



Jesus Raises a Widow's Son

Luke 7:11-17 Dan Leeper

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Father, we are so grateful for the death of Jesus Christ for us. This Memorial Day weekend, when we remember those who have given their lives for us, we are thankful for the ultimate sacrifice Jesus Christ made for us in giving Himself and bearing Your wrath which we deserved. He did this so we can be seated at Your table, called Your friends and children of God, and be one with You again. We are eternally grateful. We pray all this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Let's turn to the Gospel of Luke 7:11-17. The setting of our passage is sad although the story itself is not. The main point is not sad, yet the scene we see Jesus in is a dark, dreary and gloomy one. The scene is a funeral for the only son of a widow.

Before we look at this passage, I want us to think about the kind of emotions expressed as Jesus approaches this scene. I think it is sometimes easy for us to be a bit emotionally detached from what we read in the Gospels. Either we are familiar with them or we know the outcome so we are not engaged. Although we won't stay on this topic, I want us to start there.

The first funeral I remember attending took place when I was four. My mom had been pregnant for nine months and we were excited to welcome a new brother. Toward the very end of her pregnancy, there were complications and my brother was stillborn. He appeared fully developed and for most of my childhood I carried a picture of him in my wallet to remember him. When I was about seven, my parents got me my first nice Bible. Many Bibles have pages in the front for recording marriages, births or deaths. I remember sitting in a church service and writing his name: "Jason Leeper. September 27, 1987." Many of you know that my youngest son is named after this brother.

The reality of death in our world is a sad thing. The Bible speaks of the 'sting of death.' If we look at the positive—what Jesus will do—we can say death has lost its sting. However, for now death still has a pretty strong sting. I didn't fully understand my brother's death when I was four but as I got older and had children of my own I began to think of the emotions my parents must have had. So as I studied this passage over the last two weeks, this thought was on my mind. I shuddered to think of the possibility of losing my wife or kids.

As a church, we have been praying for my dad who was diagnosed with cancer 18 months ago. He went to the hospital this past week and was moved to the intensive care unit yesterday morning. He just got his chemotherapy port and will begin therapy within the next few weeks. He has also been diagnosed with a fungal infection in his lungs. It is a fearful, uncertain time for me. I was reading up on his condition before I talked with my mom, which was a dangerous thing to do because of the scary things I read. I am freshly aware of the pain and sting of death.

This kind of emotion is found in Luke 7:11-17. Remember, it doesn't stay sad. In fact, it is a very joyous passage.

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.

Let's look at some of the background of this passage before we consider how Jesus responds. Picture this scene: We see Jesus walking toward the small town of Nain. If we 'zoom out' to an aerial view, we can see a great crowd approaching the town with Jesus leading the way. Coming from the other direction, there is another crowd making its way through the village. Our hearts sink because this second crowd is gathered for a funeral.

As I was studying, I read scholars of the culture and customs of Jesus' time. They said a funeral was likely conducted in this way:

- The family of the deceased would lead the way, followed by an open 'bier' (plank or stretcher) on which the body was laid.
- The rest of the crowd would follow behind the bier.
- Professional mourners would likely be present to loudly grieve so those close to the deceased could loudly grieve without embarrassment.

In the case of the widow, this funeral scene is additionally sad because she has previously walked this path for her husband. She is likely walking alone now because her only son has died.

Some have called this scene with Jesus and His followers meeting the funeral procession ‘the way of life meeting the way of death.’ We see how Jesus responds as they begin to intersect and collide. We are going to see two things about our Savior, Jesus Christ, in the way He responds to this widow.

Jesus is a Compassionate Savior

Luke 7:12-13 says, “*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. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her...*” When Jesus saw her, He had compassion upon her.

It is helpful to think about the word ‘compassion’ in the original Biblical language of Greek. This word seems to have been coined, almost created by the Gospel writers as it is not seen in other Greek literature. The verb meaning ‘moved with compassion’ has at its root—and is sometimes translated—the ‘guts, innards or bowels.’ We use words like that in describing deep emotion. Sometimes we talk about something being ‘gut-wrenching.’ I previously referenced my ‘heart sinking.’ Sometimes we say, “My stomach turned.” This kind of language and symbolism refers to something deep within, not just any kind of deep emotion but a deep feeling of mercy, pity, sympathy and compassion.

Luke uses ‘moved with compassion’ two other times:

1. He uses it to talk about the Good Samaritan. This is not just a word that expresses, “I feel bad for that person.” The story of the Good Samaritan is fictional—a parable. I’m going to assume the best of the first two guys in the story who walked by the man who had been robbed and beaten. They probably at least thought, “That’s too bad,” or “That’s sad.” However, they were not moved enough to do anything but kept walking. But the Good Samaritan was moved with compassion—deeply affected with a feeling of sympathy that caused him to do something.
2. He uses it in the story of the Prodigal Son. The son leaves his father and takes his inheritance to spend it all on luxury, only to live in extreme poverty later. He finally decides to go back home and see if he could at least be a servant. The image of the love of the Heavenly Father toward us is reflected in the way Jesus describes the father in this story. The father saw his son from a great distance, was moved with compassion and had great pity. He got up and ran to embrace his son and kiss him. This desire for the father to welcome his son flowed from his great sympathy for him.

This instance of Jesus’ compassion is not an isolated event. This word is used in the Gospels other times to talk about our Savior:

- Matthew 20:34—“*And Jesus in pity* [the same word for ‘compassion’ is used here to describe a ‘deep longing and sympathy for this person] *touched their eyes, and immediately they recovered their sight and followed him.*” In pity, Jesus showed compassion and healed two blind men who believed in Him.
- Mark 1:41— “*Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him [a leper] and said to him, “I will; be clean.”*” This story says that the leper had weak faith.
- Mark 5:19—Jesus has mercy on a man who was possessed with a demon. Here we see Jesus feeling this deep internal sympathy toward a man who has the opposite of faith.

Returning to Luke 7:11-17, we see the contrast between this passage and ones we have studied previously. We have been talking about a life of faith and seeing how Jesus responded to the faith of those trusting in Him. Remember how Jesus was amazed at the faith of the centurion and healed his servant from afar. In contrast, there is nothing mentioned of the widow’s faith. Yet Jesus sees her and has compassion.

Here are three more instances of Jesus showing compassion:

- Matthew 15:32—He had compassion on the multitude of 4,000 because they had been there a long time and were hungry.
- Mark 6:34—He had compassion and healed the sick.
- Matthew 9:36— “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” As Jesus saw the crowds, He had a pure, sinless longing of mercy for them.

When my sons are sick, I have compassion on them. I’ll give them medicine and a drink, send them to bed and go on with my evening. It is compassion but not in the same sense of the word we’ve been discussing. I’ve seen my wife hold my boys until they go to sleep, carry them to bed, then come to me, put her head on my shoulder with a tear running down her cheek and say, “I just hate it when they are sick.” My wife feels deeply in instances where I do not, though there are times where I feel that way. In that scene, my wife is exhibiting the same deep feeling of sympathy Jesus has for this widow.

This sympathy was pervasive throughout Jesus’ ministry. Spurgeon spoke on Luke 7:11-17 and said,

Oh! Is there not refreshment here for you mothers that are weeping for your boys; you that have ungodly sons or unconverted daughters, the Lord Jesus sees your tears. You weep alone sometimes and when you are sitting and enjoying the Word, you think, ‘Oh! That my Absalom were renewed; oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee.’ Jesus knows about it. He was always tender to His own mother and He will be so to you. And you that are mourning over those who have been lately taken from you,

Jesus pities you. Jesus wept. He sympathizes with your tears. He will dry them and give you consolation. "He was moved with compassion."

(Source: A Sermon Published on Thursday, December 24, 1914.
Delivered by C.H. Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington)

This compassion of our Savior isn't just for moms but for all of us. Jesus knows when we feel hopeless, lost, worried, anxious and fearful. Jesus' posture toward us is one of compassion. Psalm 55:22 says, "*Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you.*" First Peter 5:7 says, "*...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*" I want us to stop and think about the compassion of our Savior for us. We need to cast our cares on Him and rest on the compassion of our Savior.

Remember the Gospel of Luke was written to Theophilus so he would be built up in his faith, assured and made certain of the things he knew. One of the ways Satan would love to erode our faith is by causing us to say, "God, I do believe in You but I'm not sure if You care for me or love me." A river of doubt begins to erode the foundation of our faith when we say this. We begin to doubt God's love, care and compassion, resulting in our faith crumbling.

Although not directly related to this text, there is another point of application. As believers, we need to imitate Jesus as our perfect example of compassion toward others. We at New Covenant Bible Church should be known for having compassion toward one another and being moved with compassion when we see the crowd.

Jesus is a Powerful Savior

In this passage, we see Jesus is a compassionate Savior. However, it doesn't end with Jesus just feeling sorry and merciful toward this woman. Jesus is both a compassionate and powerful Savior. Luke 7:13 says, "*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'*" If Jesus had not done anything else, it would not have been compassionate for Him to go up to her and say, "Stop crying." He is not just saying, "Buck up." Rather, He is hinting to her that He is about to do something. He comes to the bier with her son's dead body. As He touched it, those carrying it stopped and stood still because Jesus' behavior was not normal. Jesus begins talking to the dead man: "*And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.'* And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother" (Luke 7:14-15).

The Scriptures record that this is the first time in hundreds of years someone has been raised from the dead. The last recorded instances were in the time of Elijah and Elisha. In fact, this story closely resembles one of those accounts. Elijah raised a widow's son from the dead. The language of these two stories is very similar. Luke's record says, "*Jesus gave [the young man] to his mother*" and Elijah also "gave the boy back to his mother" (1 Kings 17:23). Jesus did something different from Elijah though. Elijah stretched himself over the widow's son three times, praying and pleading for God to revive this boy. Jesus doesn't do this. He looks at the young man lying there and says, "Young man, get up." Our powerful Savior commands the dead to rise.

Luke has been building a case for Jesus throughout his Gospel. He tells of the God-man, born of a virgin, Who entered into temptation in our place yet stood righteous. He entered ministry and began showing His Lordship and sovereignty over all things by healing the sick, raising up the lame, causing the blind to see, casting out demons, showing His authority over evil and healing from afar. Last week we heard how He was able to heal the centurion's servant without seeing or touching Him, simply by His word. In our passage, Luke shows how even death itself proves no match for the powerful, sovereign Savior. The widow's son is one of three people recorded as having been raised from the dead by Jesus. Later in Luke, we will see that He raises Jairus' daughter from the dead. In John's Gospel, He raises Lazarus from the dead. In all these situations, He is showing His compassion and power.

Look at how the onlookers respond:

And the dead man sat up [immediately] and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country (Luke 7:15-17).

We don't know how much they knew about Jesus but evidently they knew God was there and was visiting His people. This language refers to the Messiah as "God with us." Jesus is showing His compassion and power as a foretaste or sampling of what is to come in His Own death. Jesus comes into a world plagued by sin and death: "*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin...*" (Romans 5:12). Death did not always exist but was a result of sin. Death will not always exist because Jesus crushed the curse of death by His death. We find this truth in some of the songs we sing:

- "Death is crushed to death." (The Power of the Cross by Keith Getty)
- "The keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given." (Rejoice, the Lord is King by Charles Wesley)

- “Not even death could crush this King of Love.” (Jesus is Lord by Bethany Dillon and Matt Hammitt)

When Jesus crushed death by His death and resurrection, He pointed to the day when He will make all things new and all the dead in Christ will rise. We look forward to that day. Jesus is not only able to feel sympathy and compassion for us, but He is also able to reverse the curse.

To close, let me read a song I was thinking about all day yesterday. It addresses how we respond to this kind of Savior.

I run to Christ when chased by fear
And find a refuge sure.
“Believe in me,” His voice I hear;
His words and wounds secure.

I run to Christ when torn by grief
And find abundant peace.
“I too had tears,” He gently speaks;
Thus joy and sorrow meet.

I run to Christ when worn by life
And find my soul refreshed.
“Come unto Me,” He calls through strife;
Fatigue gives way to rest.

(From I Run to Christ by Chris Anderson)

I want us to leave with this on our minds: This compassionate, powerful Savior is for us. We can run to Him, cast our cares on Him and find rest in Him.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we are so grateful for Your tender mercies and almighty power. There is nothing we are facing outside Your ability or that is too difficult for You. I pray we would run to You. Holy Spirit, would You build within us a confidence that Jesus is Lord and help us rest in Him. In Jesus' name.
Amen.

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