

## Miraculously Focused

Looking over the lessons today, there are a couple of recurring, common themes. The one that immediately jumps out the most is the theme of *suffering*, which runs throughout all three texts. The widow from Zarephath suffers when her son dies. St. Paul suffers in prison as he writes to the Ephesians. There's also the widow from Nain, who suffers when her son dies. Suffering ties all these texts together. *Suffering ties us to these texts too.* We can relate—every one of us. Who among us hasn't suffered? Who among us hasn't had to grieve the death of a loved one? Some of you have even known the very same suffering as these two widows who had to bury their children. You've been there too.

And that brings us to another common theme: the miracle of the resurrection. You can't miss it. Both widows' suffering was turned to joy. Both these widows experienced a *profound miracle*—the resurrection of their beloved sons. More than that, it was by means of these resurrection miracles that people were brought to recognize and glorify almighty God. Elijah comes down the stairs with her now-alive son in his arms, and the widow of Zarephath states very plainly, *"Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the Word of the Lord in your mouth is Truth."* And the same can be said for the Nain townsfolk. *"A great prophet has risen among us! God has visited His people!"* They all see, and they all recognize and glorify God.

And I guess that's where we could look to each other and find commonality. *I wish I could experience some of that miraculous joy; some of that miraculous deliverance from suffering.* And understand: I'm not just talking about the resurrection of a loved one from the dead. Think of St. Paul. I'm not surprised at all that he can be so "joyously faithful," even as he's flogged and beaten and shipwrecked and confined to death row. He met Jesus face-to-face in blinding light and booming voice on that road to Damascus! He was rendered blind, and then given the miraculous gift of sight! *You know...I think a Damascus Road experience would change me too. I'd like to think that I would lament less and glorify God more if I was able to have a similar miraculous experience.*

But therein lay a couple of problems. *IF* we bore witness to such a powerful miracle, we would be changed. *If* we had a similar experience, we would glorify God. Note the conditional nature. Should it take a miracle to change you; to cause you to glorify God? Doesn't the Good News of your baptism—the miracle that God worked in putting His name on you and transferring you from eternal death to everlasting life—change you? *Isn't that enough?* Do you also notice where all the focus is in our desire for a miracle experience? It's on us. It's on our sufferings; our selfish desire to experience our definition of what it means to have our suffering turned into "joy." *"Thy will be done... except if I'm unhappy."*

What *if* your sufferings were turned into “joy”? What *if* you were instantly granted “happiness”? Would it change your relationship with Christ? *Should it?* What if your “happiness” isn’t in keeping with God’s good and mysterious will? Maybe we’re focusing on the wrong things.

Folks: Look to this cross. Here is the greatest compassionate miracle of all time. God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son. God doesn’t punish us children of Adam for our sin, even though we justly deserve His present and eternal punishment. *Instead—miraculously—He has compassion on us.* Notice where all the focus: On Christ and His cross; on God and His compassion and mercy and love for us. No, we don’t deserve any of it; not even a little. We haven’t earned any of it, and we’ll *never* be able to earn any of it, no matter how hard we try. This compassionate love and mercy and grace is a free and undeserved gift. Here is the miracle of God’s compassionate love for you and for all people, made flesh and hung on a cross to die for you. You need to think about what’s going on here. God is not indifferent to us and our suffering. Sin/Death grieves God so much that He gave His only-begotten Son to suffer all of it in your place. God took on flesh and died so that you may have life, and have it in eternal joyous abundance.

And this isn’t a “once upon a time” kind of miracle either. God’s compassionate love and mercy and grace is *ongoing*. This cruciform compassion is brought to us and graciously bestowed upon us as He continues to visit us and nourish us with His life-giving Word and Sacraments. He brings His cruciform victory over sin, death, and the grave to us. He brings His victory and His compassion to us, *even as we suffer; even in the midst of our sorrows and griefs.* That’s probably the most difficult thing for people to understand. Suffering hits, and we’re so quick to blame God, as if He’s abandoned us. We don’t recognize the Truth. God is right here, in all His grace and love and mercy and compassion, *even you walk through this veil of tears; even as you feel your crosses bearing down on you and crushing you under their terrible, sinful load.* “*I am with you always.*” Here He is, right where He promises to be.

And this is where a truly great miracle takes place in our lives: We hear this Good News *and we believe it.* Through the working of the Holy Spirit in these, God’s means of grace and life, we hear and hold fast. In faith and through faith we are able to recognize and glorify God, *even in the midst of our sufferings.* You see, faith just sees things differently. Even when all hell breaks loose in our lives and things are at their darkest, faith recognizes our loving and merciful God in our midst. Through faith, we understand that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him. He is working through the darkness and suffering to bring us (and others) closer to Him and His compassion. *He didn’t cause the pain and suffering, but He is working good out of such pain and suffering.* Faith understands this. Faith recognizes and runs to and holds fast to our loving God and

His miraculous compassion; compassion which He bestows upon us in very real and tangible ways—Word and Sacrament. The miracle of faith is that we glorify and praise God, *even as we suffer*, for His great mercy and compassion; for the fact that we are His, and nothing and no one can ever steal that away from us.

My prayer for you (and for me) is that through the God-given miracle of faith you are **always** able to recognize and glorify God in these very humble, yet powerful miracles of His grace and compassion. May it not take something tragic to get your attention and get you to finally look up and acknowledge God. And may you never cast *blame* on God for the suffering you are facing. May it not take something miraculous, like a resurrection from the dead, to get you to finally ***recognize and glorify God***. Instead, may the miracle of His resurrection and these, the fruits and gifts of His resurrection (Word and Sacrament), be all you ever need for all joy and peace and believing. ***May His compassion and real-presence visitation be your report and your glory, in every time and circumstance—better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness, in health...always.***

And now may this ever-abiding and unfailing compassion and peace of our Lord and Savior strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith, and may this same compassionate peace be and remain with you always.

In His name and to His glory...**AMEN.**