

Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing.¹⁸ She said to Elijah, “What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”

¹⁹ “Give me your son,” Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed.²⁰ Then he cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?”²¹ Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried to the LORD, “O LORD my God, let this boy’s life return to him!”

²² The LORD heard Elijah’s cry, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived.²³ Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive!”

²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth.” (1 Kings 17:17-24)

God Works through Tragedy

How do you feel when bad things happen? I know I preach quite often about suffering. That’s because the Bible talks about this topic so much. Today, I want to focus on you and your emotions when painful things happen because in the Word of God for today, we see our own emotions when we hurt. So let me ask the question again: how do you feel when bad things happen to you? How do you feel when you lose someone you love? What questions do you ask? What does hurt and sorrow do to your faith? God works through pain and suffering. Hurt and sorrow only touch us when he allows them to. But that is one of the hardest teachings of Scripture for us to get right. It’s easy for us to be trite about it. And it’s hard for us to see and apply this truth when tragedy touches us. But **God works through tragedy.**

I. He purifies our faith.

II. He focuses us on his promises.

I.

The word of God that we have before us this morning centers around a woman and her son. We don’t know this woman’s name, but the ten verses before our reading tell how God sent the prophet Elijah out of Israel because a three year drought had caused a famine. He sent him north to what is today Lebanon to a woman who was not from the people of Israel. This woman was a widow. She had one son and they were down to their last loaf of bread because the drought was devastating that country, too. But Elijah called on her to trust in God and use her last oil and flour to make that bread for Elijah. And he promised a miracle: God would keep the oil and the flour flowing from her almost empty jars so that she could feed herself and her son and Elijah until the drought was over.

God kept that promise. But after suspending the laws of nature so that this woman and her son could survive, God allowed this widow’s son to get sick and die. No doubt, this turn of events shocked her, since God had been doing a daily miracle to keep the boy alive. Her response was like that of people all over the world who’ve lost someone they loved: she turned on the prophet. She said, **“What do you have against me, man of God?”** What emotion came with her grief? Anger. That happens over and over again. When someone is torn away from us, we feel helpless and that makes us angry. And anger is irrational. Quite often when someone dies, their spouse or their children get angry with that dead person because they dared to inflict all that pain on them. And that anger can spill over to anyone who was involved: the doctors who couldn’t save them, the pastor who didn’t pray hard enough, the EMT who didn’t get there in time. In this widow’s case, she was angry with Elijah. Maybe she reasoned that after all those months of doing a daily miracle that kept her son alive, somehow Elijah let the boy die. That’s nonsense, of course, but that’s the way she felt. And the anger we feel when we hurt is no different.

She asked, **“Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?”** Now, the Bible doesn’t tell us what sin she was thinking of. And in the end, it doesn’t matter. A terrible thing had happened and she thought that God was punishing her. How often don’t we think the same way? Even though we’ve heard all our lives

that Jesus died to take our sins away, when something terrible happens, we can't help but think that God is punishing us for something. If we had done better as parents, as children, as people, God wouldn't have done this to us. God was not punishing this widow or her son. God is not punishing us when he allows pain and suffering to touch our lives. Even if we should lose a child, that does not mean that we have committed some horrible sin and God is now making us pay. Jesus died and he paid for all our sin. The Bible says that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

But that's hard for us to accept. Our feelings in times of loss reveal some basic weaknesses that confuse our faith. The most basic weakness in our faith is that life is supposed to be good. We make God's love mean something very different from what it means in the Bible. We make God's love mean that God would never send something that hurts into our lives. We make God's love mean that God wants us to feel happy all the time. And by extension, if something bad does happen to us, then God must be punishing us.

That whole line of reasoning is false. God does love us. But love does not mean that God never lets anything bad happen to us. Sometimes, because he loves us, God lets us hurt. He uses tragedy for our spiritual good. You see, God weighs this life against the life to come. This life always loses in that comparison simply because this life is so short. Even if we live to be a hundred, compared to eternity, that's nothing. For every second we live here, we will spend uncounted millions of years in the life to come. And we will always have more time. So if we have to suffer here to reach joy there, God figures that's worth it. And so should we.

God sends hurts and sorrows to teach us that this life is not as important as we think it is. He has to do that because this life is what we can see and touch. Heaven is so far away and so hard to imagine that it takes a miracle of God's grace for us to treasure it over what we can see and touch here. Even after he teaches us to know our Savior and look forward to eternity with him, our weak and sinful hearts still pull us back and make this life more important than the life to come. That's why it's so difficult to bring a generous offering to the Lord. We care too much about what we might be giving up here. That's why it's so hard to turn our backs on the pleasures this life offers – whether we're talking about drinking too much at graduation parties or visiting websites no Christian should ever see or just being selfish. The pleasures of this life are much more real to us than the future with God that we can't see.

God understands that. So God sends pain and suffering not to punish us for those sins but to teach us to let go of this life, to teach us that the life to come is so much better. God sends loss and difficulty to force us to realize that we cannot achieve happiness here. We are helpless before all the tragedies of life. God sends that pain and then he sends the gospel, the promise of life and forgiveness through Christ, so that we cling to him. He comes in that gospel message and says, "I forgive you for all the times and all the ways you made this life the end all and be all of your existence. I will protect you from all harm and danger. I will bring you home. And you will be with me forever." And God uses that promise to strengthen and comfort us here and keep us in the true faith until we reach eternal life. That's God's purpose in suffering. **God works through tragedy to purify our faith.**

II.

That's a miracle of God's grace because by nature, we can only lose our faith in God. Even Elijah struggled with what happened. When he asked God if he had brought tragedy on this woman, his words sound like a rebuke. When we face tragedy, we don't just get angry with the person we've lost and with the people around us who couldn't stop it. We get angry with God. But the difference between Elijah and this woman is how they handled their distress. Elijah questioned God but he also came to him in faith and asked for him to do a miracle. Now, we don't want to misunderstand this text. When I was missionary in Colombia, I read in the paper about a family who lost a child. Their pastor promised them that if they prayed hard enough, that child would come back to life. The police finally had to come and take the body away. Even after they buried the child, the parents insisted that he would come back to life.

This account does not promise that God will raise our loved ones who die, at least not before Jesus returns. Probably thousands of people died in this three year famine. Many of them were children. At that time, diseases we can easily cure today claimed the lives of children over and over again. And God didn't raise any of them except the son of this widow. He didn't do that because she had done so much for the prophet. God chose this woman and her child to be a lesson for every generation: God has power over life and death. If he chooses, he can do a miracle. And because he wanted to do this miracle, he led Elijah to ask for it.

But in the end, this child died again. We don't know how long he lived on this earth – maybe for seventy or eighty more years. But death claimed him again. Death claimed his mother. The only person in this story who did not die was Elijah. God took him directly to heaven. But he did leave this life. Death has claimed every person who lived from that time until today, with one exception: Jesus. Even he did die, but then he rose. In his resurrection, God was telling us what the real source of all suffering is and what the real solution is.

All suffering comes from sin. Death itself is the direct result of sin. A little over a week ago, I preached a funeral sermon. And I made statement that I make at every funeral that I preach at. I said that every person in that room was a sinner. When I said that, two young ladies looked at each other in horror. They were scandalized that I would call them sinners. But if you live in this world – and you're not Jesus – you are a sinner. Death will come to every one of us because we have all sinned. Pain and sorrow run rampant in this world because sin and death rule here. God decides which hurts reach us. But for as long as we live in a sinful world, some hurt must come to us.

But Jesus rescued us from the power of death and even from the power of suffering because he rescued us from the power of sin. He lived the perfect life we can't live. If someone had accused him of sin, he would've had the right to be scandalized the way those two young women were. He earned the right to live forever. And he gave that right to us. Then he died to pay for all the sin we are guilty of – for all the times and ways that we have made this life the end all and be all of our existence. And Jesus suffered everything that sin does to us. He carried death and hell in his body. He died. And then he rose. When he rose he set us free from death and even from suffering.

Now, that doesn't mean we don't have to die or suffer. We all will suffer here. We all will die, unless the Lord returns first. But that's only because Jesus is waiting until the very last Christian comes to faith. Then he will return. Jesus will wipe all suffering and all death from our lives. He will remake this world, he will remake our bodies, he will remake our hearts so that there is no sin and therefore no death or pain or sorrow about us at all. And we will live with him forever.

Every moment of pain that we feel here is designed to make us long for that day. Every death we mourn, every loss we feel, is designed to make us look forward to the day when we leave this life and go to live with Jesus. In our epistle lesson for today, St. Paul said, **“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”** Paul wanted to die. Sometimes I ask my catechism class if they want to die. Now, they know me well enough to know it's a trick question. But they don't want to die until I change the question and ask if they want to go to heaven. Of course, they want that. We all do. As we go through this life, God teaches us to want that more. He does teach us to wait and trust in his time. He does tell us to work while it is day and to use our time to his glory. He even gives us many more blessings while we live here than we can count. **But God works through tragedy to focus us on his promises.** The greatest promise of all is that we will live with him forever. That promise is our comfort in life and our strength as we die. That promise is the foundation of our faith. Trust it. Amen.