

**1 Kings 17:17-24** <sup>17</sup> Now it happened after these things that the son of the woman who owned the house became sick. And his sickness was so serious that there was no breath left in him. <sup>18</sup> So she said to Elijah, "What have I to do with you, O man of God? Have you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?" <sup>19</sup> And he said to her, "Give me your son." So he took him out of her arms and carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. <sup>20</sup> Then he cried out to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow with whom I lodge, by killing her son?" <sup>21</sup> And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him." <sup>22</sup> Then the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. <sup>23</sup> And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. And Elijah said, "See, your son lives!" <sup>24</sup> Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now by this I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is the truth."

**Luke 7:11-17** Now it happened, the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. <sup>12</sup> And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. <sup>13</sup> When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup> Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." <sup>15</sup> So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother. <sup>16</sup> Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen up among us"; and, "God has visited His people." <sup>17</sup> And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region.

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We have all heard the stories. The heart stops. The brain waves cease. The person sees the long hallway. The bright light. Peacefulness. Calmness. These are the key elements to any near death experience.

Today, in both our Old Testament lesson and in our Gospel lesson, we have what I will deem for the purposes of today's sermon not near death experiences but rather near life experiences. Allow me to first retell the stories and then I will explain exactly what I mean by near life experiences.

In our Old Testament lesson, Elijah, the great prophet, is staying with a woman and her son. Shortly after his arrival, the son falls sick and dies. This woman, a widow, is sure that God is bringing this calamity upon her to punish her for some past sin. Elijah takes the child and pleads with God to restore his life. He stretches out his body three times on the boy, and God miraculously restores his life. Elijah gives the woman back her son alive.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus sees a widow from the town of Nain in a funeral procession for her only son, the only true family she had left. Jesus feels compassion for her, stops the procession, and tells the young man to rise, and he does. Jesus gives the woman back her son alive. The people were amazed and rejoiced.

Why would I then call these events only *near* life experiences? Am I trying to cast doubt on the true nature of the miracle preformed? Not certainly not. In both cases, the men raised to life were dead, as dead as can be. And after God did His work on them they were alive, as alive as one can be here on earth. But there comes my point. Tradition holds that all of people who were raised by Jesus lived quite long lives in order that they could testify to Jesus' power over death. But tradition holds that likewise they also did eventually die again. You see the life that Jesus restored to them was earthly life, the kind you and I live right now.

And the earthly life we live now can at best be considered near life. For this life is not as God intended it to be. It is filled with sin, disease, and death, three things God never intended to have in the paradise He created. But, thanks be to Jesus, we will experience real life some day. We know that on that last day when our Lord returns we will be raised from our graves. Jesus will stand over our tombs and say, "Arise." And, by the power of His Word, we will. And the life that will be granted to us will be real life, free of sin, disease, and death. In comparison then, even the most miraculous stories of the bible, those of people being raised from the dead to more earthly life, can be said to only be *near* life experiences. For even those who were raised and believed in Jesus still awaited real life, the way God intended. They, like us, wait for the last day will receive real life, the kind of life that does not end.

But that all said, what does Elijah raising the widow's son in his day and Jesus raising the Widow at Nain's son have to do with that final resurrection. Are they completely different events, or is there some connection between the two? What do these *near* life experiences have to do with the real life we will one day have?

Well, to put it simply, the resurrection that God preformed through Elijah and the resurrection that God Himself in the flesh preformed are foretastes of that final resurrection to come. You see when the kingdom comes in its fullness, all who believe will be raised. In Jesus day, there were many who believed and died. But only a few were raised. These few were raised in order though that everyone might know that Jesus has power

over death. When Jesus raised someone from the dead, it was as if He reached into heaven and brought the kingdom which is to come into that person's life right then. And this is not only true of His resurrection miracles. When Jesus healed a disease, it too showed the power Jesus has over disease that He will exercise fully on that Last Day as well. You see when the King is around, the kingdom comes and so when Jesus is around, foretastes of that final heavenly kingdom came as well.

So also, when we see people healed in our time, or even people essentially brought back from the dead, we also should be reminded of God's power over sin, disease, and death. We should view these events as Jesus reaching into heaven and bringing the kingdom which is to come into our lives right now.

Christ with His death on the cross and His resurrection Easter morning assured us that the kingdom would come in its fullness. He assured us that the people of God would end up in a place where no sin, no disease, and not even death could touch them. But all of those blessings were not delivered in full to His people right away. The Scriptures remind us that God's people will only fully receive all of these blessings which Jesus won on that Last Day. But until that Day, God gives us occasional glimpses of what heaven will be like to keep our hope sustained. He did this through Elijah, He did it in the person of Christ, and He continues to do it today. He does that each time we are healed in our bodies. He does that each time He calms our worried minds. And He does it each time He allows us to come into His presence for the Lord's Supper. In each of these ways, He gives us a taste of the kingdom to come.

And so long as we receive these events for what they are, our hope will be sustained by them. But we must be careful. For there are two errors we can all too easily make.

First, we can forget that these things are in fact the kingdom coming right now. We can believe especially in this day and age that every healing in our bodies is just evidence of medicine's power over bacteria rather than God's power over disease. We can believe that a person brought back from near death is just an example of a doctor's knowledge outsmarting bodily processes rather than the kingdom of God being made manifest. Likewise, we can believe that the Lord's Supper is just a pleasant ritual rather than stepping into the presence of our King Jesus, of experiencing the kingdom which is to come right now.

But we can also err in the opposite way. At the other extreme we can become too satisfied with *near* life experiences and in so doing, forget that real life is still on the way. This evidences itself when we find ourselves quick to pray for our healing and health on this earth, but slow to pray for our Lord Jesus to return. It evidences itself in churches that exist only to promise miracles of healing and forget to talk about the real life to come that was assured by our Lord Jesus on Calvary. And it is made evident when we do not think of the kingdom coming it is fullness when we step up to the communion rail. Just as earthquakes, wars and rumors of war remind us that the Last Day is coming, so also things like healing, peace, and the Lord's Supper remind us of what stands on the other side of that Last Day for us Christians.

Each of us at times can be dragged into either of these false views. So today, we admit to our Lord that at times we have failed to view these *near* life experiences in our lives with amazement assuming them to be just scientific realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We admit that at other times we have viewed things like healing with too much amazement as if they are the only thing for which we hope as Christians. For going to either extreme, we return to our Lord. We ask His forgiveness. And as He forgives us, He also restores to us right thinking. He allows us through His Holy Spirit to once again view *near* life experiences as they should be viewed, as the gracious coming of the kingdom into our lives that points us to the real life ahead. Amen.