

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible and Miracles: Elisha and the Shunammite Woman

“The Useless Staff and the Seven Sneezes.” You might think that is not very promising material as the subject for our Sunday morning meditation, but if I were asked to write a title over my remarks today, this is what it would be. The passage of Scripture for our consideration is 2 Kings 4:8-37.

The Useless Staff and the Seven Sneezes are but two factors in this incident, which is indeed full of instruction. Who are the characters that we have before us? Well, we have a dead child - there is no doubt about it. Many of our clever theologians, both past and present, do all that they can to reason away the miracles of Scripture, but here, in verse 20, the Spirit of God definitely tells us that he - that is the child - sat on his mother's knee till noon and then he died. That is plain enough. Then we have the mother, who wants him back - very naturally, he was her only son, his very birth had been a miracle and she loved him dearly. And then last of all we have the prophet of God - Elisha. The great issue in this story, and the one from which we most certainly can profit, is the matter of the raising to life of the dead. When the Lord Jesus sent out his twelve disciples on their preaching tour, one of the things he commanded them to do was to raise the dead. No doubt, that was a literal and a physical raising of the dead. The Lord Himself raised the dead and no doubt in those early days these wonderful miracles were permitted in order to demonstrate the authority of those performing them and that what they were doing was by divine power.

Today I believe that commission still holds, although in a different way. Today it is to be applied spiritually and those who seek to proclaim the Word of Life; they are, under the hand of the Lord, instrumental in raising to life persons - not physically but spiritually. If you read through the New Testament, and particularly in the writings of John, you will find that there is an accent on the subject of life. For example, in John 10:10, the Lord Jesus says: “I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly.” Then in John 5:24 again Jesus is speaking: “Verily, verily I say unto you, he that heareth my word and believeth on Him that sent me, hath everlasting life and shall not come into judgement, but is passed from death unto life.” This verse also brings in the subject of death, and so demonstrates that the Lord is not talking simply about physical life and physical death, but that which applies to eternity - “The soul that sins dies” says the Scripture, but whosoever believes on the Lord Jesus shall live.

The first thing that I notice about this mother is that she was a woman of faith. In the great chapter of faith, Hebrews 11, we read of women who received their dead raised to life again, and here in this Shunammite woman we have an example of that. Immediately that she realises that her son has died, she has recourse to Elisha. After all, it was through the intervention of Elisha with God that she had been given this child and now in her extremity she resorts to him. Without mentioning the loss, she asks her husband for the necessary means to make the journey to Mount Carmel and when her husband enquires as to why this is necessary she simply says to him, “It shall be well.” Just think of that, here she is with a dead child and, after all, it was her husband's son as well, a dead child on Elisha's bed in their home, and she says, “It shall be well.” She gives a similar answer to Elisha himself, through Gehazi, when he is instructed to run to meet her and ask her the reason for her journey. She simply says “It is well.”

We so often think of faith as that initial step when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thus are saved, but faith goes further than that. We also read that we are to walk by faith, not by sight: 2 Corinthians 5:7. Such faith is exemplified in the lives of those of whom we read in Hebrews 11. Such faith enables us to trust God in every contingency and we all have to confess how we so often fail in this realm - not so this woman. In her extremity, relying upon the God of Elisha, she said, “It is well.”

Being appraised of the facts, Elisha commands his servant Gehazi to take his staff, go to the child and lay it upon his face. We are not told why Elisha adopted such a measure, the reason for this exercise is not apparent, but clearly the experiment was a failure. Gehazi lays the staff upon the face of the child, “but there was neither voice nor hearing”. No doubt Elisha's staff was excellent as a staff, but it was useless when it came to giving life to this child. Other staffs are mentioned in Scripture which seem to be instruments of power. Moses' staff was used in the parting of the Red Sea; Aaron's staff budded and thus demonstrated his authority as the High Priest of God; King David in Psalm 23 found the staff of Jehovah a comfort; but in this case Elisha's staff was powerless.

May I ask you, my listeners this morning, if you are relying upon some such staff to give you eternal life? Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:35, poses the question: "How are the dead raised up?" May I make some observations, applying the text to those described in Ephesians 2:1 as "dead in trespasses and sins".

Firstly, a word on how they are not raised up. The man that is dead, spiritually dead, in trespasses and sins, is not raised up to life by the staff of good works or self righteousness. How many today are relying upon such a staff as this? The Lord Jesus once told a parable about a Pharisee and a publican and he says that the Pharisee went up to the temple to pray, but of what did his prayer comprise? He boasted to God that he was not like other men, he was not an extortioner, he was not unjust or an adulterer, or even like the tax gatherer who was nearby. He fasted twice every week and he gave tithes of all that he possessed. Surely, here was a man who deserved eternal life? But no, the Lord Jesus said that all this was useless to establish his place in Heaven, and even added that he that exalted himself shall be abased, but he that humbled himself shall be exalted. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this when he writes in his Epistle to Titus that it is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy; He (that is God) saved us.

So, dear friends, if you are relying on the fact that you are a good citizen, or a good father, or mother, that you are honest in all your dealings, you do all that you can to help your neighbour when he is in trouble, or any other acts which men count as good, please have second thoughts. The Bible knows of no such means of entry into heaven.

Secondly, you might be relying on the staff of church membership, prayer or Bible knowledge and no doubt that these are all very good in their place. Those around you would no doubt esteem you to be religious, but again the staff of religion will never help anyone into the presence of God.

Thirdly, there might be some young people listening to what I have to say this morning and they might be relying on the staff of Godly parentage or a Christian upbringing. Without any doubt such children have had the privilege and benefit of an upbringing second to none, but I have to say that the faith of the parents will never ensure the salvation of their children. If it could there would not be a child of Christian parents who did not have the enjoyment of eternal life.

Then, fourthly, there is the staff of a superficial belief, and how many seem to be relying on such a support as this? How often today we hear of people claiming to be 'born again Christians'. Both of these terms are good, they are based on Scripture. The Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Ye must be born again." And the Holy Spirit uses the term 'Christian' for those who have truly been born again, but a mere use of the words is valueless. To have eternal life we have, in the words of Scripture, "...to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" and, the Scripture adds, if we do that we shall not perish but have everlasting life. The word "on" in this text carries the thought of "advancing towards and resting upon". For eternal life we must go to Christ and lean upon Him - have confidence in Him and what He has done.

Well, how was this Shunammite's son brought back to life? Elisha stretches himself upon the child, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands, and then, we read, "the flesh of the child became warm". There was an identification of Elisha, the man of God, with the child. And I believe that here we have the prophet as a figure of Christ. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "I am the life" and the Apostle John, in his first epistle, says that he is "the true God and eternal life" 1 John 5:20. For the dead soul to be given eternal life there must be an identification with Christ the Saviour.

You ask, how can this be? And here I have to refer you to the Cross. There we find the great Scriptural principle of substitution fully manifested and it is referred to in verses such as 1 Peter 3:18: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." And 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For he, that is God, hath made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." On the Cross, dear friends, He died for mankind, and for eternal life we have to be identified with Him there, recognising that He was dying in our place. I believe that that is what is meant by the phrase "Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ".

But that is not all, there is something further. We read the child sneezed seven times. One Christian brother was speaking to another and telling him about the recent conversion of a common acquaintance. He was, and rightly so, enthusing and was so happy that another had come to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus as his Saviour When he had finished the other, older and a very wise brother, asked one simple question. "Has he sneezed seven times?" What he was really asking was, "Has there been any evidence of life?" Here again I believe, in these days of shallowness, here is something that should be in evidence. The Lord Jesus Himself said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." There should be a difference, in the walk and ways of a person, before and after conversion.

In conclusion, I suggest three ways, given in Scripture, whereby we may be giving evidence that we have real spiritual life. All come from John's first Epistle. The first from 1 John 2:3 where we read, "And by this we do know that we know Him if we keep His (that is the Lord's) commandments." The commandments of the Lord are, of course, enunciated throughout the whole of the New Testament, even though they might have been given by another of his servants. The Apostle Paul, for instance, says in 1 Corinthians 14:37: "If any man think himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him

acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.” How often do we hear, as an excuse for not being obedient to some injunction of Scripture, the excuse “Oh, that is only what Paul said.” Then again John writes, in the 1 John 2:29, “Ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of Him.” That is, born of God. So here we have underlined what we have already referred to - there is such a thing as practical righteousness and the true Christian will live a life that is exemplified in doing righteousness. In case someone should say, “But you have just said that righteous works are unacceptable to God”, I hasten to add that, for salvation they are, but having been born again they are expected. God looks for them.

Lastly, in 1 John 3:14 we read “We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.” Then the Apostle very solemnly adds, “He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.” What love should be exhibited amongst the people of God? The Apostle John also says, “We love because He first loved us.” And we give evidence to the fact that we are the possessors of eternal life because we love those who are similarly possessed.

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