

*1 Kings 17:8–24 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup>“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup>So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” <sup>12</sup>But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” <sup>13</sup>Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” <sup>15</sup>She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup>The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

<sup>17</sup>After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. <sup>18</sup>She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” <sup>19</sup>But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. <sup>20</sup>He cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” <sup>21</sup>Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” <sup>22</sup>The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. <sup>23</sup>Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” <sup>24</sup>So the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

*Luke 7:11–17 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. <sup>12</sup>As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. <sup>13</sup>When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, “Do not weep.” <sup>14</sup>Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, “Young man, I say to you, rise!” <sup>15</sup>The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. <sup>16</sup>Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” <sup>17</sup>This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Acts 9:36-43

<sup>36</sup>Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup>At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup>Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup>So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup>Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. <sup>41</sup>He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

*Life . . . there is just not enough of it!*

What is better news than the giving of life? From beginning to end, the Bible reveals that God is the giver of life. Thus, not surprisingly, there are many stories of death overcome, even if only for a time, culminating in the ultimate defeat of death, in the resurrection of Jesus. Paul writes that "the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

So today, in this series, "Jesus is Good News," we will look at three stories of people whom God brought back to life. Each of them was a signpost to God's promise of death's true defeat in resurrection.

#### *Elijah and a widow's son*

The story of Elijah begins the prophet confronting King Ahab, the king of Israel, telling him that the LORD God (YHWH<sup>1</sup>) was going to bring a drought to the land. Ahab had led the people away from the worship of YHWH to the worship of the Canaanite god, Baal. Because the worshipers of Baal believed he was the bringer of rain, and hence life, Elijah's promise of drought was a direct YHWH v. Baal challenge. Wisely, God told Elijah to run away and hide in a wadi (a desert creekbed) near his hometown after delivering the news to Ahab.

But now, three years later, YHWH comes to Elijah, telling him that the time has come to leave the wadi. He is to go to the city of Zarephath in Sidon and look for the home of a widow, whom God has commanded to feed Elijah. Right off the bat, the story has taken several surprising turns.

- Zarephath was not an Israelite city. It was a Phoenician city on the Mediterranean coastline, north of Israel.
- Zarephath was in the land of Sidon. Jezebel, the Baal worshipping queen of Israel, was from Sidon. She was, indeed, the daughter of the king of Sidon.

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<sup>1</sup>When God meets Moses at the burning bush, he reveals his name to be YHWH, meaning something like "I am who I am." Because the name of God was very sacred to the Israelites, when they came upon God's name, YHWH, in Scripture, they would not say it aloud. Instead, they said "Lord," (*adonai* in Hebrew). In keeping with that tradition, most English Bibles print "LORD" (small caps) every place that YHWH appears in the books of the OT.

- The widow, like her neighbors, is a worshipper of Baal, not YHWH.

Thus, God commands Elijah to head off to a pagan land and the home of a pagan widow, whose widowhood put her on the margins of society, among the most desperately destitute. God's work is going to move forward even through these pagan Gentiles, for there are no boundaries on God's grace. All the world is God's and no one, not even the ancient Israelites, had some sort of exclusive claim on God. They had been chosen and saved for the larger purposes of God's restorative work. All the families, of the earth, even those Baal-worshipping Phoenicians, were to be blessed through the Israelites, as God had promised to Abraham long before (Genesis 12).

Jesus referred to this story when he began his public ministry in Nazareth (Luke 4). Jesus rose to read in synagogue on a Saturday and chose a passage from Isaiah. The passage looked forward to the day when God's kingdom arrived, Israel's sins had been forgiven, and the blind made to see. When Jesus told his fellow Nazarenes that these words had been fulfilled on that very day, the gathered men responded angrily. Just who did Jesus think he was, after all!!! But Jesus didn't respond in kind; he simply reminded them of Elijah who had to flee from his angry fellow-Israelites and take refuge among the Gentiles, bringing God's life even to the foreigners. (see Luke 4:14-30, esp. 24-26).

#### *No food?*

When Elijah arrived at the outskirts of the town, he met a widow who was busy gathering some sticks and asked her for some water and a bit of bread. The widow assured him that she had little of either.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the drought had been so severe that she was headed home to make a small fire so that she and her son could eat what tiny amount was left and then die. It isn't at all surprising that the drought would fall hardest on a widow, who had little or no means of support without a husband or family.

But Elijah reassures her, telling her to go home and make some meal cakes for Elijah and for herself and her son. The jar with meal in it will never empty, he says, for the duration of the drought. And the same is true of her jug of oil. It too will always have oil in it.

And she did as Elijah said. She and her household ate well. Neither the jar of meal nor the jug of oil ever failed. It was just as YHWH had said it would be.

In this confrontation of YHWH and Baal, the widow has learned that Baal cannot bring the rain when YHWH has commanded a drought. Instead, it is YHWH who is the giver of life, the provider of daily needs – not only for the Israelites but for the Gentiles, even for those who worship false gods. All life begins with God and God alone.

#### *Back from the dead*

A second story of Elijah and the widow follows fast on the heels of the first one. Elijah has evidently been staying with the widow and her young son. Sadly, the boy has fallen ill and died. The widow confronts Elijah, sure that he and his God have brought this about. She seems quite confident that the arrival of Elijah, this man of God, has brought to light some sin she has committed and has punished her for it by taking the life of her son.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, she swears by the name of Elijah's God, the LORD God, not her own god.

Her reaction isn't as crazy as we might think. For the ancients, the gods were the causes of much of what happened in life. If you prospered, it was because the gods were pleased with you. If you suffered, it was because you had sinned or otherwise caused the gods to be displeased. This was the general perspective on life even in Jesus' day.<sup>3</sup>

But Elijah was going to show her otherwise. He took the dead boy and carried him upstairs, laying him out in Elijah's own bed. Then the prophet laid across the boy's body three times, imploring that YHWH would return the boy to life. We're told that YHWH listened to Elijah and "the life of the child came into him again."<sup>4</sup> Then Elijah picked up the boy and carried him back to his mother. The widow affirmed then her confidence that Elijah was a man of God and that "the word of the LORD in your mouth is true." Notice that she no longer speaks of "your God"; now it is simply "YHWH/ the LORD." The widow has come to see that the bringer and giver of life is truly YHWH and YHWH alone.

One more note, the boy is resuscitated (brought back to life), not resurrected (brought through death to a newly-embodied existence never to die again).

#### *Knowing the Life-Giver*

These are ancient stories, but it isn't very hard to get inside them, to make these stories our own. We still live in a world in which many people deny that the LORD God is the Life-Giver. Some may simply never give it much thought. Others may have looked for life in other gods. Still others have made themselves comfortable with the notion that life is simply the result of time and random mutation acting on a primordial soup.

But can we really understand life without knowing the Life-Giver? Can we find the meaning of life if we look any place other than the God-Who-Is? After all, who is the Resurrection and the Life? Is there any other?

#### *Jesus restores life to a widow's son*

Luke recounts for us a much briefer story of Jesus and a widow in the town of Nain. Her only son has died, probably leaving her destitute and fearful for the future. As the son's body is carried, Jesus sees the crying mother and tells her not to cry. He then goes to the palette on which the son's body is being carried. Jesus simply touches it and tells the son to rise. He does and is restored to his mother. . . . Just like that, no prayer spoken or implied. As the crowds would say later, "God has indeed come to help his people" 7:16).

Unlike Elijah, Jesus does not pray, for he is God incarnate, ushering in his kingdom of life and Spirit. It is God alone who is the giver of life. Jesus is indeed the Good News.

Finally, we turn a story of Peter praying that the giver of life would restore life to a much needed servant of widows.

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<sup>3</sup> The community that gave us the Dead Sea scrolls, for example, wouldn't let a handicapped or injured person hold office because their infirmity was assumed to have been punishment for sin. This community was located at Qumran, by the Dead Sea, and was active in Jesus' day.

<sup>4</sup>This is not a resurrection, which is passing through death to newly-embodied life that death can never touch. Instead, the boy is brought back to life, resuscitated, in something akin to being resuscitated after dying on an operating table. The boy went on to live the rest of his life and then die again. Only one person has been resurrected: Jesus. But when Jesus returns, we will all be resurrected, just as Jesus was.

## *Peter and Tabitha*

Tabitha lived in Joppa<sup>5</sup> and devoted herself to serving others, particularly widows. Widows led a hard life in ancient cultures; they needed all the help that Tabitha could provide. She worked so hard for the widows, running from one place to another, that she earned the nickname, the “gazelle.” When Tabitha fell ill and died, the widows were terrified – who would look after them? It seems that Peter’s reputation as a healer was widespread, for Tabitha’s friends sent for Peter, thinking that he can raise the dead! When Peter arrived, he was met by the widows who showed him garments that Tabitha had made, tangible evidence of Tabitha’s charity. Going upstairs, Peter asked everyone to leave the room. Alone with the body, Peter knelt and prayed.

We don’t know the content of Peter’s prayer, but we don’t really need to. From beginning to end, the Bible is filled with the stories of “pray-ers.” David prays for forgiveness. Solomon prays for wisdom. Elijah throws himself across the body of a dead boy and prays that God would revive him. On the eve of his death, Jesus prays that another path forward might open for him. In Joppa, Peter prays that Tabitha might be returned to life and she is! This is not magic; it is God’s power at work through Peter’s close communion with his Lord.

Sometimes we are tempted to view such miraculous answers to prayer as those rare occasions when God (whom we mistakenly think of as a sort of absentee landlord) chooses to intervene in the natural order of life. But this is not the biblical view. Instead, God is active and caring in the world, in our lives, every day and in all ways. Prayer is not a once-in-awhile request. Peter lived in unceasing conversation with God, confident that God listens and loves and acts.

And on this occasion, God, yet again, brought life to the dead. Good News!

## **Scott Engle’s Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Judges*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *Acts*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

### **Scott’s Sunday Class**

This week: *Digging Deeper*: “Blind Batimaeus”

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<sup>5</sup>This is modern-day Jaffa and is part of metropolitan Tel Aviv, on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page.  
Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.