

## When to get your hopes up.

### Introduction.

“Don’t get your hopes up.” That has been one of the big messages throughout this pandemic.

- Will our holiday happen? Don’t get your hopes up.
- Will I be able to have my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday? Don’t get your hopes up.
- Will I be able to go to attend the footy finals? Don’t get your hopes up.
- Will this lockdown only be 5 days? Don’t get your hopes up.

We say that to one another because we’ve seen the way this pandemic has dashed the hopes of so many of our plans. Last year I married three different couples in lockdown. And, as much as these couples rejoiced over the fact that they could still be married, all of them, had to accept the bitter fact that some of their long-held hopes would not come to pass. No physical bodies sitting in the pews, no parents walking them down the aisle, no wonderful after party with friends and family.

It’s all kind of sad isn’t it. So many good things we hope to happen, now tainted by that “don’t get your hopes up” reality. Wouldn’t it be good if instead of the message “don’t get your hopes up”, we heard the words – “Get your hopes up – and keep them there” because, *no matter what happens*, you will not be disappointed.

That is the message I think God is giving us in the story of the Shunammite woman. God is showing us that his good promises and the hope we put in them, will not fail – even in the face of death.

So what we’ll do is look at this story in three parts: Hope mercifully realized, Hope seemingly ruined, Hope powerfully renewed. We’ll then think about how this passage applies to us in light of God’s greater hope of life now given in Jesus.

### 1. Hope Mercifully Realised. (vv.8-17)

So first, Hope mercifully realised.

What do you give to someone who appears to have everything? Maybe you’ve faced that dilemma when buying a Christmas or birthday present for someone. He just has everything! I don’t know what to get him? And that’s where gift cards come into the equation – they are the gift that says – “I have no idea what you need, so please figure that one out on your own.” What do you get someone who appears to have everything?

That is Elisha’s dilemma at the start of our passage tonight? Twice Elisha asks about the well-to-do shunemite woman:

- “*What can be done for you?*” (v.13)

And again in verse 14:

- “*What can be done for her?*”

Elisha was desperate to give *something* to this Israelite woman who had given so much to him. And she had been very kind to him hadn’t she?

Verse 8 tells us that this well-to-do woman gave generously of her resources to help Elisha. Every time he came by, she would invite him in for a meal.

But she wasn't satisfied with just *feeding* him. Verse 9 tells us that she even remodel her house so that Elisha had a place to stay as well.

Elisha gets a fully decked-out guest room (v.10) with all the trimmings (bed, table, chair, lamp). He could stay there whenever he liked, free of charge. He could relax, do some study, prepare a sermon, and then come down for dinner. I reckon that sounds great!

And so does Elisha. That's why he is so keen to return the favour for her.

But, to come back to the question I just raised, "what do you give to someone who appears to have everything" – like this well to do woman of Shunem?

It's clear that Elisha doesn't want to go the gift-card option and so after some serious thinking, he puts out his first suggestion (v.13):

*Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army? "*

"We've got few handy connections, perhaps we can put in a good word for you?"

But, she's not really interested in that is she?

"Thanks but no thanks Elisha... I have a home among my own people (v.13)." That is, I have everything I need right here in my home and community. But thank you!

Suggestion number 2, comes not from Elisha but his servant Gehazi, who says to him in verse 14:

*"She has no son, and her husband is old."* "If you could do something about that, I reckon she'd be pretty happy."

I can imagine Elisha thinking this one through "No Son eh? Husband getting old? What's her future going to look like? Who's going to look after her in the years after her hubby dies? Yep, good thinking Gehazi?

And so he calls the woman and presents his/God's gift (v.16):

<sup>16</sup> *"About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms."*

Where the first suggestion falls flat, *this* offer hits the mark powerfully.

A son... That's the gift you give to *this* woman who appears to have everything. You see, it turns out that this was the one thing that she didn't have but desperately longed for deep down.

And that's why she is so careful not to get her hopes up when she hears it. Look at what she says (v.16):

*"No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!"*

"Elisha, this issue is pretty raw for me... please don't toy with my emotions. Please don't get my hopes up."

But there is no misleading. Because in the very next verse we read:

*<sup>17</sup> 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's deepest hope had been mercifully realised in the birth of her son. And I just want to pause briefly to reflect on the kindness of God in this picture.

If you know a bit about the story line of the Bible, you'll know that this isn't the first, or last time God fulfills the longing of a childless woman.

We see it first with the elderly Sarah (wife of Abraham) (Gen 11), then Rebekah (Gen 25), then Rachel (Gen 29), then Samson's mother (Judges 13), then Samuel's mother, Hannah (1 Sam 1), **then this widow (2 Kings 4)**, then you see it happen again in the NT with Elizabeth, John the baptizer's mum (Lk 1).

But there is something unique about the woman of *our* passage compared to all the other women in that list.

In all those *other* cases the child born to the woman serves a huge purpose. Like Isaac, they might be essential for the continuation of the covenant people of God. Or like the babies Samson or Samuel they might be used by God to lead His people through a particular crises.

It's different here though. The boy born to this Shunemmite woman is *not* essential to the continuity of Israel nor does he become an outstanding leader. As one commentator pointed out, he probably just farmed his property and then died again. So what's the point? The point is to show us God's character – sometimes he does things simply because He is kind and compassionate. And it's good for us to remember this because sometimes God gets a bad rap – particularly in the OT. Sometimes he's painted as a bit of an ogre who is only interested in condemnation and punishment.

I was speaking with someone who isn't a Christian recently and she made the comment that, in her understanding of the OT God comes across as a little "Judgy". I.e. – not really the God you'd really like to meet.

But isn't the God of this woman the God you'd like to meet? Yes God is shows justice on sin and evil (which is good actually!) but he is also kind and merciful to hurting and needy people – throughout the Bible. We saw that last week, with the no-name widow. We see it tonight. And the apostle James tells us that God's kind nature hasn't changed.

*<sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

The Kind God who gives a son to this woman is the same kind God who gives of his Son to save sinners.

## 2. Hope Seemingly Ruined (vv.18-28)

So, hope mercifully realized. Second. Hope seemingly ruined.

There is nothing more fearful for parents than the thought of losing their child. I mentioned earlier in this year how one of our daughters went missing at the beach last summer. That is the most terrified I have ever been. I cannot imagine the feeling of that fear becoming reality – which is what happens to this woman. All her new founds hopes of watching him grow, seeing him marry, have kids – crushed. Her deepest hope had been realised. Her deepest hope now seems ruined. Look at verses 18-19:

*<sup>18</sup> The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. <sup>19</sup> He said to his father, “My head! My head!”*

Now Dad’s not entirely sure what to do, so like every wise Dad he looks for Mum’s help. He tells a servant to carry the boy to his mum. His mum then tries to comfort the boy on her lap but things just deteriorate and in verse 20 we read those words every parent fears the most – *“and then he died.”*

How would you respond to this? I think I’d just collapse in uncontrollable sobbing. Now, I’m sure this woman feels like doing that too, but notice how she composes herself in this moment. There will be time for grief, but right now, the only thing she wants is to speak to Elisha.

He had got her hopes up, she had seen them crash down... and she wants him to know about it. From verse 21-27 she is single-minded in her pursuit of him.

When her confused husband asks what’s going on (v.23), she kind of brushes him off: “things are all right... I just need to go.”

And when she gets to where Elisha is, she brushes Gehazi off too. When Elisha sends him comes out to her with the question.

*‘Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?’*

*“Everything is all right,” she said.”* Perfectly fine thanks, I just need to see Elisha.

It’s only in verse 27, when she has locked on to her target that all the grief finally comes out:

*<sup>27</sup> When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.”*

In her bitter distress this woman clings to Elisha's feet and cries out "why!?".

When you hear the quote: "Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all." Do you agree or do you disagree?

What do you think the woman of our passage would have done if Elisha had said to her in that moment? "Well, I guess It's better to have loved your son and lost him, than never to have loved him at all?"

I think she would have slapped him. Listen to her words in verse 28:

*<sup>28</sup> "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?"*

"I told you don't get my hopes up. I told you not to toy with my emotions. Now I'm devastated. My hope is ruined. You need to this Elisha. God needs to hear this.

I suspect most of us get where this woman is coming from. If God simply raises our hopes only to then dash those hopes to pieces, what kind of God is that? And why would I want to follow Him? Well, thankfully our passage and the woman's hope doesn't end here. Her hope seems ruined now, but it will be powerfully renewed as God brings life in the face of death.

### **3. Hope Powerfully Renewed (vv29-37).**

Point 3 – Hope powerfully renewed.

When Elisha sees the bitter distress of his friend, he immediately seeks to help her. But did you notice, his first attempt at help kind of falls flat.

He tells his servant, Gehazi, in verse 29, to quickly run ahead with Elisha's staff in hand, lay it on the boy's face.. But if you jump ahead a little to verse 31, we see that approach come up empty.

*...there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, "The boy has not awakened."*

It's unusual in the narratives of Elijah and Elisha that the first approach of the prophet doesn't bear fruit. So what's going on with this scene? Well, I think, it's giving us the reminder that we need in 1 and 2 Kings – that it is actually the power of *God*, not the power of the *prophet* that is needed to bring life – and in this case, life to the dead! And that's why the narrator highlights the fact that Elisha brought to his knees dependant prayer to God. The Woman convinces Elisha himself to come and when he walks into the room, sees the dead boy on his bed, we read:s

*<sup>33</sup> He went in, shut the door on the two of them and **prayed** to the LORD.*

But he does just use words in his petition to God. Like Elijah had done back in 1 Kings 17 – Elisha uses acted out symbols – he stretches himself out over the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands (v.34). And verse 35 tells us that he does that a second time. People have often been confused by Elisha’s actions here, but I think it’s best to understand them as a way of Elisha saying to God: “As life runs through the entirety of *my* body – may it run through the entirety of this boy’s body.

And *God* responds doesn’t he. Life returns to the boy. He sneezes seven times then opens his eyes (v.35). Covid has made us all run from sneezes today. But I’m sure they weren’t running, but rejoicing.

*<sup>36</sup> Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite.” And he did. When she came, he said, “Take your son.” <sup>37</sup> She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.*

This woman wasn’t just given her son back that day, she was given a renewed (super-charged) faith in God’s life-saving power that would stay with her for ever.

Think about how this would have changed things for her and her son for the rest of their life together:

- Let’s say a drought came to Shunem in the years that followed – I could imagine her saying: “It’s okay son, there is still hope. If God could bring *you* back from the dead, He can bring us through this.”
- Let’s say, in years to come this faithful family was persecuted by Israel’s baal worshipping elite – “It’s okay son, don’t be afraid, there’s still hope. If God can bring *you* back from the dead, we can trust Him with this.”

Hope realized. Hope ruined. Hope powerfully renewed by the faithful God who brings life in the face of death.

### **Christ Connection**

This woman’s experience is telling you that if you want the kind of hope that meets your deepest need and cannot be destroyed you will find it in the God of this passage. He is the God who is in the business of providing hope that lasts – even in the face of death. He gave wonderful hope to this woman, he gives a greater hope to you in His Son Jesus Christ.

You see, this passage in many ways serves as a foretaste or preview of the better hope of life that Jesus offers to those who trust in Him. Throughout his life, Jesus showed he had power to raise the dead. In fact, in a town called Nain (which was very close to Shunem) Jesus gave back another only son to a grieving mother. He did this to show us that *He* now is the One we must turn to for a greater hope of life in the face of death. When Jesus died on the cross for our sins, he freed us from the penalty of death and gave to us the gift of eternal life. As Jesus says in John 11:

*<sup>25</sup> “I am the resurrection and the life [Jesus says in John 11]. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.*

The boy's resurrection in this passage *is* amazing. But the hope of life Jesus gives to you is so much better.

- The boy *was* raised from the dead – but it wasn't lasting. He simply returned to this broken and sinful world, grew old and then died again.
- Jesus promises a resurrection from the dead that will be eternal. And it won't be more of this life as we know it. It will be life with God in which there will be no more pain, sickness or suffering.

But how do we know that Jesus promise of heaven and resurrection life is for real? The thought of eternal, bodily, joyful life after death is something most human hearts long for. But how do we know that promise is solid? You might be like the woman and thin. No! Don't mislead me. Please don't get my hopes up Jesus. Why should we get our hopes up? Because Jesus has shown in His *own* resurrection that He can deliver on His promise of *our* resurrection.

It reminds me of a really interesting fact I learnt a while ago about the Rialto tower in Melbourne's CBD. If you've ever been up to the observation deck, you'll know that it has these huge floor to ceiling windows that gives you an amazing view of the city. Now apparently, when Rialto was first built in 1986 there were actually a number of voices raising concern over the integrity and safety of floor to ceiling windows. People were genuinely worried that someone might trip, crash through the glass and plummet to their death.

So, to answer these concerns, the owner of the company that built Rialto, Bruno Grollo (a big and burly man) did something shocking. In front of a number of people, he took a running leap into these big floor to ceiling windows... and wouldn't you know it, he bounced right off.

The boss, himself proved that his windows were not only visually spectacular, but built to last.

In a similar way, God's big boss, His promised King Jesus shows us that His promise of life not only *sounds* spectacular but actually holds up. Jesus, himself, runs directly into death, only to bounce back to life.

Jesus laid down his own life for sinners, but had full confidence that He would take it back up again through the power of God. Jesus was telling the truth when He said He would rise again. Jesus is telling the truth, when He says He will rise us up at the last day if we trust in Him.

As Paul says in 2 Cor 4:14

*<sup>14</sup> ...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself.*

## **Implications**

So what do we do with all this?

Well, first, I think this is a call to get your hopes up and keep them there when it comes to God's good promise of resurrection life in Jesus.

The story of this woman and her son shows us that God is not in the business of dishing out faulty hope. It always comes through gloriously in the end.

In Jesus, God is giving us the glorious and sure hope that He will raise us up at the last day. Though physical death comes to all of us, it will not be the end for those who trust in Jesus.

During Covid we have gotten used to hearing the words: “Don’t get your hopes up.” Isn’t it good to hear God telling us to “Get your hopes up – and keep them there!”

Don’t settle for hopes that disappoint. So much of the time, we go through our life settling for hopes that do not last or ultimately disappoint. Covid has taught us this.

- We put our hope in the perfectly planned weekend away – then a lockdown happens.
- We have great hopes for the perfect wedding day only to see numbers limited to 5 people.
- We put our hope in our job, only to see our role change or disappear under the changing economic circumstances.
- We put our hope in heading off to Melbourne for uni and experiencing all that fun-time-of-life has to offer – only to find ourselves sitting for most of the week, in our room on a computer.

Covid has exposed many of our usual hopes for what they are - poor substitutes for lasting hope.

If you haven’t done so already, put your hope in something much better that will last. Put your hope in God’s promise of eternal and resurrection life in Jesus. As Peter says in chapter 1:4:

*In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you*

If you want to investigate the claims of Jesus in further detail, please speak with me or someone else, or come and join us in CE. But like the woman in this passage, if you put your hope in God’s good promise, you won’t ultimately be disappointed. Get your hopes up.

So that’s the first thing I’d say – Get your hopes up when it comes to God’s promise of life in Jesus.

But the second thing I think this passage teaches us, is to keep holding on to hope in Jesus when the bitter times come. There will be moments that rattle your faith, cause confusion and great distress. Like the woman of this passage, as might have already found yourself going through extreme hardships as you wait for the full realization of God’s resurrection promise.

Sometimes we feel that bitter distress when:

- When we, like the woman lose a loved one.
- Or suffer great illness.
- Or experience job loss.
- Or go through a painful relationship breakdown.

In moments like these we need to be like the woman and take our cry to God – that’s essentially what she is doing when she goes to God’s prophet.

Despite what our doubts might tell us God does care, He does listen and He invites us to be honest with Him.



One commentator I read was overly critical of this woman's actions, suggesting she should have been more like Job in this moment and declaring that "the Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." But I'm not sure the text suggests we need to be critical of her. Elisha certainly doesn't scold her for her approach. It's the opposite! She is given space to express her bitter distress and then find renewed hope in the faithful God. Elisha literally says: "leave her alone" when his well-meaning servant tries to push her away.

In your distress, keep speaking to God, and clinging to the hope He gives you in Jesus. Hebrews 6 speaks of our hope in Jesus as an "anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

Maybe you're feeling a little adrift by some painful circumstances. Let me encourage you to anchor your soul to the hope of the new creation and resurrection life Jesus gives you. You might want some help with that. Myself and others are happy to do that with you.

### **Conclusion.**

I was reminded of God's hope of resurrection life recently when I needed to go and look after my Dad a few weeks ago. For those of you who don't know, my Dad has quite significant dementia. Dementia is a horrible and terminal condition. It strips a person of their memory, often their dignity, and then finally their life. In the eyes of the world, the person with dementia is in a kind of hopeless situation.

But something my Dad said to me really stood out when I was with him. We were both sitting at the kitchen table, Dad was a bit confused, and then simply said: "I know I can't do much. I know I can't remember much... But if I don't pull through all this, I know I'm going to Heaven."

Isn't that kind of hope something to stake your life on? The hope that says, this condition will not get the final say. Because Jesus had died for my sins He will also raise me to life one day, and I will have a new body, a new brain, and a new experience of life with my saviour that far outstrips any comfortable retirement lifestyle that others might get to enjoy in their senior years.

Because Dad's trust is in Jesus He can still get his hopes up – even in a seemingly hopeless situation like dementia. And when the day comes that he can't even remember his God, *we'll* get our hopes up for him – because though he might forget God, we know God will never forget him or His promise to Him.

May God give us all such a sure hope in Jesus. Let's pray.