

### A Matter of Life and Death

Have you ever found yourself facing a matter of life and death? Every time I take a ride on my motorcycle it's a matter of life or death. (No wonder Lois doesn't particularly like riding with me!) Some of you have been in car accidents that could have gone either way, if one or more factors had happened even slightly differently. A couple of months ago, a cousin of mine ran a stop sign and was hit broadside by another car. Both cars were traveling at a high of speed. It was the driver's side that was hit. My cousin walked away from the accident. Ironically, this is the same cousin who, just weeks later, died from a malignant brain tumor. As tragic as this was, it was also a reminder that every day, really, is a matter of life and death. We just don't usually think about it. We could step off a curb and get hit by a car. Barbara Gingrich's grand-nephew was recently killed in an accident, when his mother ran a red light. An angry person with a gun could come into your workplace and start shooting, as happened at Excel several months ago. Every time we go into surgery, as Chuck Graber did last week, it's a matter of life and death. Simply putting a person under anesthesia is serious business. (Aren't you glad you came today? You get to listen to such a happy sermon! ☺ Try to stay with me; we'll get there eventually.)

The prophet Elijah was facing a matter of life and death. There was a bad drought, and because of the drought, a famine. Elijah had nothing to eat, or to drink. He surely would have died . . . had not God sent some ravens to feed him. Including meat twice a day. That's better than Lois and I received at the Hyatt Regency Wednesday night and Thursday morning!

Back to Elijah, it was God who caused the famine in the first place. It was punishment for Israel's apostasy. That'll teach 'em to never again worship Baal! As the cliché goes, the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.

The biblical writer makes it crystal clear that the woman in Zarephath was facing death. Think about the adjectives he uses. "A handful of meal." "A little oil in a jar." "A couple of sticks," so she could make a fire, to bake a "morsel of bread" with the meal and oil, that she and her son would eat before they died. You see what I mean? You can't make a decent fire with nothing but a couple of sticks!

Why would God allow her to be in that situation? Why would God send Elijah to the Wadi Cherith, which would soon dry up? It takes weeks to die from hunger. It takes only days to die from thirst.

Why would God do that? So Elijah and the woman could both learn from the experience? So they could learn that, when it comes down to it, God "is all we have?" That God "gives us what we need?" That our "lives are in God's hands?"

It's easy to say that (or sing that) when you wake up from the anesthesia and learn that your surgery—which was a very difficult one—had gone well. But what are you supposed to think when they put tubes into your sides to try to drain the fluid, and the doctor suspects either a blood clot in the lung or a possible infection?

God at least came through for the woman, right? Upon Elijah's pronouncement, the jar of meal was not emptied, and the jug of oil did not fail. It almost made a believer out of her.

But then, the woman's son became ill. Gravely ill. So ill that "there was no breath left in him." Which means he died. The woman was forced to conclude that all of this—the grain and the oil and the son's illness—was nothing but a cruel punishment for her sins.

Is this how God operates? Gets your hopes up one day, only to dash them the next?

Or what if we asked a different question? A question like, What do we learn from this story? I'd like to suggest three things.

First, we learn once again that God is the source and giver of life. Listen to these verses from Psalm 104: "You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken . . . You make springs gush forth in the valleys, giving drink to every wild animal . . . you cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use to bring forth food from the earth."

The writer of Psalm 104 gives God the credit for everything; for the earth being set on its foundations, for springs gushing forth in the valley, giving drink to every wild animal; for God giving all of them—all of us—our food in due season. It's the very same message as our song, "You are all we have. You give us what we need. Our lives are in your hands, O Lord."

Second, we learn that death is a part of the life that God created. Sooner or later, we all die. Just as Lazarus surely died again after Jesus raised him from death the first time. And given that God is the source of life, would it not be accurate to conclude also that God is the source of death? Listen again to Psalm 104. "These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust." It's all in God's hands.

Third, we learn from our story that God is both a God of judgement and consequences, and a God of grace and restoration. Perhaps God sent a drought to the people of Israel not as punishment per se, but simply to get their attention, so that they would turn back from their sin of Baal-worship, and turn toward God once again. And, that is indeed what happened! Although, it wouldn't be the last time the people turned towards Baal and away from God; nor would it be the last time God sent them consequences, that they might learn from their choices. Some lessons take a long time to learn.

Remember Psalm 104? Listen to these two verses: "When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." It appears that in the Bible at least, this is the pattern for the way God relates to his people: giving us life; sending consequences when we turn away; then restoring us when we turn back.

After Elijah restored the woman's son to life, she said to him, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth." It sounds like the woman finally became a believer. Or to put it differently, that she learned to know God in a much deeper way. After all, isn't this the overarching story of the entire Bible: God revealing God's self, so that the people may learn to know and love God in return?

It turns out that God's purpose for creation is not a matter of life and death. It is, rather, a matter of life, and death, and new life. Praise be to Yahweh, our God!