

## The Death of Death

July 15th, 2012

Luke 7:11-17

*"<sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." <sup>15</sup>And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. <sup>16</sup>Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" <sup>17</sup>And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country."*

A few years ago my cousin got married. A couple of years before that, her mom (my aunt) had passed away from a long, difficult battle with pancreatic cancer. At the wedding reception, the matron of honor called for a moment of silence before the blessing on the meal "to remember those loved ones who were no longer with us to celebrate this joyous occasion." Everyone was thinking about my aunt. After the moment of silence and prayer, I looked up and saw my dad wiping tears from his face.

I was struck, because my dad is a professing atheist who has told me on a number of occasions that death is just a natural part of life, something we just need to accept, that it's the end and there is nothing after it. But in that moment, his true beliefs were exposed.

The line, "death is just natural" goes out the window when you're really confronted with the death of someone you love. Deep in your heart you know that you're not like a tree or a block of wood. You want to last, because you were made to last. The deepest desire of the heart is to experience a love that will last; and when death takes away that love so that a mother cannot be there for the wedding of her daughter, we know there is something wrong with that. Death is an enemy, and if we're honest, we all know that.

In the next moments my dad took to checking and sending messages on his Blackberry; it was a way of numbing himself to the pain of death, trying to avoid the matter rather than face head on the implications of

his tears. And that's what a lot of people do with death. They try to avoid thinking about it, and they try to accept it. There's only one alternative to that, which is to embrace a hope that can give you courage and joy in the face of death.

This text says that Jesus is that hope, because it demonstrates that He is the One who has power over death: "<sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.'<sup>15</sup> And the dead man sat up and began to speak." That is the central truth this passage reveals about Jesus: He is the One who can put death to death. So let's consider what this passage teaches us about Jesus, to increase our hope, confidence and trust in Him in a world in which a lot of death is in our future.

### **Addressing an Objection**

Before we get into this, though, I can imagine a skeptic saying at this point, "Come on! You really believe that a man spoke and raised someone from the dead. It's a fairy tale." That's what my dad would say. So how do we address that very common struggle? I'd want to help him see that his unbelief is also a form of belief. "You can't be sure about who Jesus is and what He did?" Are you sure about that? How can you be so sure that Jesus didn't really raise this man? Can you prove it scientifically? And the answer is: it's an act of faith. You're basing your eternal destiny on that belief!

That's a serious thing to do, especially considering that here we are, 2000 years later, still talking about Jesus. We literally split time in half by His life. So before you so casually dismiss this thing (or this man) as a legend, at least reckon with that reality. Do people give their lives for what they know to be a fairy tale? Is that a reasonable explanation for the existence of the Christian church today? I'd really press the skeptic to have the humility and the intellectual integrity to demand

from your beliefs the same evidence that you demand from ours, and you might just find your beliefs to be built on sand.

### **Three Glimpses of Jesus' Beauty**

Part of what makes Jesus so remarkable is on display here in this passage. As I pondered what to highlight here (it's so hard to determine what God wants me to say each week as we look at Jesus!), I was struck by the words at the beginning of the text, "Soon afterward..." Those words connect this event with the one we examined last week from verses 1-10, where the Roman centurion sends for Jesus and begs Him to heal his ill servant, and Jesus marvels at His great faith and heals the sickness with just His word.

"Soon afterward," this event occurred, and there are some pretty clear ways that this event differs from the incident with the centurion. So I want to draw your attention to those differences (three) and how they contribute to our understanding of Jesus.

### **Jesus Seeks the Unseeking**

First, Jesus pursues someone who isn't pursuing Him. Last week we saw that the centurion eagerly pursued Jesus, he had great faith, unsurpassed in all of Israel. But what's striking in verses 11-17 is that there is no mention of faith in this woman, no pursuit of Jesus by her. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep," and raised the young man from the dead. She's not sending people to Jesus, she hasn't traveled a great distance to get to Jesus, she's not digging a hole in the roof to get to Jesus. She's just grieving.

But in love, Jesus is in pursuit of her. She's not looking for Him, but He sees her. This is a reminder of our salvation from sin and death and

hell. If you're saved this morning, it's because He took the initiative and sought you out when you were indifferent or hostile to Him: "<sup>20</sup>I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me." "Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God." "We love, because He first loved us." When we were dead in our trespasses and sins, because of His great love, God made us alive in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2). This is to the praise of Jesus' glory: He seeks the unseeking.

### **Jesus Cares for the Destitute**

Second, Jesus cares for the destitute. The centurion was a wealthy, powerful man. He was highly esteemed, and had a lot of people advocating for him before Jesus. This woman is utterly destitute. She's a resident of Nain, a small and insignificant town around 25 miles from Capernaum. She's already lost her husband; she's already put him into the ground. Now she's doing it with her son, her only son. Not only is there the emotional pain of this, but there is the social and economic plight. There is no social security system, no retirement plan. This woman's life is absolutely wrecked. She would awaken the next morning alone, brokenhearted, without a livelihood.

And Jesus comes after this woman, who isn't just unseeking, but who is utterly helpless and worthless and vulnerable and weak. The Creator of the galaxies, the One eternally joyful in the fellowship of the Trinity, the One with all power and authority, pursues her with His care and compassion. The news in State College, PA this week is that power corrupts. And as nauseating as it is to read, as much venom as is spewed, I have to wonder: have you ever twisted the facts a bit to put yourself in a better light? If you had the kind of power these men had, you're naive to insist you wouldn't have done the same.

And yet we can insist on this: Jesus Christ, the One with unbridled power and fame, using that authority and power to come alongside of

and care for the weakest and most vulnerable woman in this town. Jesus cares for the destitute.

### **Jesus Tenderly Enters Her Pain**

Third, Jesus tenderly enters into the pain. Jesus healed the centurion's servant from a distance, at his request. He just said the word, and the man was healed. But here, Jesus enters in: "<sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her (His heart went out to her) and said to her, "Do not weep."<sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the bier..." Why the touch? Why the look? He could have just spoken the word from Capernaum! He knows that in a couple of minutes He's about to raise the young man, and the whole spirit of the town is going to be transformed from weeping to joy. So why enter into the pain?

Because Jesus is a perfect man. When He returns, He won't just put an end to tears, but "<sup>4</sup>He will wipe away every tear from their eyes." "<sup>8</sup>You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle," King David says, in the midst of his pain. Yes, Jesus has all authority; there are no maverick molecules in the universe. But don't take away from that that Jesus is cold and unfeeling in the way He relates to you in your grief. He cares for you, His heart goes out to you, in your heartbreak. And don't make the mistake of thinking that biting your lip and holding your tears in is the Christian way to deal with sorrow. Jesus was perfect, and He felt the grief and pain and groaning of this world.

### **Where's My Resurrection?**

So there is great beauty in these verses: Jesus, the Lord of all, has authority over death, and He exercises that authority with compassion and tenderness for a weak, helpless woman in an absolutely miserable plight, a woman who isn't even seeking Him. The question arises, "Well, if that is the way Jesus is, then what about my mom, sister, son (insert loved one her) who died? Why didn't Jesus raise them up? If

He has this amazing authority and compassion for the weak and the hurting, why didn't He hear my prayer?"

The first thing to say in response to this is that you're not the first person to face this conundrum. In response to this miracle, the crowd was amazed (v.16), because this didn't happen very often. There are only three recorded instances of Jesus raising people from the dead, so it wasn't happening all the time. And this woman still had a dead husband, so it's not like all her grief was gone. There's a lot of people who don't get their miracle.

In fact, we see this in the very next passage. John's disciples report these things to him (he's in jail), and he wants to know if Jesus is the One, or if there is another (because he's thinking, if this is the one, why am I in jail?). And Jesus says, "<sup>22</sup>Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, *the dead are raised up*, the poor have good news preached to them." In other words, "Yes, I'm the One; look at all I am doing." So does John get his miracle then? No, he gets his head chopped off. He's the greatest among those born of a woman (v.28), and he doesn't get a miracle. He gets decapitated. So you're not alone.

## **The End of Death**

But that little incident with John and Jesus' words to him also point us to the ultimate answer to the mystery of where your miracle is. Jesus' resurrections are signs that He is the One to come, the one the people had been longing and waiting for. And what had they been waiting for? Not just a few scattered healings or resurrections here and there, but the total restoration of all things, the defeat of death forever. The widow's son was raised up...only to die again. It was just a sign of a resurrection still to come: "<sup>8</sup>He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken."

And for Jesus to put death to death, He couldn't just come down from heaven and raise up some people; He was going to have to defeat sin, because that is the cause of death in the world: "<sup>12</sup>Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." How could Jesus swallow up death forever? He'd need to bear the curse of sin Himself.

There's an allusion to it here in the text: "<sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still." He stopped because in touching that bier, Jesus made Himself unclean (Numbers 19:11). If you touched a corpse, you couldn't go to the temple, you couldn't approach God, you were unclean. It was intended to show that death is a curse, it's the wages for our sin, which makes us unclean. But Jesus takes the curse, He gets defiled, to show what it's going to cost to get resurrection joy like this woman has.

In going to the cross, Jesus bore the curse of sin in behalf of all who believe, and rose on the third day to demonstrate that His death truly was sufficient to satisfy the wages of sin. That's **the** sign that Jesus is truly the One who would swallow up death forever; the resurrection of the widow's son in Nain was a sneak preview. Now, the risen Jesus can truly say, "<sup>25</sup>I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

You want your miracle; that's your miracle. Jesus is raised from the dead, the firstfruits of all who belong to Jesus through faith. You ache to hear Jesus say, "Do not weep." You will get your "Do not weep," just like John the Baptist will get his head back. You'll get it at the end, when He comes back to wipe away every tear and make all things new:

*<sup>52</sup>The trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed...When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is*

*written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"*

This is rock solid hope in the face of death, and every earthly tear that precedes death. So in the valley of heartache, fix your eyes not on how heavy the tears are, but on how heavy the glory will be because of the tears (2 Corinthians 4:17). When you look at Jesus' triumphant care in Nain, let your heart leap with joy and wonder and praise for the great, cosmic resurrection that is to come, secured by Christ's life, death and resurrection. Stand in awe, and "spread the report through Judea and all the surrounding country."