

Luke 7:11-17
Victory over Death

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). We should never forget what sad consequences sin has brought into this world. Throughout all time, in every place, for every person, the consequences of sin are great. Because of sin a perfect world became fallen, and life has never been the same. All of the troubles of the world, from the personal to the international, are the consequences of sin.

While Romans 6:23 is illustrative of spiritual death, it is true of physical death as well. Death is ever present. Even though our society has advanced so much technologically and medically, and life expectancy rates are as high as ever in human history, everybody dies. The old adage is that the only things that are certain are death and taxes, but you can avoid paying taxes (if you don't mind going to prison). You cannot avoid death.

Only Luke records this particular narrative in his gospel. It is the telling of a funeral and a Savior, of death and the call to life. And it teaches us much about our God.

God has a Perfect Plan

“Soon afterwards” (v. 11) is typical of the general chronology of Luke. Context would suggest that after Jesus healed by word the centurion's slave, he made his way to a small village about twenty miles southwest of Capernaum. It is wonderful to think that Jesus never tired of His work. No sooner had He healed one person, than He moved on to another. Weary though His physical body must have been, His divine Spirit never was exhausted. His resources are boundless, and His grace is sufficient.

This tiny village of Nain was located on a hill about six miles southeast of Nazareth near the ancient village of Shunem (where Elisha had raised a young boy from the dead, 2 Kings 4:8-37). And along with Jesus were His disciples and “a large crowd” of indeterminate size. Jesus always attracted a crowd. This motley group was made up of the usual conglomeration of people genuinely interested in Jesus and His teaching, other people who were merely just curious, a few who just enjoyed the entertainment value of watching Jesus do miracles, and probably some that were opposed to Him and were looking for a way to accuse.

It is important to remember that Jesus did not simply wander about doing miracles and teaching. Everywhere He went, He went with a purpose. He had a plan. God's perfect plan. God has always had a plan. What man considers luck, or fortune, or circumstance, God has ordained. What modern man describes as coincidence is the fingerprint of a sovereign God.

For example, when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac and God intervened, there just happened to be a ram nearby to serve as a substitute (Genesis 22:13). When Gideon and his servant are sneaking about the Midianite camp, he just happened to overhear a Midianite soldier relating a dream to a friend that foretold the victory of the Israelites. Thus encouraged, Gideon and his vastly outnumbered men triumphed (Judges 7:13-14). Ruth just happened to be gathering the leavings in the field of Boaz (Ruth 2:3). When

the Jews formed a conspiracy to kill Paul, his nephew just happened to overhear the plot and Paul escaped (Acts 23:16).

Jesus likewise functioned according to God's sovereign plan. As Jesus passed through Samaria, He just happened to meet a Samaritan woman at a well in the middle of the day (John 4). To think these things just happened by accident is to deny the sovereignty of God. Things do not just happen, they happen for a reason. And that reason is the plan of a sovereign God. This ought to be a source of great comfort.

Psalm 33:11, "The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
The plans of His heart from generation to generation."

Proverbs 16:4, "The LORD has made everything for its own purpose"

In this particular case, Jesus had planned His visit to Nain to coincide with a funeral procession. Since it was the custom of Jews at the time to bury the body quite soon after death, and perhaps it took Jesus a couple of days to make the journey, perhaps the man had not yet even died when Jesus set out for the village.

The meeting of the two groups was perfectly timed. Just "as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out" (v. 12). This is not a miracle. A miracle is when God alters natural events (heals an illness with a word or touch, calms a storm, extends the natural food supply, etc.). Such miracles are rare. This is God's providence. God's providence is His working through natural events to accomplish His purposes. He does this all the time. He is constantly at work in natural events to bring His perfect plan to fruition.

Think of the detail of coordination involved to manage every single event in the natural universe toward one ultimate goal. What an extraordinary example of God's sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence. Throughout history. God has worked events according to His perfect plan. Even when we think we are in control we are not. Proverbs 16:9, "The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps." This is true not just for typical people like us but kings as well. Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes." Think of the pharaoh of Egypt in the time of Moses and Cyrus king of Persia,

God's sovereign plan applies to tragic events as well. God is not the cause of sin, but He nonetheless has control over all events, even those we see as bad or wrong. If we agree that His plan is perfect, then there is no room left for complaint. Either "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28) or He does not? If so then He is sovereign and we have no possible motive for frustration or despair. If not, then we are on our own to manage the vicissitudes of a fallen world.

God has Perfect Compassion

The scene is moving. Though Nain was likely too small to have had a wall built completely around it, it did have a gate, located no doubt at the place where the main street began at the entrance to the city. Here people gathered, rulers ruled, judges judged and trade and gossip took place. Just as Jesus and those with Him were coming to the gate, a funeral procession was leaving the city. The funeral had just finished, and the body had been placed on a stretcher to be taken to the burial site outside the town, for Jewish law prohibited burial within the city.

What made this scene even more tragic is that this was the only son of a widow. We are informed that the woman was a widow. She had lost her husband at some point in the past. Now her only son was dead. She was utterly without hope for the future. She had lost her means of financial support and her opportunity to see the family line continue. Her situation was desperate. Perhaps in the grief over the loss of her son she had not become aware of the fact, but any dispassionate observer knew that the woman's life was over.

Such loss was often used as an example by the OT prophets when they spoke of grief.

Jeremiah 6:26, "O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth
And roll in ashes;
Mourn as for an only son,
A lamentation most bitter.
For suddenly the destroyer
Will come upon us."

Amos 8:10, "Then I will turn your festivals into mourning
And all your songs into lamentation;
And I will bring sackcloth on everyone's loins
And baldness on every head.
And I will make it like a time of mourning for an only son,
And the end of it will be like a bitter day."

Zechariah 12:10, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn."

The "sizeable crowd" (v. 12) would have included the extended family, friends, professional mourners, and others. It had to be a sight that would cause any heart to sink. And Jesus was no exception. As soon as He saw her, "He felt compassion for her" (v. 13). The word describes a feeling in the inward parts of the body. In His perfect humanity, Jesus was deeply moved. We are again reminded of the humanity of Jesus. He was no celestial being above unaffected by human emotions. Hebrews 4:15 speaks of sin, but I believe it applies to other aspects of our humanity as well, "for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." God has always been compassionate. The dualistic representation of God as an OT wrathful, angry, storm God and a NT loving, compassionate, savior is absurd. Jesus spoke often of the coming judgment of hell, cleansed the temple by overturning the furniture, and reminded His disciples, "Do not think that I

came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Likewise, in the OT God taught Moses that He was “⁶The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; ⁷who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7).

The Psalmist echoes this truth, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” (Psalm 103:8). The theme is repeated throughout the OT and perhaps the best summary of the grace and compassion of God in His relationship with His people is Psalm 78:38:

“But He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them;
And often He restrained His anger
And did not arouse all His wrath.”

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). The same Jesus who responded with compassion then does so now. Our God is not distant from the troubles we have. He is not apathetic or uncaring. He is deeply moved when we are in times of trouble.

God has Perfect Power

It is significant, I think, that this is the first time Luke, himself, uses the term ‘Lord’ in referring to Jesus. Considering the miracle Jesus is about to perform, Luke cannot resist foreshadowing the event by ascribing to Jesus the sovereign power of God.

No one asked Jesus to perform a miracle. No doubt all thought the situation irremediable. Rather, Jesus took the initiative and spoke directly to the woman, who probably headed the funeral procession. “Do not weep” (v. 13), He said. This would seem callous and insensitive if He were not able to do something to remove the cause of her weeping. Just to say “it will be okay” is usually not a good response when someone is suffering.

But Jesus did more than just tell the woman not to grieve. Any rabbi, any person, could have done just as much. Jesus did something remarkable. “He came up and touched the coffin” (v. 14). This was extraordinary on two counts. First, such interference would immediately cause outrage among those attending the funeral. Just imagine someone interrupting a funeral service. Second, according to Leviticus 19, touching anything associated with a dead person made that person unclean. And here was a rabbi, interrupting a funeral and touching the stretcher the dead man was being carried upon.

Those carrying the coffin immediately “came to a halt” (v. 14). They stopped, probably not knowing what to do next. Should they shove this impertinent man aside and continue with the procession? Did they look at the grieving woman for an idea of what she wanted them to do? While these thoughts were passing through their minds, Jesus spoke. And Jesus spoke to the dead man!

“Young man, I say to you arise” (v. 14). Jesus spoke and life was renewed. Creating life was understood by all to be an act of God alone. Jesus possessed the power of creation by simply speaking it. One cannot help but be reminded of Genesis 1 and the several times it is recorded that “and God said . . . and it was so.” This was the Word of God (John 1) bringing life by speaking.

The response was immediate and complete. “The dead man sat up and began to speak” (v. 15). He gave an immediate demonstration that he was, in fact, alive. He was restored to health. Whatever had caused his death (disease, accident, etc.) was purged from his body, and he was well.

Naturally “fear gripped them all” (v. 16) who witnessed the event. How could it not? The word means to be traumatized, overwhelmed, terrified. They clearly recognized that a miracle had occurred in their presence and “they began glorifying God” (v. 16). There were many present, we do not know the number, but Jesus had brought with Him many, and there were all those in the funeral procession itself. News must have quickly spread through the small village where no doubt everyone knew that the young man was dead.

But the news is not as good as it appears. They recognized Jesus as a “great prophet” (v. 16). Unfortunately, for many this was all. They saw in Jesus a great healer who could perform miracles like Elijah. “God has visited His people” (v.16) they claimed. He had, but they did not recognize Him in the flesh of Jesus. They had seen a great work, attributed it to God, but missed the Messiah.

The power of God has been seen since the beginning of Creation. Still the one question to be answered by all is Who Jesus is? The only correct answer is that given by Matthew “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus asserted as much, “Unless you believe that I am He [God], you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). The deity of Christ is foundational to right Christian thinking, and creating life is the sign of deity.

That “This report concerning Him went out all over Judea (v.17) shows how unique the miracle was. Nothing like this had been seen since the times of Elijah and Elisha. But despite the sovereign plan of God to bring about the greatest of miracles. Most people were blind.

Take Aways

Let us remember that God is perfect in all He is, as well as all He plans and all He performs. We should not look back with regret, but look forward in hope.