

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

Luke 7:11-17

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Scripture

During his earthly ministry Jesus raised three people back to life from the dead. They were Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:40-56), Lazarus (John 11:1-44), and a widow's son (Luke 7:11-17).

Let's read about Jesus raising a widow's son in Luke 7:11-17:

¹¹ Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. ¹² As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. ¹³ And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴ Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." ¹⁵ And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. ¹⁶ Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" ¹⁷ And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11-17)

Introduction

There are a number of instances recorded in Scripture of children dying. There is understandable grief associated with the death of children. The Egyptians grieved the death of their firstborn children (Exodus 12:29-30), the parents of Bethlehem grieved the death of their sons younger than two years old when Herod killed them after the birth of Jesus (Matthew 2:16-18), the widow of Zarephath grieved the death of her son (1

Kings 17:17-18), and the Shunammite grieved the death of her son (2 Kings 4:18-37). And who can ever forget David's grief over the death of Absalom, when he cried, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33)? Is this not the heartbreaking sentiment of every parent when a child dies?

The great 19th century theologian R. L. Dabney (1820-1898) was away on ministry when he learned that his beloved young son had come down with a serious illness. Dabney traveled all night to reach his son as quickly as possible. This is what happened next, as he wrote in a letter to his brother:

We used prompt measures, and sent early for the doctor, who did not think his case was dangerous; but he grew gradually worse until Sunday, when his symptoms became alarming, and he passed away, after great sufferings, Monday. . . . A half hour before he died, he sank into a sleep, which became more and more quiet, until he gently sighed his soul away. This is the first death we have had in our family, and my first experience of any great sorrow. I have learned rapidly in the school of anguish this week, and am many years older than I was a few days ago. It was not so much that I could not give my darling up, but that I saw him suffer such pangs, and then fall under the grasp of the cruel destroyer, while I was impotent for his help. Ah! When the mighty wings of the angel of death nestle over your heart's treasures, and his black shadow broods over your home, it shakes the heart with a shuddering terror and a horror of great darkness. To see my dear little one ravaged, crushed and destroyed, turning his beautiful liquid eyes to me and his weeping mother for help, after his gentle voice could no longer be heard, and to feel myself as helpless to give any aid – this tears my heart with anguish.¹

Some of you know that anguish. You have lost a child. Or

¹ Robert Lewis Dabney, quoted in James W. Bruce, III, *From Grief to Glory: Spiritual Journeys of Mourning Parents* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 37-38.

an infant. Or a preborn child. All of us know someone who has died. The question we ask is: Does God provide any comfort for grieving people? And, is there any hope beyond the grave?

Lesson

Luke answers these questions when he tells us what Jesus did for a grieving mother who lost her only son, and we learn about Jesus' compassion, his power over death, and the response he inspires.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Setting of the Miracle (7:11-12)
2. The Compassion of Jesus (7:13)
3. The Power of Jesus (7:14-15)
4. The Response of the People (7:16-17)

I. The Setting of the Miracle (7:11-12)

First, let's look at the setting of the miracle.

The base of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and his adopted hometown was the city of Capernaum (Matthew 4:13). Jesus healed a centurion's son in Capernaum (Luke 7:1-10), and **soon afterward he went to a town called Nain** (7:11a).

This is the only place in the entire Bible that mentions **Nain**. It was about twenty-five south of Capernaum.

Jesus went to Nain, **and his disciples and a great crowd went with him** (7:11b). Presumably they left Capernaum early in the morning, and it was late in the afternoon by the time they arrived in **Nain**.

As Jesus, his disciples, and the crowd with him drew near to the gate of the town (7:12a), they came across an all-too-familiar procession. It was a funeral procession. Luke said that **a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable**

crowd from the town was with her (7:12b).

Leading the procession was the **mother**. She was followed by men carrying a bier (7:14), which is “a stretcher or plank used for carrying a corpse to a place of burial”² on which her **only son** was placed. Along with the **considerable crowd from the town** were professional mourners, whom Luke does not mention, but they would have been there because Jewish tradition stated: “Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman” (Ketuboth 4:4).³

Jesus immediately understood what was going on. The woman at the front of the funeral procession was alone. There was no husband or other children beside her. Her grief was intense, and one commentator said that the professional mourners wailed loudly so that the one grieving would not be embarrassed by her expressions of grief. There was also a bitter irony with the contrast of the **considerable crowd** behind the solitary woman. Today they were with her, but tomorrow she would be all “alone in this world – without a provider or protector. Tomorrow she would awake by herself, brokenhearted, without the sustaining footfall and sounds of her beloved son.”⁴

Author Joseph Bayly knew what the loss of a child was like. In fact, he and his wife MaryLou lost three sons—one at eighteen days, after surgery; another at five years, with leukemia; the third at eighteen years, after a sledding accident. So when Joe Bayly wrote about the death of a child, people listened. Here is part of what he had to say:

Of all deaths, that of a child is most unnatural and hardest to bear. In Carl Jung's words, it is “a period placed before the end of the sentence,” sometimes when the sentence has

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 66.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998).

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 262.

hardly begun. We expect the old to die. The separation is always difficult, but it comes as no surprise. But the child, the youth? Life lies ahead, with its beauty, its wonder, its potential. Death is a cruel thief when it strikes down the young. The suffering that usually precedes death is another reason childhood death is so hard for parents to bear. Children were made for fun and laughter, for sunshine, not for pain. And they have a child's heightened consciousness rather than the ability to cope with suffering that comes with maturity. They also lack the "kind amnesia of senility." In a way that is different from any other human relationship, a child is bone of his parents' bone, flesh of their flesh. When a child dies, part of the parents is buried. . . . I met a man who was in his seventies. During our first ten minutes together, he brought the faded photograph of a child out of his wallet – his child, who had died almost fifty years before.⁵

The death of a loved one is always difficult, but the death of one's child is unquestionably one of life's greatest difficulties. The widow Jesus encountered that day in Nain was filled with overwhelming grief. She was on her way to bury a part of herself that day.

But little did she know that Jesus was about to intervene in a most dramatic way.

II. The Compassion of Jesus (7:13)

Second, notice the compassion of Jesus.

Luke said that **when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep"** (7:13).

Jesus immediately understood that the widow was in great turmoil. She was now alone in the world with no companionship and, perhaps more importantly in that culture, no visible means of financial support. His great love drew him to the woman in sympathy. He took the initiative to reach out to

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 260–261.

the widow in her loss and pain.

And so he said to her, **“Do not weep.”** Jesus was not telling her to suppress her emotion. He did not tell her to stop crying as we perhaps sometimes thoughtlessly tell others to do. He was instead expressing heartfelt caring for her and, in this instance, was aware of the miracle that was about to happen.

Luke has included this encounter in his Gospel because he wants us to understand that Jesus still cares for us today. Regardless of the pain and suffering and sorrow and loss we experience, Jesus cares. The same Jesus who had compassion on the widow of Nain reaches out to us in our pain and suffering and sorrow and loss. Isaiah the prophet said, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4).

The compassion Jesus had on the widow of Nain is still available to every suffering and anguished soul today.

III. The Power of Jesus (7:14-15)

Third, observe the power of Jesus.

Luke said that Jesus **came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still** (7:14a).

This was not done. According to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, touching a dead person or anything with which the dead person was in contact, such as **the bier**, made one unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11-22). But Jesus, as God incarnate, was not contaminated or corrupted by death.

I suppose that everyone stopped and looked at Jesus. “What is he doing?” people must have thought to themselves.

Of course Jesus knew what he was doing. Here was Jesus, the author of life, encountering the procession of death. Here was the creator of the entire universe (John 1:3) confronting the destroyer of human life. Here was Jesus, whose heart was filled with compassion, halting a procession that was the terminal expression of human sin.

And so Jesus, at whose command the entire universe was previously spoken into existence (Psalm 33:6, 9), simply **said, “Young man, I say to you, arise”** (7:14b).

At this point the crowd may have really wondered about Jesus. But, they did not have to wonder for long. Luke said that **the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother** (7:15).

I want you to notice two very important truths that commentator Kent Hughes points out. First, it is significant that “when performing lesser miracles, Jesus would sometimes enjoin specific actions along with the healing. The actions were spiritually instructive. But when it came to resurrections, he used only his word (cf. Mark 5:41; Luke 8:54; John 11:43). Clearly, he wanted everyone to see that resurrection power rests in him!”⁶

And second, “notice too that when he spoke to the boy’s cold corpse, the boy heard him. The young man was dead in body, but he was fully alive somewhere! For we humans, death is only death of the body. The human spirit lives on.”⁷ I think it may have been C. S. Lewis who said that we tend to think of ourselves as bodies having souls when in fact we are really souls who have bodies. The point that Lewis and Hughes are making is that the real “us” is not our bodies but it is our souls. Our bodies die but our souls never die.

By raising the dead **young man** to life, Jesus was pointing to the death of death in his own future resurrection. Jesus came to destroy death and give us new life and new hope in him. This miracle shows us that Jesus has power over death.

A few years later Jesus was crucified. He died and was buried. But three days later, he was raised back to life. Now that he himself has risen from the dead, he has the power to grant eternal life to anyone who comes to him in faith and re-

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 264.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, 264.

pentance. His resurrection is the promise and proof of our own resurrection.

Let me come back to R. L. Dabney, who wrote to his brother about the loss of his precious young son. After giving full expression to his anguish, Dabney went on to affirm his confident hope in the resurrection. He wrote:

Our parting is not for long. This spoiled and ruined body will be raised, and all its ravished beauties more than repaired. . . . Our little boy, we hope and trust, is now a ransomed spirit. . . . This is a hope inexpressible and full of glory. As I stand by the little grave, and think of the poor ruined clay within, that was a few days ago so beautiful, my heart bleeds. But as I ask, "Where is the soul whose beams gave that clay all its beauty and preciousness?" I triumph. Has it not already begun, with an infant voice, the praises of my Savior? . . . He is in Christ's heavenly house and under his guardian love. Now I feel, as never before, the blessedness of the redeeming grace and divine blood, which have ransomed my poor babe from all the sin and death he inherited through me.⁸

This is the hope of every Christian, is it not? Through the death of Jesus we have forgiveness of sins, and through the resurrection of Jesus we have hope of eternal life.

IV. The Response of the People (7:16-17)

And finally, look at the response of the people.
There are two responses.

A. They Worshiped (7:16)

The first response of the people is that of worship.
Luke said that **fear seized them all, and they glorified**

⁸ Dabney, quoted in Bruce, *From Grief to Glory*, 39.

God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” (7:16).

Over 500 years earlier the prophet Elijah had gone to a small town named Zarephath, just as Jesus went to Nain. There he met a widow at the gate of the town, just as Jesus did at Nain. The widow had an only son who became ill and died, just as the widow of Nain. Elijah took the boy from the widow, and prayed to God for the return of his life. The Lord heard Elijah’s prayer, and that boy came back to life (1 Kings 17:19-24).

It is understandable that the people thought that a **great prophet**, surely one like Elijah, had **risen among** them.

And so they worshiped God for doing something new and great in their own day. Jesus was of course much greater than Elijah, but the people did not know that yet.

B. They Witnessed (7:17)

And the second response of the people is that of witness.

Luke said that **this report about Jesus spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country (7:17).**

News about Jesus continued to spread.

Conclusion

We of course know that Jesus is God in human form. We know that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

We should glorify God for the compassion of Jesus and, especially, for his power over death. We should tell others that there is resurrection power available to all who will believe in Jesus and repent of their sin.

Jesus’ compassion and power over death gives us hope. It doesn’t take away all our tears – at least, not yet – but it does

give us a hope for the future.

The great Southern Presbyterian preacher Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818-1902) and his wife experienced some of that hope when they went out to bury their teenaged daughter. The Palmers were heavy with grief that day. Nineteen years earlier they had lost an infant son. Now they were going to bury their daughter in the same spot, near the bank of a gentle stream. But as they began to dig, they made an unexpected discovery. Palmer writes:

The pick-axe and the shovel threw aside the earth, which for many years had pressed upon the bosom of the infant. Only a few bones and a little skull. No, wait a second; and with trembling hand the father clipped one little curl from which the luster had faded, but twining still around the hollow temple. He placed it on the palm of his hand, without a word, before the eye of the mother. With a smothered cry she fell upon his neck. "It is our boy's; I see it as long ago, the soft lock that curled upon his temple." "Take it, Mother; it is to us the prophecy of the resurrection; the grave has not the power to destroy."⁹

The Palmers wept at their children's graves. But they were not only tears of sorrow; they were tears of hope as well because they believed in the resurrection power of Jesus.

They knew that the day is coming when Jesus will say to all the dead, "Arise!" And then he will say to all those who believe in him, "Do not weep," and all will be well. Amen.

⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Broken Home, or Lessons in Sorrow*, quoted in Bruce, *From Grief to Glory*, 124.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the compassion and power of Jesus that he demonstrated at Nain. Thank you that he encountered a widow that day whose only son had died. Thank you that Jesus raised that young man back to life again.

Will you give comfort to every hurting, grieving, suffering soul today?

And will you give faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to everyone who longs to know the power of Christ's resurrection in his or her life. Amen.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!