THE SEVEN SNEEZES

NO. 1461A

A SERMON
WRITTEN AT MENTONE
BY C. H. SPURGEON

"The child sneezed seven times."
2 Kings 4:34

THE child was dead. Although he had been the special gift of divine promise, and was therefore doubly prized by his parents, yet the little lad was not secure from the common hazards of life. He was in the harvest field in the heat of the day, and a sunstroke smote him down. His father bade one of his young men carry him home, and he died on his mother's knees.

The brave woman was heartbroken, but being full of energy and spirit, she rode off to Elisha, the man of God, to tell him her sorrow, and to upbraid him with the short-lived blessing which had come to her through his prayers. She clung to the prophet in the hour of her bitter sorrow, and he with his whole heart sympathized in her motherly grief.

He hastened to the chamber where the dead child was laid upon the bed, and there alone he exercised the sacred power of prayer—again and again he wrestled, and at length prevailed—so that in the glad Shunammite's case it was true that "women received their dead raised to life again." Such is the power of faith when it uses the weapon of all prayer—even the gates of the grave cannot prevail against it.

The prophet's mode of operation when he lay upon the child and put his mouth upon the boy's mouth, "and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands," is full of instruction. Spiritual life is the gift of God, but if the dead are to be raised by our means, we must enter into hearty sympathy with them. We must create spiritual contact, and become in a great measure identified with those whom we would bless.

The Holy Spirit works by those who feel that they would lay down their own lives for the good of others, and would impart to them not only their goods and their instructions, but themselves also, if by any means they might save some. O for more Elishas, for then we should see more sinners raised from their death in sin.

The first clear evidence that the child was restored to life was his sneezing. Doubtless, it greatly rejoiced the prophet's heart. We, too, who are seeking the good of others will greatly exult if we are favored to see gracious tokens in those for whose good we labor.

At all Gospel meetings, earnest people should be on the look-out for persons convicted of sin, aroused in conscience, or in any other manner made to feel the power of the life-giving Spirit. It will be well if these persons watch with instructed eyes, so that they do not look for what they will never see, nor overlook that which should give them full content.

Of natural life we may discern the tokens more readily than those of spiritual life. We need practice and experience in reference to this more mysterious matter or we may cause great pain to ourselves and to those whom we would befriend. Possibly we may gather instruction from the signs of life which contented the prophet—the child sneezed seven times.

This evidence of life was very *simple*. Nothing is freer from art than a sneeze. It is so far from being artificial that it is involuntary. As a rule, we sneeze not because we will, but because we must. No instruction, education, talent, or acquirement is necessary to a sneeze, nor even to a series of seven sneezes—it is the act of a child or of an illiterate peasant quite as much as of a philosopher or a divine.

Yet Elisha asked no further evidence of life. He did not require the little lad to repeat a Psalm, or walk a mile, or climb a tree. He knew that he was alive although the act of the newly-given life was of

the most elementary kind. Just so, let us feel thankful when we hear the first groan of distress or see the first tear of repentance.

Hopefulness is a helpful element in the success of those who have to deal with seeking sinners. We ought not to expect too much of inquirers. We ought not to be satisfied without signs of *life*, but the faintest sign of life ought to encourage *us* and lead us to encourage *them.*

Very little knowledge can be looked for in inquirers. Elisha did not ask the child to say his catechism. Very little strength will be found in them. Elisha did not bid the child move the table, and the stool, and the candlestick with which the room was furnished. No, the sneeze proved life, though it was inarticulate, and the uninstructed expression of untrained vitality.

Repentance for sin, desire after holiness, child-like trust in Jesus, tearful prayer, careful walking, delight in the Word of God, and intense self-distrust are among the elementary tokens of life—the sneezes of those freshly raised from the dead. Such tokens are to be seen in all the truly living in Zion, whether old or young, and hence they are not proofs of *growth*, but of life—and it is life that we have to deal with at first—growth is an after consideration.

Elisha did not leave the child upon the bed till he had developed into a man, but as soon as he had heard him sneeze, he said to the mother, "Take up thy son." And we would earnestly say to every church in whose midst a soul has been born unto God, "Take up thy son." Receive the convert, though he be weak in the faith. Carry the lamb in your bosom, cherish, and nurture him till life has girded itself with manly strength.

This evidence of life was *in itself unpleasant.* To the child it was no pleasure to sneeze. We should most of us prefer to be excused from sneezing seven times. Many of the surest marks of the new life are by no means pleasurable.

The regenerate are not at once happy—on the other hand, they are often in great bitterness for their sins, and in sore anguish because they have pierced their Savior. The divine life is not born into the world without pangs. When a man has been nearly drowned, and animation is restored by rubbing, the first movements of the blood within the veins causes tingling and other sensations which are exquisitely painful.

Sin causes numbness of soul, and this is attended by an absence of sensation—this is changed when life comes with its look of faith, for the first result is that men look on Him whom they have pierced, and mourn for Him.

Some regard pleasurable emotions as the clearest signs of grace, but they are not so. "I am so happy," is frequently a far less certain token than, "I am so grieved because I have sinned." We do not think much of the song of "Happy Day," unless it has been preceded by the mournful ditty—

"O that my load of sin were gone!"

A sneeze, again, is not very musical to those who hear it, and so the first signs of grace are not in themselves pleasing to those who are watching for souls. Our minds may be greatly pained to see the sorrow and despondency of the stricken heart, and yet that which we see may be none the less a certain sign of renewed life.

We cannot take delight in heartbreak and convulsion of soul when considered in themselves—on the contrary, our earnest endeavor is to apply the balm of the Gospel, and remove such pains. Yet are they among the most assured marks of the life of God in the soul in its earlier stages, and we ought to be thankful whenever we see them.

That which worldlings condemn as melancholy is often to us a hopeful sign of thoughtfulness. And the self-despair which the ignorant deplore is cause for congratulation among those who pray for conversions. We delight in the sorrows of penitents because of their results—otherwise we take no delight in human grief, but the very reverse.

"The child sneezed seven times," the evidences of life were very *monotonous*. Again and again there came a sneeze and nothing else. No song, no note of music, not even one soft word, but sneeze, sneeze, sneeze, seven times. Yet the noises wearied not the prophet, who was too glad to hear the sounds of life to be very particular about their musical character. The child lived, and that was enough for him.

Much of the talk of inquirers is very wearisome—they tell the same melancholy tale over and over again. Answered a score times, they return to the same questions and repeat the same doubts. If one were seeking interest and variety, he would not look for it in the painful repetitions of persons under conviction of sin.

But when we are watching for men's souls, we do not grow weary, yet in themselves the utterances of the newly awakened are frequently among the most tiresome of communications. They are often difficult to understand, involved, confused, and even absurd. They frequently betray culpable ignorance, and sinful obstinacy, combined with pride, unbelief, and self-will—and yet in them there is a secret something which betokens an awakening to the higher life, and therefore we cheerfully lend our ear.

After days of exhortation and consolation, we find them still floundering in the Slough of Despond, sticking fast in the mire, out of which they seem half unwilling to be drawn. We must render them the same help over and over again, and point out the stepping stones for the hundredth time. Better that our service should be monotonous than that a soul should perish.

The poor child may sneeze seven times if it will, and we will gladly hear it, for it is a joy to know that it lives—and our poor neighbor may repeat his painful story until seventy times seven, if therein we can discover traces of the work of the Spirit upon his soul.

Let us not be disappointed because at the first we get so little which is interesting from young converts. We are not examining them for the ministry—we are only looking for evidences of spiritual life. To apply to them the tests which would be proper enough for a doctor of divinity would be both cruel and ridiculous.

In preachers of the Gospel we expect variety, and wish we could have more of it, but from the babe in grace we are quite content to hear a cry, and a cry is not a subject for musical variations any more than a sneeze.

Yet the sound which entered the prophet's ears was a *sure* token of life, and we must not be content with any doubtful or merely hopeful signs. We want evidences *of life*, and these we must have. We long to see our friends really and truly saved. Do but prove to us that they have passed from death unto life, and we rejoice in the lowest form of that proof, but with less than this we cannot be quiet.

Mere resolves to reform, or even reform itself, will not end our anxiety. No fine talk, or expressed emotion, or remarkable excitement will at all content us—we want them to be converted—to be born again from above, to be made new creatures in Christ Jesus.

The child might have been washed and dressed in his best clothes, but this would not have fulfilled the prophet's desire. The lad might have been decked with a chaplet of flowers, and his young cheeks might have been rouged into the imitation of a ruddy blush, but the holy man would have remained unsatisfied—he must have a sign of life.

However simple, it must assuredly be a *token of life*, or it would be in vain. Nothing could have been more conclusive than a sneeze. We remember a case in which a loving watcher fancied that a corpse moved its arm, but it was only imagination seconding the wish of affection. There could, however, be no room for a mistake in a sneeze, much less in seven sneezes. The prophet might safely call in the mother and commit to her care her undoubtedly living boy. So we also ask for indisputable marks of grace, and till we see them we shall still pray and watch, and feel painful anxiety.

So far we have kept to the text, and as our space is limited we can only add these few precepts. Let the Lord's living ones believe that He can raise the spiritually dead. Let them make the ungodly their daily care. Let them bring them where souls are quickened—namely, under the sound of the Gospel—and then let them prayerfully and wisely watch for results.

The more watchers in a congregation, the better. They will be the preacher's best allies, and greatly increase the fruit of his labors. What say you, dear friends in Christ, can you not attempt this service? It requires graces rather than gifts, affection rather than talent.

Rouse yourself to the delightful service, and watch until you see the signs of spiritual vitality. However unnoticed by others, let them not escape your eye and ear and heart, but be ready to take care of the newly-quickened one, even if there be no more to be said of him than, "The child sneezed seven times."

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