

Sermon 24, “The First Resurrection:” God’s Word and Messenger Vindicated, 1 Kings 17:17-24

Proposition: The first resurrection recorded in Scripture is a sign of the truth of God’s word and the identity of His prophet, and a demonstration of God’s trustworthiness and power over death.

- I. The First Step in God’s Self-Revelation: The Widow’s Child Dies (vv. 17-18)
- II. The Second Step in God’s Self-Revelation: The Widow’s Child Resurrected (vv. 19-23)
- III. God’s Revelation Embraced (v. 24)

In 1841, the Church of Scotland sent four ministers to Budapest, Hungary, as missionaries. One of these men was Dr. John Duncan, “Rabbi Duncan,” who formed a relationship with Israel Saphir, the most learned Jew in Hungary. Israel was 63, and he always brought his 11-year-old son Adolph to attend Duncan’s lectures. Duncan showed Israel and his son the harmony between the testaments, until one night, when praying before dinner, Adolph closed his prayer “In Jesus’ name.” This was an event insignificant in itself, but big with implications. The deal was done; the Saphirs left the synagogue, and so on. Their identity had changed.

Well, our story tonight follows a similar pattern. Here Elijah performs a sign, not for the purpose of proving God’s power, or for the purpose of comforting the widow directly, but for the purpose of vindicating the word of God and the messenger of God, vindicating God as the God who lives and gives life, and vindicating God’s word to a Gentile. Remember, the last chapter ended with Israel rejecting the word of God. This chapter ends with a Gentile embracing the word of God! Truly, our God works in mysterious ways. We see these truths in the one-two punch of God’s revelation. The first part of this revelation consists in the death of the widow’s son; the second, in his resurrection to new life. Finally, of course, the point of the sign is revealed in the widow’s words to Elijah: the point was to vindicate God’s word and prophet. So let’s get into the story.

I. The First Step in God’s Self-Revelation: The Widow’s Child Dies (vv. 17-18)

Basically, the point of this section is a micro-scale illustration of Paul’s teaching that “God has consigned all to disobedience that He might have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:32). Do you see it here? God had promised food to the widow for the remainder of the drought. Since she had submitted to the all-demanding call of God’s word on her life, she and her household were guaranteed protection from the drought that was ravaging the people and land around them.

Now, did the widow believe in God? At some level. Obviously, she believed in him enough to believe that He was responsible for the death of her son. And that death was something she was not happy about. God took her son’s life, and she knew it.

Notice something important here: Elijah doesn’t say, “Ma’am, God didn’t take your son. He would never do a thing like that.” The theodicy here is not an openness of God kind of

defense, or a free-will defense. We never see Elijah saying, “Ah, there you’re wrong. It was Satan who killed your son; God was doing all He could to keep him alive. He had to die because there is evil in the world.” No, the widow was correct that God had taken her child. But her theology was incorrect when she believed that it was a punishment for her sin. God took her son for the merciful purpose of vindicating His word to her.

At our church here, you shake the pastor’s hand on your way out. But at the church in which I grew up, our pastor stood at the door as a greeter. You shook the pastor’s hand on the way in, to take your seat. Going through a sinful period in my youth, I dreaded that time. Every Sunday, I felt like Pastor Thurston could look right through me and see my sin, and I knew that he was judging it whenever he saw it. Well, to this day I don’t know whether he saw my sin every time he looked at me, but I do know how I felt shaking his hand on my way in the door on those Sunday mornings. Well, that’s how this widow felt about Elijah. To her mind, this was a ploy to destroy her for her sins.

Notice two things: it wasn’t, and that’s how God works. He doesn’t smite people because they are worse than other people. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish, said Christ. Sure, there are signal judgments of God on notorious sinners. But the correct way to interpret disasters is not that God is out to get you, but rather that God is calling you to repentance. The same was true here. In softening her heart, in sensitizing her to her sin, God was preparing this woman to embrace the good news that His word is fully trustworthy. The death of her son was for the purpose of manifesting the works of God to her.

It’s safe to say that some of you feel like Pastor Allen can see right through you, can see your sin and guilt. I don’t know whether he can—but I promise you God can. I further promise you that a sensitivity to sin is a gift from God. It is a message to you telling to repent, telling you to embrace the promises of God who forgives sins. You have no need to feel guilty as you walk out the door after service and shake the pastor’s hand; what you need to do is take that guilt to God, and recognize that He has given you a pastor not so you can beat yourself up, but so that you can be redirected back to the right way.

Further, if you, like this widow, are angry at God for taking something--your child, your grandmother, your job, your retirement savings, your opportunity to go to college, even your ability to sleep at night or your vacation time--well then, I ask you: was this widow’s anger justified? Though we know she was right that God took her child, what was the purpose behind it? Why did He take her child? To glorify Himself and to vindicate His trustworthiness to her.

II. The Second Step in God’s Self-Revelation: The Widow’s Child Resurrected (vv. 19-23)

So how does Elijah respond to this woman’s anger? He takes the child, and he cries out to God. Why did he stretch himself on the child? Perhaps as a way of indicating that, if he could, he would communicate his own life to this child. Regardless, he prays to God for a resurrection.

Now, this chapter has so many threads that it’s hard to hold them all together. One thread is mission to the Gentiles. One thread is Israel’s excommunication. One thread is the polemic

against Baal-worship. One thread is prayer. The fattest thread is the word of God, and its eternal and unchangeable validity. All of these come together here. Remember, Elijah is in Sidon, the homeland of Baal. Baal claims to be the source of life; Yahweh declares that Baal cannot give life, and in fact that only He, Yahweh, can grant life. The battle is being played out on a planetary scale, as the heavens proclaim the wrath of God. Now, it is played out once again on an intimate, domestic scale, as this Sidonian boy dies. Once again the question comes to the fore: who has the power to grant life--God, or Baal?

Further, this verse reveals the crisis as it came to Elijah. He had been staying with this widow for months or even years. She knew that Yahweh was his God, and that Yahweh had the power to take life. But to a polytheist, such admissions are easy. Yahweh is another god, alongside Baal and Asherah and all the rest of them. So the sudden crisis, as it confronts Elijah, is the realization that God's virtual promise to sustain the widow's household has been called into serious question by this death. Suddenly, God has been called on the carpet. Is He any more trustworthy than Baal? Can His word be relied on? Suddenly, Elijah is forced to vindicate God's word, and himself as God's messenger, to this woman.

So what does he do? What does the great prophet do? God's reputation as the giver of life is at stake. God's reputation as a trustworthy deity is at stake. Elijah's status as God's messenger is at stake. So Elijah prays. He casts himself on his face before God, and then he prays for something unheard-of: a resurrection. This is the first resurrection in all of Scripture. And God came through for Elijah. He proved Himself to this woman. Suddenly, it is revealed why He took her son from her: so that He could be revealed as Yahweh who raises the dead, Yahweh who has power where Baal does not, Yahweh who always keeps His word.

Just as a side note, even without the arguments from silence that I mentioned earlier, this chapter puts the nail in the coffin of all openness of God and cosmic conflict theodicies. Even if all human tragedy is a result of Satan's work, even the limited God of the Open Theists can still raise the dead. The fact that He doesn't shows that in some sense, He is willing to let tragedies happen in this world.

God vindicated Himself: "See, your son lives!"

In this chapter, we see God's work of creation in the drought, His providence in sustaining Elijah, and His redemption in the extension of the word of God outside Israel. We see that He is greater than all false gods, and that His power is accessible to prayer. The era of miracles is over, in general. But on the mission field, and in places where the word of God is coming for the first time, I have heard too many stories to not believe that God still responds to the faith-driven prayers of His people. If the spread of His Kingdom depends on a miracle, that miracle will be forthcoming. But again, we must leave it up to God to vindicate Himself on His own terms. God backed Elijah into this corner. God gave the promise of miraculous provision. God sent him to Sidon. God took the widow's son. And God made it very clear that He was relying on Elijah to vindicate Him.

In effect, God forced the prophet to reach out to this Sidonian. How different is the NT dispensation, in which Christ deliberately reached out and calls us to reach out! Do you see the missionary focus here?

III. God's Revelation Embraced (v. 24)

But vindicate Himself, and His prophet, He did. He showed only too clearly that Elijah was His messenger and His word was true. Notice that the woman didn't get hung up on the sign. This resurrection was important, but it wasn't everything. It was a temporary reversal of death. And so the woman doesn't say, "Now I know that you can raise the dead. You know, would you please bring back my late husband? He was a great guy. Could you please restore my parents?" And so on. We all have a dozen departed loved ones we would love to see again. But the woman doesn't go there; she goes straight to the thing signified: now she knows that the word of the Lord is true.

Notice how Israel failed to make the jump from the sign to the thing signified. Israel was in the grip of a crippling drought. God had announced that this drought signified His wrath over the broken covenant. But Israel refused to trust His word. They stopped at the sign. Not this Sidonian widow; she saw the sign, and knew that the sign pointed to the trustworthiness of the word.

"With prophetic power she announces to all generations: 'The Word of the Lord is greater than any sign, and the dispensation of that Word *without* miraculous signs is greater than the dispensation of the miraculous signs intended to lead us to that Word.'" This greater dispensation still demands our recognition today."³

Do you see it, brothers and sisters? The fact that Pastor Allen stands up here and preaches to us is greater than if he had performed resurrections at the last four funerals in this church. Do you regard God's word and God's messenger as truth, as being reliable? Do you organize your life by the Word of God says? Do you adjust your schedule so you can hear it proclaimed? When you read it, do you take time to think about what you read? Remember, at the end of the last chapter Israel rejected the word. Here, a Gentile embraces it.

Every word of God proves true. He is greater than Baal, greater than miracles, signs, and wonders. He is a shield to all those who take refuge in Him.

³ Van't Veer, *My God Is Yahweh*, 134.