

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Important Numbers in Scripture: Number 8

This morning's talk is the second in the series entitled "Important Numbers in Scripture", and will deal with the number 8. We learned last week that perfection, or completeness, is the general character of the number seven. Consequently, our number eight, being the first number of the next series, introduces that which is new, or signifies a new beginning. For example, in 2 Peter 2:5 we read: "And [God] spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly."

Noah was a faithful man who found grace in the eyes of the Lord and it was he, called in this verse the eighth person, who stepped out of the ark into a world where sin had been judged. In other words he was given the chance to begin again. This thought is emphasised still further in the flood event as we can read in 1 Peter 3:20, where it states that eight souls were saved by residing in the ark. These emerged from the ark and, immediately, offered a burnt offering to God, the first mention of the burnt offering in Scripture, demonstrating again the thought of a new beginning on a cleansed earth.

There are many interesting groups of eight in the Scriptures, such as the eight songs that we find in the Old Testament. These are:

- The Song of Redemption (Exodus 15),
- The Song of Israel at the Well (Numbers 21),
- The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32),
- The Song of Deborah (Judges 5),
- The Song of David (2 Samuel 22),
- The Song of Songs (Song of Solomon),
- The Song of the Beloved (Isaiah 5); and
- The Song of Judah (Isaiah 26).

If we turn to the two books of the Kings, where Elijah's life appears, we can find eight miracles performed by that prophet. They include three cases of causing fire to fall from heaven, and one of making rain to fall upon the earth. The other four were multiplying the widow's meal, raising her son to life, dividing the waters of the River Jordan and causing a severe drought.

An additional, yet associated, meaning for 'eight', especially when it is used in the phrase 'eighth day', is that of resurrection which is obviously a new beginning. It is important for us to realise that resurrection always refers to the raising of the body out of death. It is the moment when the soul is re-united with the raised body. If we search through the Bible, we will find mention of another group of eight, this time it is eight persons who were raised from the dead and I wish to concentrate upon these for the rest of this morning's programme.

If we look at the group as a whole we shall notice, as we examine the passages of Scripture that contain the accounts of these resurrections, that three are from the Old Testament, three from the Gospels and two from the Acts of the Apostles. Obviously the persons that were raised died again. We know that only One ever left the grave never to return and He was the Lord Jesus. Interestingly, the resurrections in the Old Testament are strongly linked to those in the Gospels. There were two widow's sons raised. The first was that of the widow in 1 Kings 17:17-25. The other was the widow of Nain in Luke 7. There were two children raised who were from a wealthy home. They were the son of the woman of Shunem in 2 Kings 4, and the daughter of Jairus, recorded in Mark 5.

We shall briefly study the Old Testament incidents of resurrection. The first one is in 1 Kings 17. Here, Elijah seeks lodgings with a widow in a city of Sidon and asks her for a drink of water. We pick up the story in verses 11 and 12. "And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. And she said, As the LORD thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

From this passage, I want to point out that the widow was facing death by starvation when Elijah arrived. The following verses tell how their lives were preserved through the intervention of Elijah's God, only for the son to die of an unnamed illness. Verse 18 gives us the widow's response: "And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?"

From verse 20 it is obvious that Elijah was puzzled as to the reason for this calamity, but he still trusted in his God. Verse 22 states triumphantly: "And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived." Besides the obvious lesson from this passage, that our God is not only the God of the living, and the God of resurrection, we also learn that Gentiles could taste of God's goodness.

The next example of a person being raised from the dead can be found in 2 Kings 4. Here again the faith of a prophet in Yahweh is tested, though this time the prophet is Elisha. Verse 33 recounts his response: "He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the LORD."

The following verses show that he had the secret of the Lord, in addition to having learned prophetic symbolic actions from his mentor, Elijah. The result must have been an increased maturity in the faith of the prophet and the Shunammite woman. It is also important for us to notice how Elisha involved Gehazi in the miracle. Elisha was seeking to advance the servant in the knowledge of God. Gehazi had the outward symbols of the prophet's office yet lacked the power. Sadly, as we see from chapter 5, though we have not the time to read it this morning, Gehazi did not profit in a moral and spiritual sense from his time with Elisha. That can be a warning to us that time spent in a Christian atmosphere will not benefit us one iota unless it is accompanied by genuine faith.

We have not the time to deal in detail with the last example in the Old Testament concerning resurrection. It can be found in 2 Kings 13:20-21. All I wish to say about this is that it demonstrates that the power of Elisha's God was available for the people of Israel if only they remained true to their God. One commentator has suggested that this incident was meant as a divinely intended sign to Jehoash, the king, and all Israel: God was the God of the living, not the dead. It was meant to indicate that the LORD'S power was not only for Elisha and the man who had been restored to life, but for the people of God as a whole.

We now move on to the New Testament to view the five incidents there which make up the eight examples of resurrection in Scripture. We shall consider first the raising of the Widow of Nain's son, recorded in Luke 7. I shall read verses 13 to 15: "And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother."

This event brings before us the awesome power of the Lord as He ministered with tender loving kindness in a world that is often marked with heartache and sadness. The mourners, who no doubt led the funeral procession through the town of Nain, felt sympathy for the plight of the bereaved widow, yet were helpless in the presence of death. The widow's future was, quite probably, one of destitution or, at the very least, considerably reduced circumstances. When He, who is the Resurrection and the Life, met death, in the form of the widow's son, there could only be one result. Jesus' power must predominate. This was no automatic, unfeeling, response however, because the King James Version states that the Lord had compassion upon her. The New International Version translates this as: "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, 'Don't cry.'"

How keenly the Lord Jesus felt the sorrow and sadness that was manifest in those days. We believe that He is still the Friend of sinners; that He still desires to bless each one of us.

From the verses that we read regarding this miracle we must also notice that Jesus exposed Himself to ritual defilement when he touched the bier. It must also have seemed a foolish thing to witness a person stopping a funeral procession to speak to a corpse. As we have seen, the power of God was manifested in the action of the Lord and resulted in restoration of the widow's son and, if we had read Luke 7:16, praise unto God, and recognition of the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus. The question must come before us, even as we read these things this morning, as to whether we believe in Jesus. Are we convinced in our hearts that He is the triumphant, powerful Son of God, risen from amongst the dead, who gives to His followers eternal life?

The next of these miracles can be found in Luke 8. This time it is a little girl, the daughter of Jairus, who was raised. When Jesus was first contacted, the girl was still living, though seriously ill. Due to Jesus being delayed by healing a sick woman, a message was sent to the Lord not to bother as the girl had died. This attitude is typical of us in our day. Where there is life there is hope. Death is the end and can't be beaten, so many think. When we move onto the ground where faith is present, then things are much different. This is pointed out to us in verse 50, where it states that Jesus said, "Fear not: believe only, and she shall be made whole." Even then there were others who thought they knew better, as verses 52 and 53 inform us: "And all wept, and bewailed her: but he said, Weep not; she is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn, knowing that she was dead."

If there was one thing they did know it was that the young girl was dead. They knew the signs of death and, without a doubt, that girl was dead.

Once again we need to be reminded of the human tragedy involved in this incident. She was the only daughter of the household and, at twelve years of age, was standing on the threshold of adult life. Jairus seems to have been a well-to-do man with influence, riches and prestige. None of this availed him when death invaded his circumstances and robbed him of the daughter he loved so deeply. At a time when Jesus was becoming unwelcome in some synagogues, Jairus was willing to bury any prejudice and invite Jesus into his home to cure his child. We must also follow the example of Jairus and commit our times unto the Lord, whether they are pleasing or painful, dark or bright. We live by faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

Our sixth miracle of resurrection is found in John 11. This time it is Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha, who hears the command of the Lord to come out of the tomb.

I can never really understand why some expositors of Scripture have difficulty believing that God can raise people from the dead. They dismiss the Old Testament examples that we have studied as 'myth'. The two New Testament miracles that we have just looked at are considered to be people in comas. Lazarus can never be considered as being in a coma, because the Scripture states that he had been in the grave for four days. To get over the difficulty, the unbelieving students of the Bible state that the story is an allegory. I am persuaded that, if by the grace of God I am brought to faith in Christ, believing that He is God incarnate, then the fact of raising a corpse from the grave pales into insignificance with my belief that Jesus is God.

This is the last of the seven signs of John's Gospel and emphasises His divine power over the last and chief enemy, that is, death itself. From verse 6, we notice that the Lord delayed His departure for two days even though He knew that Lazarus was very ill. It is as if the visit to Bethany was delayed on purpose, though perhaps we ought to read verses 5 to 6 to set the story in its context. "Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick. When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When he heard that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was."

How precious it is to note that the sisters were aware of the Lord's love for Lazarus. This was sufficient for them to believe that He would return to Bethany and help them, despite the danger that awaited Him in the region near to Jerusalem. Are we aware of the Lord's great love for us? The delay in answering the sister's request might have puzzled them. Sometimes, we too are puzzled and uncertain when our requests are not answered straightaway. We should be content to commit events and worries to the Lord, although that is easier said than done. The disciples, too, had their worries when the Lord Jesus stated that they were going back to Judaea. Anywhere but Judaea was, probably, their wish. We are often so like them!

There is a hymn, which used to be sung more than it is today, with the following chorus:

*"Follow! Follow! I would follow Jesus!
Anywhere, everywhere, I would follow on!
Follow! Follow! I would follow Jesus!
Everywhere He leads me I would follow on."*

Such an attitude is also easier to sing about than to do. If we are followers of the Lord Jesus, however, it is incumbent upon us to follow Him wherever He leads, as the disciples did in the story we are studying.

Further education awaited the disciples, as we see from verses 14 and 15: "Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent that you may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him."

The immensity of the power involved in raising Lazarus would further confirm the faith of the disciples, and the sisters of Bethany. Martha believed that the power of the resurrection would be demonstrated in her brother on a future day, as we can read in verse 24. The important lesson that she had to learn was that the One with power of the new life stood before her. It is important for us to realise that the doctrine of the resurrection, indeed all the doctrines and dogmas, find their reality in Christ. He is the sum of all our beliefs and teachings. If our belief and trust is not in Him, our teachings and doctrines are empty of power and meaning.

We finish our glance at this miracle by a consideration of the words used to describe the Lord's reaction when the weeping and grieving Mary arrived. Verse 33 states that he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled. Verse 35 states simply that "Jesus wept". These reveal to us something of the depth of compassion and pity that filled the heart of the

Lord. He was no automaton. Rather, He was expressing the common grief over the death of His friend. Perhaps there was also an expression of sadness at the work of the enemy of souls, the one who had the power of death. We know that the moment was near when the prince of the power of the air would be destroyed. Let us, who believe in the Lord Jesus, live our lives as those who have been delivered from the power of the evil one.

We must now quickly look at the two remaining resurrection miracles in the Scriptures. The first of these is found in Acts 9 and concerns Dorcas, or Tabitha, as she is alternatively known. There is just one element of this story that I want to focus on, and it is found in verse 36: "... this woman was full of good works and alms deeds which she did."

Because the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith, it is possible for some to denigrate good works as though it is a bad thing to go around doing good. Of course, if we try to put our goodness in place of the perfect work of Christ, and to rely upon our own effort to gain peace with God, then we are on the wrong track altogether. If, however, we are disciples, as was Dorcas, then we have to do those things that are good, for, after all, the Lord went about doing good and as He acted so should we.

The last of the eight resurrection stories concerns the Apostle Paul. It is recounted in Acts 20:9-10. The context has Paul preaching at some considerable length. "And there sat in a window a certain young man named Eutychus, being fallen into a deep sleep: and as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead. And Paul went down, and fell on him, and embracing him said, Trouble not yourselves; for his life is in him."

If we had started reading a few verses earlier, we would have noticed that the narrator of the Acts joins the missionary party for the journey to Troas, which is where the incident took place. My point is that the story, as it is recorded, is full of signs that it was written by an eyewitness. Luke, himself, witnessed the raising of Eutychus and recounts for us almost every detail of the scene. We can see the beloved apostle to the Gentiles moving down the stairs to restore the young man to life. They had earlier been celebrating the death of the Lord by breaking bread together; now Paul demonstrates the power of the risen Christ by this miracle of restoration.

We began this morning by referring to the thought that the number eight, in Scripture, can refer to a new beginning. We have briefly examined the eight resurrection incidents recorded for us in the Bible. How precious that, through belief in the Lord Jesus, we are brought into the new life that teems with resurrection blessing, and are filled with divine energy that can, through grace, overflow to those around. May such a life mark each one of us.

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