully demonstrates that He is faithful to His word and promise.

We have no Biblical information on why Elisha walked into the woman's home and immediately started doing things, as if he was preparing for some unusual event. We have no knowledge of the content of his prayer, only that he prayed. But we do have a powerful and encouraging Bible account of a son restored to life.

A proper study of Biblical prayer can be one of the strongest encouragements we ever experience to our faith. It nudges us, in the midst of life's greatest trial, even a pandemic, to look for blessings, not problems and troubles. And the Lord often sends more blessings in response to our prayers and our looking to Him for help.

After describing in rather painful details the problems we create for ourselves because of sin and pride, James offers a powerful encouragement, "***But he giveth more grace.***" (James 4:6A) Sinful man reacts in panic and pride to a mystery virus, "***But He giveth more grace.***" We chase our frustrations, becoming more the problem than the solution, "***But He giveth more grace.***" Relief shall come, and yet again, our gracious God shall "Give more grace!" Thank Him daily for His "More grace" supply to our need, ***for his delivering us from us!***

Elder Joe Holder