

2 KINGS 4:8-37

II

Listen to this blurb from a book published in the last few years:

*If you have ever asked, “Why do people have to die?” then this book is for you. The answer is that no, death is not necessary, inevitable, or good. In fact, death is wrong. Death is the enemy of us all, to be fought with medicine, science, and technology. If you have ever thought that death is unjust and should be defeated, you are not alone. This book is here to show you that, no matter who you are and what you can do, there is always a way for **you** to help in humanity’s struggle against death.*

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Have a guess... Is that from a book you’d find in the *science fiction* section of the book store? Or maybe you’d find it in the very niche section of *advanced medical textbooks* for scientific researchers?

Actually, you’d find it in the children’s picture book section. It’s from a *kid’s book*, titled “Death is Wrong” and ‘Psychology Today’ magazine recommends it to parents around the world.

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Well, where do you start? Death *itself* is horrific enough, but coming in at a close second is the thought that *anyone* would burden *children* with the *impossible* task

of growing up to win ‘the war on death.’

It’s a desperately hopeless approach, isn’t it? Looking for the solution to death in humanity, is like looking for the cure to cancer in a tumor. How could anyone come to the conclusion that we—a dying humanity—can beat death ourselves? Surely the answer has to come from outside of us.

II

I suppose the one thing we can *all* agree that this children’s book gets right, is that death **is wrong**. It just *is*! Death *is* wrong. We all instinctively know it to be true (don’t we?) In Ecclesiastes 3:11 we read that: **God has set *eternity* on our hearts.**

We all seem to instinctively know that a still heart and a breathless body is wrong; that there’s something more; something we can’t see; something we can only look forward to by faith.

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With sorrow, we know the wrongness of death when we mourn the death of a loved one, and with dread we know it in our minds when we consider our own mortality. Death is (rightly) feared by many. It’s a terrifying thought to all who live, and (in Hebrews 2) the Lord Jesus is presented to us as having taken on our frail humanity *specifically* so that: **by *his* death, he may free those, who all their lives, were *enslaved* to their *fear* of death.**

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And, so then, what's the answer to our problem of death?...

Is the universal, age-old problem of death going to be solved once and for all?...

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2 Kings 4, verses 8 to 37 is a bit of an unusual passage for Resurrection Sunday, but by us simply *hearing* and *feeling* this true story and by having *it* grip *us*, I'm confident that we won't be able to come away from this passage **not** adoring Jesus in our hearts, and clinging to him by faith!

II

Last Sunday, we spent some time submerging ourselves in the world of 2 Kings. It's a spiritually dark world with Israel's final judgement for their sin just a few pages over. God's faithful people are a small remnant, but God is not about to abandon them and toss them out with the idolaters. No, the miraculous *love* of God... for the *people* of God... is here through the *man* of God, Elisha!

Last week we met a *poor* woman *with* sons. This week we meet a *wealthy* woman with *no* son. God's impartial love extends to them both!

II

Please turn with me (either in your Bibles, or to page 9 of your order of service) to 2 Kings 4, beginning in verse 8.

Here we see that: **A SON IS GIVEN FOR KINDNESS SHOWN TO THE MAN OF GOD.**

Verse 8,

⁸ One day Elisha went to Shunem (in Israel). And a *well-to-do* woman was there, who *urged* him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. ⁹ She said to her husband, “I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. ¹⁰ Let’s make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.” (She shows kindness to Elisha, the man of God, by extending her home upwards with a room for him on her roof!)

¹¹ One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. ¹² He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite.” So he called her, and she stood before him. ¹³ Elisha said to him, “Tell her, ‘You have gone to all this trouble for *us*. Now what can be done for *you*? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?’” (Elisha’s asking, “Can we pull some strings with the big wigs for you?”)

She replied, “I have a home among my own people.” (“I’m content here” she says).

¹⁴ “**What** can be **done** for her?” Elisha asked. (He’s not giving up!)

Gehazi said, “She has no *son*, and her *husband* is *old*.” (And as we saw last week, this is a serious problem in her world. No male heir and an ageing husband means she’s soon to be left to fend for herself).

¹⁵ Then Elisha said, “Call her.” So he called her, and she stood in the doorway.

¹⁶ “About *this time next year*,” Elisha said, “you will hold a *son* in your arms.”

“**No**, my lord!” she objected. “**Please**, man of God, *don’t mislead* your servant!”

¹⁷ But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

II

A son! After all these years! A son to take her husband’s place when he’s gone. A son to carry on the family name! A son to care for her in her old age! And (just as with those *today* who yearn to be parents) a baby son simply to enjoy, to hold, to nurse, and to love.

Her objection to the promise of a son in verse 16 is one that reveals what a huge thing this is for her! “**No**, my lord!” she objected. “**Please**, man of God, *don’t mislead* your servant!” That is: “*Don’t even say it, Elisha! Don’t you say it! I couldn’t bear it if you’re messing with me!*”

But he isn’t messing with her. I wonder what that experience must have been like for this well-to-do woman. The man of God she’s showed kindness to has simply spoken a promise that she’ll be a mum and have a son. And then the first bout of morning sickness hit a few months later... and then the first kicks... and then the first contractions... and then (verse 17) *she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.*

II

But, as is the case in this badly broken and sin-cursed world, death can strike in those tragic of ways. Next, we watch helplessly as **A SON IS TRAGICALLY TAKEN BY DEATH.**

Verse 18,

¹⁸The child *grew*, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers.

¹⁹He said to his father, “***My head! My head!***”

His father told a servant, “Carry him to his mother.” ²⁰After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. ²¹She went up and laid him on the *bed* of the *man of God*, then shut the door and went out.

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This miraculous son is so tragically short lived. He goes to work out on the fields with his dad, he clutches his head and screams in pain. A servant rushes him to his mother; the mum who so badly longed for a son she couldn't bear the thought of being misled on the matter... and at noon... he dies in her arms.

II

Are you angry?... Has the *wrongness* of death hit you?... The saying goes that no parent should have to bury their child, and we totally understand that sentiment, don't we?

When it comes to helping us feel the *tragedy* of death and the sheer *wrongness* of death, this story hasn't aged *one bit*, has it? This *ancient* story so powerfully impacts on us the timeless problem of death, and the deep anguish it causes.

As the story goes, the son's life is tragically short, isn't it? His life is all of three verses long. He grew... went to work with his dad... experienced severe head pain... was taken back to his mum... died in her arms by noon.

II

Brothers and sisters, I wonder if, when fellow believers are hit with the anguish of a death of a loved one, we sometimes think we're supposed to have perfect words of comfort, or a perfect embrace to ease the pain, or a perfect prayer that stops the tears... But perhaps, at a time like this, if we were sat next to this distraught woman, the best thing we could do, is say nothing, and for a moment even pray nothing, and simply weep with those who weep...

Death is wrong, it inflicts pain and fear like no other thing can, and everyone who's sat next to someone in the anguish of grief *knows* how *powerless* we are to 'fix' the problem.

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This mum knows that herself. Notice what she does with the body of her dead son in verse 21; she hides him up in the room she'd had built for Elisha, **and laid him on the *bed* of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.**

*That's a strange thing to do; what has she got in mind, here?... Maybe she'd heard about a *strangely similar* situation that had happened some years before with **Elijah**, Elisha's predecessor. (You might remember that Callula read that for us just two Sunday's ago from 1 Kings 17. There, the God of Israel gave life back to a dead son in the upper room of the prophet. Perhaps this mum is trusting for God to do the same again).*

Well, we aren't left questioning for long, because it becomes absolutely clear as we read on. *Watch this and learn!* **IN THE BITTER DISTRESS OF DEATH, A MUM CLINGS TO THE MAN OF GOD.**

II

²² She called her husband and said, "Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to *the man of God* **quickly** and return."

²³ "*Why go to him today?*" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath." ("What's the *hurry*," he's asking, "It's not the *usual* day we go to see Elisha and the prophets"... Her husband isn't being callous; I just think he's unaware of the situation; she can't bear to tell him the news. And maybe she already holds out hope that she doesn't have to? Maybe the man of God can do something?)

Verse 23,

²³ "*Why go to him today?*" he asked. "It's not the New Moon or the Sabbath."

"That's all right," she said.

²⁴ She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “*Lead on; **don’t** slow down for me unless I tell you.*” ²⁵ So she set out and came to *the man of God* at Mount Carmel. (She goes as *fast* as she *can* on this forty kilometre journey to Elisha).

When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, “*Look! There’s the Shunammite!*” ²⁶ **Run** to meet her and ask her, ‘Are you all right? Is *your* husband all right? Is your **child** all right?’”

“Everything is all right,” she said. (But it *isn’t*. But it’s not Gehazi she needs; it’s the *man of God*, Elisha, and she’ll settle for *no one* else but *him*).

²⁷ When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she **took hold** of his **feet**. (This well-to-do woman *throws* herself down before Elisha). Gehazi came over to *push* her away, but the man of God said, “**Leave** her **alone!** She is in *bitter distress*, but the LORD has *hidden* it from me and has *not* told me *why*.”

²⁸ “Did I *ask* you for a son, my lord?” she said. “*Didn’t* I tell you, ‘*Don’t* raise my *hopes*?’” (It seems *that’s* all Elisha needs to hear. It’s no longer hidden from him).

²⁹ Elisha said to Gehazi, “*Tuck* your *cloak* into your *belt*, *take* my *staff* in your *hand* and **run**. **Don’t** greet **anyone** you meet, and if **anyone** greets **you**, **do not** answer. Lay my *staff* on the boy’s *face*.”

³⁰ But the child’s mother said, “As surely as *the LORD* lives and as *you* live, **I will not leave you.**” So he got up and followed her.

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.”

II

This is a woman who is on a *mission* to fall at the feet of the *man of God*. She's had her hopes *firmly* set on Elisha from the *moment* she laid her dead son on his bed, to when she **raced** to Elisha *forty kilometres* away, to when she brushed off Gehazi because she knew it was Elisha she needed, to when she fell at Elisha's feet, to when Elisha suggests sending his *staff* with Gehazi but she insists that, **no; he, Elisha**, must **personally** accompany her back to her dead son.

II

Does that *surprise* you, brothers and sisters?...

If her son, who was *given* through the word of the *man of God*, is only given to be *taken* so tragically by *death*, what sense is there in going back to that same man of God?...

Yes, we **know** this world is broken and sin-cursed, and we know that death comes for us all, but what kind of **cruel providence** is going on here?...

Brothers and sisters, what do we do when the good gift of a baby is given, only to not go full term?... Who do we go to when a long-awaited adoption order is given, only to be revoked in the final days?... Where do we go when it's God's amazing kindnesses through which anguish enters our lives?...

Bible scholar, Dale Ralph Davis, looks to the example of the woman in our passage and answers that weighty question like this:

*“Where can she go? Only to the same God who has perplexed her—there **is** no one else to whom she can go. What can you do when God’s mercy has turned to malice? Take the bitter distress and, in it, keep clutching at the God you don’t understand. We have a word for that: **faith.**”*

II

Well, Gehazi has raced on ahead, and while Elisha and the woman are still returning, he explains to them the staff has had no effect. Laying Elisha’s staff on the boy’s face hasn’t worked any power over death. Maybe Elisha was thinking about previous times in the history of Israel when a prophet’s staff had been a means of God’s miraculous love? But not this time, and not in the hand of Gehazi.

And so Elisha reaches the woman’s house. Death has come to take in residence in the man of God’s room. Her son is laying lifeless and *has* been now for *some time*. But, by the miraculous love of God, this woman’s faith is not put to shame! **A SON IS GIVEN (AGAIN) THROUGH THE LIFE OF THE MAN OF GOD.**

Verse 32,

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. (Another miracle behind closed doors like last week?... Let’s find out)... 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.

II

There are some surprising details here (like the seven sneezes, for example!) but the point is wonderfully clear! It’s *not* a *servant* of the man of God with the *staff* of the man of God that brings life to the dead; it’s ***the*** man of God ***himself***, in the *flesh*!

Death has come into *Elisha’s room*. But he doesn’t stand in the corner and *cower* at the dead boy on his bed. He doesn’t *recoil* at the *impossible* situation before him. No, he shuts the door, prays in trust to the *Almighty LORD God of life*, and stretches himself out on the dead boy’s cold body. And it grows *warm*!

He does it a *second* time, and the boy is *restored to life*!

II

Did you pick up the imagery of this surprising scene? ***Mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands***. Elisha is laying his *life* as though a *mirror* to the *boy’s*. It’s as though it’s Elisha’s *own* life ***through*** which God gives life to the dead boy on his bed! In this moment, Elisha has truly embodied the meaning of his own name: ***“God saves!”***

And in the beautiful closing scenes, Elisha hands the boy back to his mum! Filled with *wonder* and *joy* she does *exactly* what she’d done before; she falls at the man

of God's feet! Both in her desperation of faith, *and* in her rejoicing of sight, she knows the right place and posture: to be bowed to the ground at the feet of the man of God!

II II II

Centuries later, Jesus (or 'Yeshua,' meaning "*the LORD saves!*") would be walking into a village called Nain, *just* over the hill from Shunem. A grieving mum accompanied by mourners would come towards him with the body of her dead son stretched out on a bier for burial. And *this* man of God, this **God-man** (**God** in the **flesh**) would look on her in compassion, and he'd say to her "Don't cry."

Simply by his word, he would tell the young man to *get up*. *The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him **back** to his **mother**...*

But this was no miracle behind closed doors! A *watching crowd* were *filled* with awe and *praised* God saying, "*A great prophet has appeared among us. **God** has **come** to **help** his **people**.*"

II II II

*Death is not necessary, inevitable, or good. In fact, death is wrong. Death is the enemy of us all, to be fought with medicine, science, and technology. If you have ever thought that death is unjust and should be defeated, you are not alone. This book is here to show you that, no matter who you are and what you can do, there is always a way for **you** to help in humanity's struggle against death.*

II

Friends, there is *one* hope and one hope *only* in death, and it *isn't us*. Death is simply the wages every sinner has earned for themselves. We saw that just a few weeks back in Psalm 90. Do you remember the Psalm of Moses? Even for redeemed Israel it was still the case that:

You (LORD God) have set our *iniquities* before you,
 our *secret sins* in the light of your *presence*.
 All our days *pass away* under your *wrath*;
 we *finish* our *years* with a *moan*.

II II

Every single one of us will experience the deep anguish of death, the acute awareness of its wrongness, and our terrifying helplessness in its grip.

What can we say in the bitter distress of death?... Honestly, what hopeful thing can we really say in the bitter distress of death?...

Just this:

*“I know the man of God, **Yeshua!**... I know **Jesus**... He’s my *friend*... He’s been *welcome* in my *home*... I have *thrown* myself at his *feet*... and he has *fled* to my *aid*” ...*

*“He has *died* for my *sins* on the cross... He has been *raised again* for my *eternal life*... **I am helpless** in death, but *in him* is **life!**... and **I** am found *in him!*”*

II

Friends, **IN THE BITTER DISTRESS OF DEATH, *CLING BY FAITH TO JESUS WHO IS OUR RESURRECTION LIFE!***

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Our hope in death *isn't* found in *ways* and *means*; not in a *servant* or a *staff*... Our hope in death is found in *Christ alone*, our God, in whom is everlasting life, and who has personally come to our aid! **IN THE BITTER DISTRESS OF DEATH, CLING BY FAITH TO *JESUS WHO IS, HIMSELF, OUR RESURRECTION LIFE!***

II

Happy Easter, brothers and sisters! *He is **risen!***