

"See, thy son liveth."

- I Kings 17:23

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John 12:23-50

Psalm 86

New Book of Worship, Psalm 86, p.67

The story containing our text is most tender and appealing. Death had taken the son of a poor widow. She and her son had been carried through the three year famine by the meal and oil that wasted not, because Elijah, the man of God, had found shelter in her house. Then came affliction sorer than the famine. Her son, in whom lived her hope as a mother in Israel, died in her arms.

To get the vital lesson in this narrative we must see it in its relation to the events immediately preceding, for the striking chapter of the text by three wonderful miracles there told describes three successive states of a regenerating man. The third state is pictured in the raising to life of the dead son of the widow.

The first state of regeneration is described in the story of Elijah fed by the ravens. Elijah of Gilead, which was a Gentile land, had been in Canaan, the Holy Land. Famine overtook him there - just as spiritual famine comes upon the natural man, the Gentile, when for a time he has dwelt in the Holy Land of Christian truth. For everyone who has become instructed in the kingdom of God, in Christian doctrine, and enters into the Holy Land of Christian faith soon feels yearnings for the old life that is left behind. The truth and life of Christian doctrine seem unable to sustain and vivify him. Then is the famine and, by the very nature of spiritual progress, one returns for a while to his natural life. He goes back across the spiritual Jordan into his former state, for it is only step by step that from natural we become spiritual. The natural man, instructed but not confirmed in Christian life, is Elijah back in Gilead. The ravens that bring him meat morning and evening are the natural thoughts and reasonings which sustain the natural in the morning of their joys and in the evening of their disappointments. These for "a while" must sustain him until the brook of external and worldly pleasures dries up.

Then when the ambitions of youth fail, when through experience one sees the hollowness of the temporary and the natural, he is led back in the Holy Land to be nourished by the unfailing meal and oil of spiritual truth and love. This period when the truths of faith are always found to give comfort, encouragement, and strength to bear the things that afflict the soul is the second state of regeneration.

Now we come to the lesson of today. The famine had passed, as our spiritual famine does when we no more feel that we do not get all we deserve and that the ways of the Lord are unequal. The famine passes when we see that the Lord has abundantly provided for us, that He has given His whole self to us, that from His very nature, which is infinite Love and Wisdom, He can never fail to supply all our spiritual needs.

But the abundance of truth given, the light that then comes, disclosing the great and unfailing love of the Lord, brings our own imperfect nature into awful contrast with that of the perfect, sinless Savior. The humiliating truth breaks upon us. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." In the searching Gospel light we behold our own nature and see and confess that of ourselves we are nothing but evil. We see that we are spiritually dead, dead in sin. It seems at first as though the Lord Himself has condemned us, that we are forever lost.

The son of the widow is our natural, our heredity, that which is not born of the church conjoined to the Lord. This son must die. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground

and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Our son dies when we awake to the fact that the natural man in us, the hereditary nature, is dead, dead as to the truth, life, joy, and peace that are in and from the Lord Jesus.

The widowed woman is our soul not yet conscious of the close presence of the Divine Bridegroom and Husband of the Church. And when the holy light first shines within us and reveals that without God's help we are condemned and lost, we cry, as did the widow in her grief, "O thou man of God, art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?"

Jesus has answered, "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill." The Lord does not send in the pure and searching light to make us grieve, to destroy our peace, to convict of sin and condemn. He sends the truth to show us our evils and thus enable us to confess them, repent of them, and by ceasing to do evil enable Him to expel our evils, wash away our sins, so that we shall not take them with us into the eternal life. He sends the truth to show us the way, to lead us out of evil, and to raise us up to life eternal. He comes not to slay, but to fulfill in our souls the law of the Divine covenant and raise us up from spiritual death into everlasting life.

When the widow had thus pleaded with Elijah, he took the child up into the loft where he abode and "laid him upon his bed." This is also descriptive of human experience. For when one sees that in himself he is nothing but evil, that he cannot live from himself, that as to the life of heaven, the Lord, and Divine joy he is dead in sin, the Lord lifts him up into closer presence, even as Jesus prayed, "These things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves... Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me."

Humility is the ground that receives influx from the Lord because in it is self-denial, and where self is renounced, the Lord spontaneously inflows. In the degree in which we see our evils, confess them, and yearn for the true and enduring life of the Lord, He gives it. He carries us up into the place of His abode, as Elijah carried the dead son up into his chamber.

Elijah laid the child upon his bed. We say of some people that their life is a bed of roses. What then is the bed of the holy man of God? What is that bed upon which the Lord would place us when we see that as to spiritual life the natural man is dead and that we are dead because we are not truly alive from that love with which Jesus loved us? We well know. The Lord would carry us up into His close presence and lay us upon the bed of His truth, the comforting support of the Gospel. Upon His truth we can rest. It comforts, it refreshes, it gives peace. The natural man makes up his own bed, and it is a hard one, "shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it" and "the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it." But the bed of the man of God, the bed that the Lord makes, is the Gospel truth, the full measure of men and angels, and when we rest upon it, the Lord refreshes us and awakens the dead to Himself and His life. Elijah, because He spoke for the Lord, represented the Lord, the Word speaking to us.

Elijah prayed for the restoration of the child's life. He cried, "O Lord my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" And thus he prayed because fervent prayer for spiritual strength and life, the deep yearning for the Lord is the Lord in us desiring to give us of His life. His love in us breaks forth to our consciousness as our yearning for Him.

Now we come to the greatest fact in the lesson for today, the most blessed fact in Christian experience, the greatest of all truths, the very expectation of which was the

sustaining hope of mankind throughout all the declining ages. It is now an accomplished fact, the glorious truth in which center all Christian hopes and the salvation of mankind. It is told in dramatic form in what Elijah did: he stretched himself upon the child three times, pleading, "O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again."

Elijah is not the only one who thus restored the dead. We recall that Elisha in a similar manner raised the son of the Shunamite woman. Again the child was laid upon the prophet's bed. The prophet prayed to the Lord. "And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands," and brought the child to life. Here is a prophetic picture. It portrays in particular how there is now influx from every part of the Divine Human of the Lord into every part of man's human. In the time of Elijah and Elisha there was no such influx as this, for the Holy Spirit was not yet because Jesus was not yet glorified. But by these seemingly strange ways of bringing the dead back to life the Lord foreshadowed how, by His Holy Spirit, He eventually would operate to save mankind from spiritual death.

Let us have this thought fully in mind. There was no Holy Spirit before the coming of the Savior and the glorification of His Human, as the Gospel says. Before the Advent truth and life flowed into the world through the angels. The angels then accommodated and mediated the unapproachable essence of God to human reception. But when evil so increased as to transcend the power that man could thus receive, the Lord clothed Himself with a human like ours. In that human He met all evil, the hells combined, and conquered sin and spiritual death. In doing this He glorified and made Divine the human that He had assumed, and in that Human He now dwells as a soul in its body, and through that Human there now comes the Holy Spirit, working resurrection from death and sin.

Glorious and prophetic picture - the prophets stretching themselves upon the dead, mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hand to hand! It tells of that wonderful and merciful provision whereby from every part of His perfect, sinless, glorified Divine Human the Lord can infuse truth and life into every part of our body, of our earthly thought and feeling. Now there is not only the influx from God by an internal way through the heavens, but there is also an influx immediately from the Divine Human of Jehovah coming by an external way to purify, save from disease, sin, and spiritual death, and to raise up to life eternal. Now we can see how it is true: "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me," how "Underneath are the everlasting arms." So we understand. Three times Elijah stretched himself upon the child and prayed for life to return. We do not come at once into a full understanding of the Lord's relation to us. There must be that fullness of preparation arising from repeated attempts and prayers to realize the Lord's presence in our souls, which is represented by Elijah's thrice stretching himself upon the child and thrice praying. But when Elijah had so done, the soul of the child returned. So in human experience, as we exercise repeated endeavor, sincere prayer, and steadfastness in keeping the precepts of the Word, the Lord finally comes into our lives. He may come as a mighty rushing wind and tongues of fire kindling holy zeal. He may come as a deep inward peace, a conscious assurance of His presence. He may come as a mighty light, like the lightning that cometh out of the east and shineth even unto the west, lighting up our understanding of His Word. In many ways may He come through any open gate of our souls.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Amen

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