

2 Kings 4:17-37

God's Goodness Has the Last Word

Good things often bring with them some bad. Imagine kids asking for a dog. They envision only the positives; it will be great. "Yes, we know it's a big responsibility. Yes, I'll take care of it, feed it, walk it, clean up after it, please please please!!" Then the novelty wears off, reality sets in, and so does the trouble and hassle of having a dog. People who once complained about not having a dog then start complaining about the dog, and about the responsibilities that go with it.

Good things often bring with them some bad. But **God's Goodness Has the Last Word**. That's what the woman in 2 Kings 4 discovered.

17 But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her. This woman was from the town of Shunem. We often refer to her as the Shunammite woman, because we aren't told her name. What we are told is that she was a well-to-do woman, and that she was a generous host. Whenever the prophet Elisha passed by Shunem, she opened their home to him. She even had her husband build a guest room for him to stay in whenever he needed it.

Now, her pregnancy and birth was not a typical one. The woman and her husband had no children, and it seems that it wasn't for lack of trying or wanting. So in the verse just before we picked things up this morning, Elisha told her, "**About this time next year...you will hold a son in your arms.**" Normally in the Bible, an improbable birth points to a special situation. A mother unable to have a child receives an announcement from God that she will finally have one. And normally, that child would be important or necessary for the big picture of salvation—Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, John the Baptist—they all were necessary for carrying on the line of the Savior or for saving the spiritual health of Israel. But this Shunammite woman didn't ask for a son, and she didn't need one to carry on the line of the Savior or save Israel. This is just God doing something nice for her.

Sometimes God gives, just because. Think about blessings in your life that God has given you, things that aren't necessary for your salvation, things that you could have survived without. Yet God gave them to you just because. He is generous, he is good, he is thoughtful.

But sometimes good things bring with them some bad. God gave her a gift she didn't ask for; then he took it away. The son of the Shunammite woman grew to be a boy, and then something terrible happened. We don't know if it was some kind of injury or disease or sunstroke, but the boy complained of pain in his head, and before the day was over, he was dead. It's one of the greatest fears of a parent. And how especially cruel this death seems! The woman hadn't asked for a son. She seems to have accepted the fact that she would never have children. She was prepared to live out her life that way, and it was ok. Then God gave her a child just because he wanted to, and she loved this unexpected gift. But now she had to deal with the pain and heartache of losing a child, something she would never have experienced had she remained childless. It seems like a cruel prank.

God's gifts can bring with them some bad. But which do we find much easier to focus on? Many of the complaints and worries that we have in life are not about what we don't have, but about what we do have. The fact that you stress over your children's behavior and future means that he has blessed you with children. The fact that you get frustrated over clutter and maintenance means that he has blessed you with possessions and assets. The fact that you complain about your job or your coworkers or taxes means that God has blessed you with income. The fact that students complain about teachers who call out missing work or bad behavior means that God has blessed them with teachers who care. Much of our grumbling and complaining and crabbiness is a direct result of God's gifts. What a self-centered, spoiled response! And when God decides to take away one or two of these gifts, our whole mood and attitude reveals that we thought we were entitled to it in the first place. It's evidence that maybe we're not as good and godly as we might like to think, not as quick to say with Job, "**The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.**"

We can be honest and realistic about this: "Having" does set us up for losing and for mourning. But here's the thing. God doesn't take away to be cruel. It is the same loving, generous, thoughtful God who takes away. ("The *LORD* gave and the *LORD* has taken away," not the mean, cruel judge.) This is not to minimize the pain of losing a child. I can't think of much that would be worse in this world. But today's Scripture readings make something pretty clear: the most precious gifts that God has given he has the ability to give back. He makes sure that we don't end with the bad. He gives life. He takes life. But he will give life back.

That's what we say several times a month—"I believe in the resurrection of the dead." God is the giver of life. Dead bodies will come alive again. Lazarus was one. It happened to the Shunammite's son. **32 When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. 33 He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. 34 Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy's body grew warm. 35 Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.**

These do not promise that God will raise people from the dead in *this* life. These are exceptional, rare situations. But they do show that God has the power to do it. In fact, Jesus is the power to do it. Notice that Elisha prayed to God for the boy's life. Jesus simply told Lazarus to come out. He said "**I am the resurrection and the life.**" He has power even over death. Even though there are many things that mankind has conquered and tamed and cured, death remains the undefeated opponent. Even Lazarus and this Shunammite boy died again. No treatment, medicine, or preventative routine can fend off death. The people in your life that God has given you will die. You will die too. But Jesus has power over death.

He showed that when he raised Lazarus. He showed that when he himself came back to life. And he doesn't hoard that power for himself. "**The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.**" Death is the result of your failure to be perfectly good and godly. But Jesus on the cross died the death that is separation from God. He did that as your substitute, so justice would

be served for your sins. With that punishment paid, your physical death will not be combined with eternal death. No, now the one who believes Jesus will live.

That's why the Bible often refers to death as a sleep. It's not just a euphemism—trying to make it sound nicer than it is. It's reality. Death is a sleep. Jesus said at the tomb of Lazarus, **“Whoever lives by believing in me will never die.”** Will never die, even though they die. Jesus turns death into sleep. The same thing that happens to you when you go to bed at night will happen to you when you die. You've done it thousands and thousands of times. You close your eyes, lose consciousness, and wake up. The next night you do it again. Close your eyes, lose consciousness, wake up. You've done it so many times that it's not a frightening experience. You know what's going to happen. You know you're going to wake up. Because Jesus died the death of your sins, because he rose from the dead, you can face death the same way you face sleep. You've had a lot of practice! You will close your eyes, lose consciousness, and then you'll wake up. You will wake up to the eternal day, to the new heavens and new earth, with your body in a state of no more mourning, crying, sadness, or pain, as you interact once again with those who have died in Christ, and as you see Jesus face to face.

My children go to school at Neenah Lutheran School. This week, the husband of the second grade teacher suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. She came home from school to discover that the Lord had taken that gift away. It's so sad, so tragic. But it's not the end. This is a gift that she will get back. Because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, his body will wake up. And so will hers. And so will yours.

She didn't see that day coming. Many times death strikes unexpectedly. That's why we fill ourselves with these words and truths of God now. That's why we come here, that's why we teach it in our schools, that's why my kids go to that school. We sit here now and we teach our children these things, not so much because it makes them feel good now, but because it's preparing them for the future, ready for the day when God takes away gifts, so we can face those moments with trust, knowing that the LORD has not abandoned his goodness and has not left us, even if he takes something away. We'll even be prepared for when he takes away life, so we can grieve not like the rest of people who have no hope, but through the tears know that this isn't the end. God gives good gifts, and that will never stop. And when bad accompanies the good, we'll keep our eyes focused on the goodness of the Giver, and remember that his goodness will have the last word.