

4. The lifegiving voice

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at page 309, we'll have a moment of prayer. And they said, were not our hearts burning within us while he walked with us on the road and while he opened to us the scriptures?

We know, Father, that this may have been part of those very scriptures that the Lord Jesus Christ opened up to his disciples. And we pray that as your Spirit graciously opens the word to us, that indeed like them, our hearts may burn, our eyes may be opened, may be out into the world with the message that the Lord is risen indeed.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. I very much doubt if there is anyone here who has not heard of Michael Jackson.

His death has dominated the news and indeed still does. I wonder how many of you have heard of Isabella Purvis, whose death also was briefly in the news last week.

An old lady who would have been 90 had she survived, but whose body was discovered in a flat in Edinburgh, five years probably after she had died.

[1 : 28] Now, I'm not saying that to make some kind of moralizing comment about the famous get all the attention and those who are not well known don't. I want to make a very different point.

Whether we are famous, whether we are not famous, we are ultimately vulnerable to death. We are ultimately mortal. And therefore, we need a gospel that actually speaks into this greatest and into this deepest of human tragedy.

Now, in this chapter, chapter 4, and we looked at the shorter incidents two or three weeks ago, Elisha the prophet is coming into situations of great problem.

He's coming into situations of destitution and debt. He's coming into situations of poison. He's coming into situations of famine. And here in the longest of the stories, he is confronting death itself. The life-giving word is face-to-face with death. That's the point of this story. That's our title for this evening, the life-giving voice, the life-giving word.

[2 : 33] Now, if you read the books of Kings, and sometime, this would be a good holiday reading as well, sit down and open your Bibles at 1 Kings 1 and read through to the end of 2 Kings.

It's a very exciting read. There's a lot of interesting material there. You may well wonder what the point of all this material is. But one thing that will strike you straight away is that Elijah and Elisha totally dominate.

From 1 Kings 17 right up to 2 Kings 13, when Elisha himself dies, the great mass of the stories concern these two great prophets. If you go back further in the book, you'll find that as David is dying, he tells his son Solomon to walk in the ways of Moses, to keep the words of the Torah, the words of the law.

And then at the end of the book, the great reforming king, Josiah, turns the nation back to the Lord by the reading and the teaching of the word of God.

So it is the living word of God that dominates these books. Indeed, you can go back further still. If you go back to 1 and 2 Samuel, in many ways, 1 Samuel to the end of 2 Kings is one continuous history.

[3 : 45] You'll find the great prophet Samuel is raised up to turn people back to God. So it is a chapter, it is a book about the life-giving word. But above all, it is a chapter that is absolutely drenched with grace.

This is a chapter about grace. About ten times in the chapter, Elisha is called the man of God. It's not Elisha who is life-giving, it is his word which is life-giving.

I want us to look at the stories that develops in three parts. And the first thing I want to talk about is grace, which responds to need. That's verses 8 to 17.

A significant meeting with a wealthy woman. Now one of the points I made the last time was that nobody in this chapter, apart from Elisha himself, is named.

And even he is usually simply called man of God. And this place, Shunem, which is in the north of the country, not very far from the Sea of Galilee, and obviously on an important route where many travelers passed.

[4 : 53] This woman, her story invites comparison with a similar story of Elijah back in 1 Kings 17, where once again a boy was raised to life. But she's a very different kind of woman.

And she's very different from the woman mentioned in the early part of the chapter. This is a married woman. This is not a widow. And she is a wealthy woman. A woman of some substance. The first thing I want you to notice is her spiritual perception. In verse 9. And she said to her husband, Behold now I know that this is a holy man of God who is continually passing our way. Now what we discover about the husband later probably suggests that he would grunt and be rather indignant. This husband of hers appears to have had little spiritual perception.

We'll come to that. And it's another example both of how the prophet brings the grace of God and how spiritual life hasn't totally died out, even in the idolatrous kingdom of Israel.

[5 : 56] There are still people who are sensitive to the voice of the Spirit of God. And verse 10. Now we don't need to spiritualize all these things.

I've heard sermons when I was a boy saying a bed speaks of rest and a table speaks of fellowship and so on. We got sermons and nothing would have ever to do with the passage.

The point about this surely is that this woman's generosity was expressed in practical ways. Have you ever noticed how often in Paul, in those parts of his letters which most people ignore and think are irrelevant, he says things like, make sure that you send Apollos on his way.

Look after Artemis and so on. These were days when traveling was dangerous and difficult, where inns were dirty and dangerous and few and far between. The hospitality to the servants of the Word of God.

That's what this verse is about. Not some kind of spiritualizing about chairs and lamps, but very practical. Look after God's servants. They are servants of the Word.

[7 : 02] That doesn't mean that we don't have a responsibility to look after them. And also, the recognition is ultimately not, oh, here's the super celebrity, Elisha.

Now, if I invite him into my house, my name will be up there in the lights. Our evangelical celebrity culture is pretty awful, isn't it?

We've simply bought into the world's standards. There's nothing about this at all. This is a holy man of God. We're not told how she recognized this, but it wasn't his personal qualities.

It wasn't his charisma. It was that she recognized the presence of the Lord. That is the point that's being made. Somebody hearing the Gospel for the first time wrote this.

Not very good poetry, but it makes the point very clearly. It was not then, she writes, the truth you spoke, to you so clear, to me so dim.

[8 : 09] It was that in your words you brought a sense of him. That's what preaching is about, isn't it? A sense of him. Now, those who preach and teach must work as hard as they possibly can to be clear and to be understandable.

It takes no great talents to be complicated and confusing. People must work very hard to be clear. But we must never reduce preaching to explaining the Bible, as if the Holy Spirit needed our explanations, otherwise he couldn't work.

The Holy Spirit graciously uses what we say, but he doesn't need us. So that's the first thing, our spiritual perception. But secondly, Elisha's generosity.

Elisha's practical generosity, a sign of the grace that dwelt in him. He doesn't take this for granted. And look at verse 13.

And he said to him, Say now to her, see you have taken all this trouble for us. What is to be done for you? Triggering little verses, would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?

[9 : 22] A suggestion that Elisha's voice actually had greater resonance in the courts and the seats of the mighty than we might have imagined. The point is, he doesn't take it for granted.

And the totally unexpected and seemingly impossible promise of having a son. Now what's all this about? There's two little phrases.

A phrase that's repeated. The same phrase in Hebrew, slightly different in our translations. Verse 16, about this time, next year. And then again in verse 17, about that time, the following spring. And here bells are ringing in the mind of the alert reader. Because exactly that phrase occurs far back in the story in Genesis 18. When the Lord himself says to Sarah, About this time, next year, you will have a son.

We're instantly being invited to look at the big picture. There's something hugely significant that is going to happen. Happens, happens many times.

[10:27] I mentioned one Samuel. Hannah, weeping because she didn't have a son. And the Lord giving her a son. Earlier still, the birth of Samson. Once again, an angel coming to announce that.

And then of course, Elizabeth, in Luke chapter 2, the birth of the Baptist. But I want you to notice one significant difference here. Think of these other children I mentioned.

Think of Isaac. If Isaac had not been born, the line of promise would have been snuffed out, wouldn't it? Think of Samson. If Samson had not been born, Israel would have been overwhelmed by the Philistines.

I know Samson's story is perhaps not very edifying, but the author of the Hebrews, who has exactly the same story in front of us as we did, writes, By faith, Samson.

So when you're assessing Samson, remember the inspired commentator on him, By faith, Samson. And when Samuel himself was born, he calls Israel back from the chaos of the book of Judges into a more godly way of life.

[11:29] And then of course, the significance of the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah himself. In all these cases, the line of promise was threatened and in danger.

Here, it is pure grace. This child not being born would not have affected the line of promise. It would not have affected the big story.

This is God who wants to make a woman happy. This is what grace means. This is the gracious, generous God. Because not everything in the Bible has to be fitted neatly into the big picture.

Not everything in the Bible has to have huge spiritual meaning. Well, let me put that another way. Everything in the Bible does have huge spiritual meaning. But the huge spiritual meaning here is that God loves to give, not because the person is prominent or going to be prominent.

Never read anything else about this son except that he died, was raised to life. I don't know what his name was. It was because God loves to give. He's that kind of God.

[12:35] So if you're sitting here tonight wondering, I'm not one of those superstars. Nobody wants my autograph. Nobody keeps on talking about me. Nobody keeps on praising me.

What kind of a God do we believe in? We don't believe in a God of superstars. We believe in a God of grace. And this story is pure grace. Amazing grace. How sweet the sound that gave this woman a child.

That's what grace is about. So that's the first thing then. The grace which responds to need. Then going on to the second part of the story, 18 to 26.

The grace which perplexes and confuses. Why? Why? Why? That's what must hang over this next part.

After the unexpected joy comes this desperate tragedy. Why has God given only to take away? Let's not be pious.

[13:34] Let's not quote Job. The Lord gave and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. This woman was in no situation to say that.

This woman is totally shattered. Look at the circumstantial detail in verse 18. When he had grown, you can just imagine. He's grown. He's excited. He wants to go out among the big boys.

And then he says to his father, My head, my head. The father who appears not to have a great sense of his soul. Oh, carry him to his mother. You can sense almost the kind of this boy coming out here, making a nuisance of himself.

When he had lifted him up, brought him to his mother. And notice, you know, every phrase is like a nail hammered into the coffin. When he lifted him up, the child sat on her lap until noon.

And then he died. This is human tragedy and agony, isn't it? But behind it, there is a deeper problem, isn't there? God had given and God had taken away.

[14:38] Some of you may have read C.S. Lewis's Grief Observe, that powerful and heartbreaking account of his response to the death of his wife. In that book, he talks of how when his wife was first diagnosed with cancer, there was prayer.

And for a time, it seemed to be arrested. Then it returned again more virulently than ever. Read that and see something of the cry of anguish. God had given and God had taken away.

This is incomprehensible grace, isn't it? I want you to notice two things here as well. First of all, there is the desperate faith of the woman. Verse 28.

Then she said, Did I ask my Lord for a son? Did I not say, Do not deceive me, Elisha? Elisha, why did you do this? Then the mother of the child said, As the Lord lives, And as you yourself live, I will not leave you.

Notice the faith shining through the utter darkness of the dungeon, as the Lord lives. You see, it's not all death. Yahweh lives.

[15:44] And Elisha is still alive. When we are puzzled by the ways of the Lord, where is there to go? There's only one place to go. To the Lord himself.

Read some of the lament psalms. Don't turn it up just now, but read a psalm, for example, like Psalm 86, which is one of the darkest of all the psalms.

Sorry, Psalm 88, beg your pardon. Psalm 88, the darkest of all the lament psalms, because all the other lament psalms begin in the darkness, but they end with a ray of hope.

This isn't how this psalm ends. You have caused my beloved and my friends to shun me. Darkness has become my companion. Where is the hope there?

The hope there is that the psalmist holds on to Yahweh. He holds on to the Lord, even in the darkness. The Bible has a word for that, doesn't it?

[16:43] The Bible calls that faith. That's what faith means, holding on in the darkness. Faith and not feelings must dominate our lives.

Feelings are important. I'm not denying that for a minute. Think of the old gospel hymn, You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. It's not good enough, is it?

I need to know that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth, even when my heart does not rejoice. Even when my heart, as one of the Easter hymns says, is wintry, grieving and in pain.

The fact that he lives in my heart is not much good then. What I need are the great assertions that no doubts can challenge. The old hymn, standing on the promises that cannot fail, and the howling storms of doubt and fear of sale.

So there's the desperate faith of the woman. But secondly, there is the crassness of her husband. Verse 23. Verse 22, first of all.

[17:47] Then she called her husband and said, Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back. And he said, Why will you go to him today?

To neither new moon nor Sabbath. What are men of God for? Men of God are for new moons and Sabbaths. What is the word of God for? The word of God is to be shut up in religious activities, in special buildings.

This sense of indifference, it reminds me very much of the story we read in 2 Kings chapter 1, which we looked at some months ago when we were doing Elijah, when Ahab's dreadful son Ahaziah has a bad accident, and he sends to Beelzebub, the god of Ekron.

And Elijah says to him, Is there no god in Israel that you send to Beelzebub, the god of Ekron? And you know sometimes that needs to be said to us in the church today.

Is it because there is no living God? Is it because there's no God in Israel? We have to try everything else and depend on everyone else, rather than turning to the living God.

[18:57] The grace which puzzles. We have the grace which is amazingly generous. Then we have the grace which puzzles. And then the third movement of the story, verses 27 to 37, the grace which defies death.

Now, the Bible never encourages us to believe in magic. We'll come back to that in a minute. Nor in rationalism. The rationalist commentators tell us this was the kiss of life.

The boy simply had sunstroke. Elisha, who was a shrewd guy, knew how to give him the kiss of life. Well, it was no kiss of life.

This was the amazing grace of God, who gives more than we can possibly imagine. The grace that snatched this boy back, not from a trance, but from the realm of death itself.

I want you to notice one or two things. First of all, the failure of Gehazi, in verses 29 to 31. Elisha sends his servant Gehazi.

[20 : 01] He says, Tie up your garment, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, do not greet him. If anyone greets you, do not reply, and lay my staff on the face of this child.

Now, the mother, sorry, verse 30, the mother of the child says, As the Lord lives, and you yourself live, I will not leave you, so arose and followed it. Gehazi went on ahead, and laid the staff on the face of the child.

But there was no sound, or sign of life. What did he expect? Did he expect the staff was magic? Therefore, he returned to meet Elisha, and told him, The child has not awakened.

God is being totally misunderstood here. Gehazi had obviously been, probably with Elisha, when Elijah's mantle was thrown on the Jordan, to split the scene. He thought, Oh good, anything that's associated with this, with this great prophet, it obviously has magical qualities.

So as we saw then, the point of that was not magic. It was to show that Elisha, was in the succession of Elijah, and indeed in the succession of Moses, the parting of the waters. The staff here, had a very practical purpose, I believe.

[21 : 13] In the hot climate, it was common to bury the body very quickly. Elisha knows, that if his staff is on the body, no one will dare to move it. And I think that, is the point, that's being made.

The total misunderstanding of Gehazi, the trusting in methods, the trusting in techniques, and so often, this is what, isn't this so often the case in the church?

If only we did this, if only we had better methods, if only we, if only we were more in tune, with the spirit of the age, if only we did what they did, at such and such a place, either, either because we love the past, or because we love the present, do anywhere that happens to fascinate us.

The point is, methods, are in themselves, mean nothing. So what's the other point? The point is, that it is God's power, which brings life.

It is not the staff, which brings life. Look at verse, 32. When Elisha came to the house, he saw the child lying dead, on his bed.

[22 : 15] I don't think that's just, an irrelevant remark, or a repetitive statement. This is the, this is a human, poignant little statement.

Elisha comes into the house, and there is the child, lying dead. He's dead. And looks like the end, doesn't it? So he went in, and shut the door, behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord.

Just as Elijah had done, in a similar situation. We saw this morning, didn't we, the importance of the prayer, of the church, when Peter was in prison. Well here once again, it's not magic.

He prayed to the Lord. He prayed to the Lord, and giver of life, and he went up, and lay on the child, putting his mouth, on his mouth, his eyes, on his eyes, his hands, on his hands, and the flesh of the child, became warm.

And then the sheer joy, joy that must have broken out, after verse 37. It's not described, as we could imagine, the woman, dancing with joy, telling her neighbours, sending a message out, to the field, where the harvesters, are working.

[23 : 21] The sheer joy, and wonder, of all of this. Now what does that mean, to us? It surely does not mean, that, if we pray, over a dead child, or over anyone else dead, that the Lord, will miraculously, raise them to life.

That's not what, this story is about. This story, is a miracle, that anticipates, something greater.

Don't want you, to turn me up just now, but, later on, read Luke chapter 7, verses 11 to 17.

That's Luke chapter 11, 7 sorry, verses 11 to 17. A few miles, from Shunam, a little known place, is another little known place, called Nain.

And one day, Luke tells us, as Jesus, made his way, towards that town, a bleak, and dismal, little procession, was coming towards him. Once again, a dead son, not named, and a grieving mother, who this time, is a widow.

What did Jesus do? Think about this, think about the amazement, of this. Jesus stopped, the funeral procession. Now, the point is, that sounds crazy.

[24 : 37] Most of the time, in the gospels, Jesus' power is hidden, but there are some times, when his power, as the son of God, comes to the fore, and here, he stops the funeral.

Elisha prays, but Jesus commands, because that's the story, of the new creation. Even when Jesus was on earth, the cemeteries, didn't empty, did they? Because, he raised three people, from the dead, two of them nameless, one of them, simply called Jairus' daughter, and one of them, this unnamed young man, a story, which, to my mind, recalls this story, we're looking at.

But surely, it points more, to something, even greater, as John tells us. One day, he will stop, all the funerals, and empty, all the cemeteries.

The day is coming, when all who are in the graves, will hear the voice, of the Son of God, and will come out, the hope of resurrection. Now, you can imagine, as I said, you can imagine, the rejoicing at Shunam, you can imagine, similar rejoicing at Nain, the boys come back, and all the sheer happiness, and excitement.

But what's the rejoicing, of the new creation, saying? It's saying, the words that we sang, at the beginning, I was dead, and I'm alive forever, and I have the keys, of death, and of hell.

[26 : 02] That's why, at the end of the service, we're going to sing, yours is the glory, risen, conquering Son. Endless, is the victory, you or death, has won.

Death is awful, death is dreadful, all of us, fear it, and rightly, because it is an outrage, it divides what God has joined, it divides body, and spirit.

But we live, in the hope, of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who, through his servants, in old days, people like Elijah, and Elijah, gave us a glimpse, of that world, of resurrection, for there is no grieving, no pain, and that is ultimately, what grace is about.

Let me just finish, by saying this, last week, at the Cornhill Summer School, we were looking, at that wonderful passage, in Titus, about the grace of God, appearing, and the glory, of God, appearing. Grace has appeared, and glory will appear. And in the last analysis, grace and glory, are the same thing. Grace is the way, in which we experience glory, in this earthly life.

[27 : 07] And one day, the grace of God, which brings us, through all these situations, of life and death, will bring us, safe to glory. That's what this, old story, is about.

That's what, the Bible, is teaching us here, I believe. Let's pray. Blessed be the God, and Father, of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has brought us again, to a living hope, by the resurrection, from the dead, of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

To eat now, around your table, Father, we pray, that that same risen Lord, will come to us, saying, do not be afraid, I am the living one, I died, and see, I am alive forever.

We ask this, in his name. Amen.