

## Widow of Nain

### Luke 7:11-17

**Prayer:** Father, I am grateful that you are the Father to the orphan *and* the widow. I thank you that your character is demonstrated through your Son, Jesus, who is your perfect image, and when we see his character, we see that he is compassionate. He understands our struggles, he understands our pain, and he identifies with us. I thank you that through Jesus, you have given us the gift of new life, and the hope of resurrection. It is in Jesus glorious name that I pray, amen!

**Intro:** Today, as we continue our study through the book of Luke together, we are walking alongside Jesus as he continues his ministry. Last week, we saw him heal the servant of centurion, a commander of troops, from far off, a man, who he may have never met. If Luke simply told us that story, we might be tempted to think of Jesus - and by extension, God the Father - as being far off from the pain and suffering that marks human existence. We may think of him as benevolent, but never very close, in the same way that a customer service representative for a large company may be kind and helpful, but they are miles away and will never meet you or experience your sadness. But Luke follows up the story of the centurion's servant with a chapter in Jesus ministry, that ensures we know how our suffering is met by and understood by God.

You see, Luke, the ancient Greek physician who wrote this Gospel so that we might know Jesus' ministry, so that we might have an account of all the people whose lives he touched, and ultimately an account of Jesus' suffering on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. Luke explores several themes of Jesus' life and ministry,

including his ministry to those who are on the fringe of society, rather than the social and cultural elites, and wraps up his Gospel by telling us that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of what we know call the Old Testament. And in this story, we see those two themes overlap, and we see, not a disinterested, but vaguely benevolent God, but one who intimately concerned with the affairs of his people.

### 1. **The Compassion of Christ**

The first thing we see is the compassion of Christ is a painful situation. Let's put ourselves in this woman's shoes. It has been said that the worst thing a parent can do is bury their own child and that is precisely what is happening here. **This woman has lost her son, her only son.** She doesn't have four or five children to call her own; this man was it. She is in grief because she has lost the closest person to her. And unfortunately, this isn't the first time. This woman has led the funeral procession, full of professional mourners, and extended family in the past. She has already buried her husband. She is a widow. And for whatever reason, she never remarried. Perhaps no one in the town was willing or able to marry her, give her children, and provide for her in a culture where she would have limited opportunities to accumulate wealth apart from a land owning male. She may well have moved to Nain after being married to this man and not even have her parents and siblings to lean on, though they too may be dead.

Not only is this woman in grief because of the loss of her son, but what we can forget in a society with some welfare safety, be in Medicare, Disability, or Social Security, and advanced financial planning like 401Ks or IRAs, is that the man who has just died, her son, is her retirement plan. Until 80 years ago, even in our own country,

that's how people planned for their old age. They had children. The more, the better, because that meant more wage earners or land owners who could help provide for a person when they reached an age they could no longer work. Perhaps provide a place in the home that Grandma could live when she could no longer care for herself. Feed her, when she can no longer feed herself, provide companionship when leaving the home becomes impossible, and comfort for those last days.

Some of you may have been near retirement age in 2008 when the Great Recession hit. Overnight, your 401K or IRA that had been accumulating wealth was halved in value as the stock market plummeted. The dream of retirement, whatever that may have looked like in your mind, dissipated as you prepared to work a few more years or curtail the grand plans you had to travel cross country, or even plan for different assisted living options that were less nice.

In some ways, that is what has happened to this woman, but without much in the way of a formal safety net. Perhaps a few members of the community may care for her in some way, but she is not likely to have the care she needs on a consistent basis in her last days now that her only son has died without providing, it seems, grandchildren or even a daughter in law. The shock of grief and financial instability has crashed together, almost certainly leaving this woman devastated. Her life is uncertain and sad. We could think through all the ways that this woman can get her life back on track, if she just marries again, moves back home to her folks, gets a job at the Ancient Near East equivalent of a Toot N' Totum, but we see something different from Jesus. We see in verse 13, that Jesus has compassion on her. He cares for her in the midst of her suffering.

We could then ask ourselves, how can we too have compassion on the elderly? I spent some time talking with Gary Wilcox, one of our elders here at Redeemer this week. He is trying to identify ways that we can care for the elderly in our midst, think about planning for our parents future, and how we plan for our own kids when they have to make decisions regarding our lives as we reach our dotage. But the topic is actually near to his heart because he took care of his widowed father for so long. I know it wasn't always easy, and Gary's dad could be vexing, but Gary wanted to ensure that his father knew he was loved and cared for. Gary's challenge to me, and to those of us who are not yet in our old age was to be mindful of the elderly. To remember that our aging parents and grandparents are also created in the image of God. That they need not just physical needs met, but to be visited if they are in a nursing home, to be prayed for, to be talked with. He challenged me to not shield my children from the elderly, but to remember that little children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren can bring a great deal of joy into the lives of people who, like this woman, leaving Nain to bury her son, may feel that their life is over, or almost over, and can feel the crushing weight of loneliness. Jesus' compassion is a reminder that we are to be a compassionate people, and might even remind us of James 2:27, which says, **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.** Jesus has compassion on this woman, because he does not view her as disposable. Society may see her as a burden; Jesus sees her as an image bearer of God in need. And in her need, he graciously shows her his glory.

## 2. **The Glory of Christ**

[Jesus] said to her, “Do not weep.” Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. 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. 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.

By showing this woman, his glory, I mean two things. First, that he showed her his position as a prophet in Israel and second, his divinity. The fact that he was, in fact, God visiting his people.” To show this to you, we need to look briefly at another healing account that we see in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings 17:17-24, a story that undoubtedly would have been familiar to the people who witnessed Jesus resurrect this man, would likely have been familiar to readers of Luke’s Gospel who were familiar with the Old Testament.

I’m going to read this passage to you in its entirety; see if you can pick out the subtle differences between Elijah’s miracle and Jesus’.

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. And she said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” And he said to her, “Give me your son.” And he took him from her arms and carried him up into the upper chamber where he lodged, and laid him on his own bed. And he cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” And the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house and delivered him to his mother. And Elijah said, “See, your son lives.” And the woman

said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”<sup>1</sup>

It should be clear, why the people thought Jesus might be a prophet of Israel, the first such prophet that the nation had seen in 400 years. Elijah, the archetypal prophet of Israel, the standard by which all other prophet’s were judged, brought the son of a widow back to life. Jesus’ miracle brought the son of a widow back to life. Make no mistake, if you can bring people back from the dead something is special, because that does not happen every day. Its worth writing down and taking account when someone comes back from the dead. It just doesn’t happen, and Jesus, among a crowd of witnesses, who know what a dead person looks and acts like, people who have buried loved ones over the course of their lives and will bury plenty more, in front of all of these people, Jesus brings a man back to life. Luke even directly quotes the Greek translation of the 1 Kings narrative when he says Jesus “gave the boy to his mother”. Pastor David said last week that the box that best fit Jesus in the minds of First Century Jewish folk would have been, prophet. And they are not entirely wrong; Jesus knows what he is doing. Luke knows what’s going on when he chooses to recount this story. Jesus is something of a prophet, but he’s also something more.

When the people exclaim about Jesus that God has visited his people, they are probably speaking metaphorically as they glorify God, in the same sense that we might say that Congress came to our aid, if they approve a state of emergency for grass fires. They sent some people and money as their representative, but don’t come themselves. But these folks are more accurate than they realize and the contrasts

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ki 17:17-24.

between what Jesus has done and what Elijah has done demonstrate that God has in fact visited them. If we think about Elijah's miracle, we see that Elijah questions God as much as the widow questions Elijah. He wonders why God allowed this thing to happen to a widow who had stepped out in faith and cared for Elijah. We see none of that questioning in Jesus. We don't see him interrogate God. We see compassion from Jesus, but he doesn't accuse God of divine malpractice. From Elijah, we see an elaborate ritual, but Jesus merely touches the stretcher the boy is laying upon. And finally, Jesus, unlike Elijah does not ask God to heal the young man; he commands the young man to arise. He does not have to appeal to the authority of God, because Jesus is God the Son who has been given authority by God the Father. Not just a great prophet from God, a high enough commendation, Jesus is as the first verses of the book of Hebrews says, "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" who "upholds the universe by the word of his power."

### **3. The Resurrection of Christ**

And Jesus, who has just shown himself to be God, and who had demonstrated his compassion, is also demonstrating a really that had not occurred yet. He was previewing his own resurrection. Jesus here, is showing his power over death. When he walks up to this woman, when he sees her at her saddest - and keep in mind, we have no indication that she had faith that Jesus would or could do anything, and her son sure didn't have any faith of his own because he was busy being dead - when Jesus sees all these mourners whose sole expectation is that they are going to go out to the town graveyard or tomb and put this man into a hole in the ground or side of a cliff, he does something that is unexpected, by this mother or any one else around; he

touches the stretcher this man is on. The only people who should be touching the stretcher are the people carrying it and everyone of them will have to go through ceremonial cleansing later that day. For a random stranger to touch the stretcher, was unfathomable. If you go to a funeral for someone you don't know very well, even if its open casket, you don't go hang off the side of the coffin or touching the body. Someone in the family is gonna take offense.

Part of the reason that God's law forbids touching dead bodies without a cleansing ritual is because dead bodies, especially the bodies of young men, tend to be carry disease and a person would worry about contracting those diseases. But Jesus shows none of these compunctions. He simply touches the bier and commands life from this young man. Jesus has power over life and death. And here's the thing; Jesus' resurrection, his defeat of death for himself is a reality those who believe in Christ are meant to share. 1 Corinthians 15 tells us, **"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."**<sup>2</sup> This man that Jesus healed received a foretaste of what everyone who dies a Christian will experience: because Jesus died a death we, not he, deserved and then by the power of the Holy Spirit rose again, we can look forward to a future when we will have a physical bodily resurrection. In fact, this is our greatest hope. God the Father, in his compassion over us, in our spiritual death and our future physicals deaths gave his only Son over to death, so that he might secure life for you and me.

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<sup>2</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 15:21-23.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we know, like this family, the compassion of God and the power of a new life. And may that compassion that God has graciously demonstrated toward us, lead us to be ourselves a compassionate people toward those around us.

## Works Referenced

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1. Jesus' resurrection gives us new life, first spiritually then physically. What has changed since Jesus spiritually resurrected you?
2. Jesus demonstrated the compassion of God when he brought the widow's son back to life and for you when he gave his life for you. In what other circumstances has God shown you compassion and brought you through? What opportunities has he given you to show compassion of God to others?
3. The new life given to the widow's son shows the glory of Christ and leads others to worship. How has God's compassion toward you or others near you lead you to glorify God? Is gratitude or is taking God's work for granted your first instinct?