



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI † DEO † GLORIA

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE
Raising of the Widow's Son
Sermon Notes
Luke 7:11-17
April 8, 2012

“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.”

- As a husband and father to four children, I can think of few things more tragic than the death of a child.
- We read or hear in the news, almost on a daily basis, stories of accidents where children lose their lives. Just over two weeks ago in Hillsboro, Oregon, 21-month old Oliver Hebb drowned in a washing machine after his mother had taken her eyes off of him for just a few minutes.
- About 150 years ago, one of the most prominent Reformed theologians in America, Robert L. Dabney, experienced a similar tragedy. He was away from his home on church business when he received word his son had fallen ill. He traveled through the night to get to his son's bedside, later providing the following account in a letter to his brother:

“[W]e 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.”

- The anguish that Robert Dabney felt was something none of us would ever wish for; however, the reality is that we live in a world ravaged by sin and death, and despair seems ever-present.
- Yet, it is in the midst of tragedy that the glory of the Gospel of Christ and the hope of the Resurrection is often the sweetest.
- And this morning we read of a mother who, like the parents of Oliver Hebb and Robert Dabney, experienced the tragic loss of her son.
- However, given the context of his death, it was especially tragic, as we will see.
- Yet, it is in the midst of her sorrow, that Christ steps in and provides not only the grieving mother, but all readers of this text, a picture of the glorious hope that is to be found in Him alone.

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I. The Hopelessness of Sin and Death

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.

- This episode follows shortly after the healing of the centurion's servant by Jesus.
- Luke writes, “Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain...”
- Although the exact location is not known for certain, Nain was likely located in Galilee three miles west of Endor, six miles southeast of Nazareth and twenty miles southwest of [about a day's journey from] Capernaum [where Christ had just been].

- Luke informs us that “his disciples and a great crowd went with him.” In other words, the miracle Christ was about to perform would be witnessed by a great many people.

- Then, Luke writes, “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.*”

- And so, the scene is set: Jesus, his disciples, and “a great crowd with him” approach the gate of a small town, called Nain. No doubt the “mood” of the crowd with Jesus is positive, for He has just healed the centurion’s servant probably just a day or so earlier.
- And in the midst of the excitement of the crowd, **here comes a funeral procession.**
- In first century Israel, funerals most typically occurred at the end of the day, and often on the same day of the death.
- Once an individual died, the following would typically take place in accordance with Jewish tradition in the first century:
 - The family tore their clothing as a public sign of grief.
 - The eyes of the corpse were closed to demonstrate that death had come.
 - The body was anointed with oils and buried quickly (often on the same day of the death) in order to prevent decay and deterioration.
 - As the corpse was prepared to go to its place of burial, it was wrapped in cloth and placed on a burial plank (a bier) resembling a wooden stretcher. This was done so the body could be publicly seen.
 - At the end of the funeral service, the priest would lead in the citing of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6).
 - The family would then mourn for thirty days.
- **Yet, this funeral was especially tragic.**
 - First of all, this is a grieving mother burying her child. But given the historical context, the situation only gets worse.
 - Secondly, Luke tells us that the dead man was “the only son of his mother.” He actually uses the Greek word *monogenes* – *only-begotten son* – simply, her only son.
 - Thirdly, she was a widow.
 - In the first century, there was very little a woman could do to make a living. She was essentially completely dependent upon her husband or sons for not only provision, but protection as well.

- And so, this woman was now not only alone in the world, but she had no one to take care of her, provide for her, and protect her.
- On top of everything else, **the family line has now ended.**

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- And so we read that the two crowds essentially meet outside the gate of Nain.
 - As the procession went by, the mother/widow would have walked in front of the bier, as this is where the family was.
 - Luke tells us that “a considerable crowd from the town was with her.”
 - Although he does not specifically describe mourners, they were likely there.
 - According to the Mishnah, “Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman” (*Ketuboth* 4:4).
 - The mourners present represented the collective grief that the covenant community had experienced when just one individual passed away.
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- As Christ (and His followers) approached the procession, the widow would have likely been the only one in the front on the casket, **walking alone.**
 - **And, yet, because of this, she was the first whom Jesus would engage.**
 - What we see here is a crowd led by the Author of Life meet a crowd led by a grieving mother – a procession of death. And a great confrontation is about to occur.
 - **And it is in the midst of this great tragedy that Jesus is about to perform one of His great miracles.**

II. The Compassion of the Lord

¹³ *And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.”*

- We have all experienced a similar situation to this before:
 - You are driving down the highway going somewhere when you see a police escort followed by a hearse and a long line of cars with the lights on.

- And for a brief moment, you wonder to yourself, “I wonder who just passed away? Is it a child? Is it a youth? An elderly man or woman?”
- And then, you go about your day and probably do not think of it again.
- **Yet, this would not have been the case in first century Israel.**
- The procession would have included mourners, so it would not have been easy to put it out of your mind. The sadness of the situation would have been much more difficult to get out of your head, unlike today.
 - Yet, the other aspect of the procession would have been that the body of the person who just passed would have been on a *bier*, on an stretcher.
 - In other words, **it would have been much more evident who the person was – a child or an adult.**
 - The reality and sadness of death would have been much more *real* than today.

“When you hear...of death, you must think not only of the grave and the coffin, and of the horrible manner in which life is separated from the body and how the body is destroyed and brought to naught, but you must think of the cause by which man is brought to death and without which death and that which accompanies it, would be impossible...namely, sin and the wrath of God on account of sin.”
 Martin Luther

- As the procession would go by, all observers one have, once again, been reminded of the fate that awaits us all: death.

Romans 5:12: ^{“12}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—“

- And so, **as the procession goes by with the widow leading the way, followed by the body of her fallen son**, Luke writes: ^{“13}*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.”*
- Luke makes two statements here regarding the Lord: (1) He saw her; and (2) He had compassion on her.
 - The first appears simple and anti-climatic: (1) He saw her.
 - Yet, this is critical. The woman may have physically seen Jesus and the crowd who had followed Him, but she surely did not know who He was.
 - But, this did not matter, for **the Lord saw her.**

- There is a beauty to this truth. The Lord sees us even before we see Him. He knows us, for He created us. And because He sees us, His children, He loves us, has compassion on us, pursues us, and changes us. And this he does with the widow.
 - Secondly, (2) He had compassion on her.
 - The Greek word here for “compassion” is *esplanchnisthe*, describing the deepest of emotions (literally from the “bowels” or the “gut” as we would say).
 - The English translation is fairly good: *compassion*. The word compassion literally means “to suffer with” someone.
- Few things demonstrate the full humanity of Jesus Christ than when we read of His compassion.
 - We read of the compassion of the Lord throughout the Scriptures. In fact, in a similar scene in Bethany, just before our Lord raised Lazarus from the dead, we read:

John 11:33: “³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.”

- In the Beatitudes, we also read:

Matthew 5:4: “⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Luke 6:21: “²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.”

- And in Paul’s letters:

2 Corinthians 1:4: [We read of our Lord] “⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

- **Only Jesus is uniquely able to *truly* have compassion for His people, for only He suffered in our place:**

Isaiah 53:4: “⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.”

- And, so Jesus has compassion for the widow and speaks to her, saying, “Do not weep.”

Psalm 68:5: “⁵ Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.”

- Indeed, the protector of the widows is now on the scene.
- **Notice here, nobody asks Jesus to do anything. He takes the initiative, being moved by compassion for the widow woman.**
- Martin Luther comments concerning this passage, saying:

“the general rule that applies to all the merciful deeds of God, that they all overtake us without our merits, even before we seek them... Thus you have her as an example, not of faith, but of the pure grace and lovingkindness of God.”

I. The Power of Christ

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.

- What follows here will be for at least a two-fold purpose:
 - (1) as **an act of compassion for the widow**; and
 - (2) as **a sign pointing to Christ and a shadow of the coming resurrection.**
- Then, after telling the widow, “Do not weep,” Jesus does the unthinkable: **He came up and touched the bier.**
 - Once again, this was the stretcher/open-casket where the body lies in the open.
 - The problem, however, is that in accordance with the Torah (the Old Testament Law), in Numbers 19:11, 16, touching a corpse makes an individual ceremonially unclean.

“Jesus’ touching it meant pollution according to the ceremonial laws, but where human need was in question he never worried about ceremonial trifals.” Leon Morris

- But, there is more to this than Jesus simply not worrying about ceremonial laws.
- Such an act – i.e., coming in contact with a dead body, would have defiled an ordinary Jew. **Yet, Jesus was no ordinary Jew – He is the Author of Life.**

○ **Jesus is not defiled by the unclean; He makes the defiled clean.**

- Notice what happens when Jesus touches the bier: the bearers stood still.
 - In other words, the pall bearers just stood there. Perhaps, they were in shock, or simply did not know what to do.
 - The literary effect here, is that of a movie where the main character is doing something, and the whole world stops...time stands still.
 - That is what the scene appear like here. Everyone is “frozen” and Jesus is moving.
- And while the bearers are “still” Jesus speaks, but not to them. For, He speaks **to the dead man!**
 - But, Christ does not simply speak to the dead man, He gives him a command: “Young man, I say to you, Arise!”
 - One can only imagine what the crowd was thinking as this “stranger” (Jesus) started speaking to the dead man.
 - This is quite similar to what Christ did to Lazarus at Bethany, saying, “Lazarus, come out!”
- But, then, we read: ¹⁵ *And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.*
 - Miraculously, the dead man is dead no more.
 - What we witness here is **the death of death itself**. This is precisely why John Owen’s great puritan work is entitled, “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ.”
 - The One is who life in Himself confronts death in its tracks.

J.C. Ryle writes, “that the Prince of Peace is stronger than the king of terrors, and that though death, the last enemy, is mighty, he is not so mighty as the sinner’s Friend.”

- It goes without saying that **the power of Christ here is astounding.**
 - The manner in which Luke conveys this is through his **anti-climatic telling of the event.**
 - For, unlike the prophets of old, Christ did not pray a prayer or an incantation. He simply spoke and the dead were raised.
 - Jesus' miracle here is **effortless.** This puts His actions in stark contrast to Old Testament examples of resuscitations: Elijah stretched himself three times over the boy he revived (1 Kings 17:21), and Elisha touched his child with his staff and then later lay over him (2 Kings 4:31, 34-35). **Christ simply speaks.**
 - Then, as a demonstration of the fullness and completeness of Christ's work, the man rises up **and speaks!**

- Then, in a moving display of His great compassion for the widow, Luke writes that **“Jesus gave him to his mother.”**
 - One can only imagine what she was thinking.
 - Just as Jesus gave the widow her son back, so He gives us, through His grace alone, the gift of life through and with Him.

- Then, Luke writes: *“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.”*
 - The “fear” here was certainly an “awe” that the crowd experienced as a result of the power of Christ.
 - Luke says that they glorified God.
 - **A funeral procession has now turned into a joyous celebration.**

- The crowd then exclaims, “A great prophet has arisen among us! And “God has visited his people!”
 - Elisha was the last prophet to raise the dead (2 Kings 4:18-37)
 - And so, the crowd clearly draws a parallel between the work of Christ and the work of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.
 - “A great prophet” is likely the highest title the people would have thought to give Christ at the time.

- The phrase “God has visited his people!” would not have been uncommon, as similar forms are used throughout the Old Testament.
- Certainly, the people are amazed and filled with awe.
- As was typical, Luke writes that word of Christ’s work spreads throughout Judea and the surrounding country. Judea, in this context, refers to the entire region of Judea and Galilee.

II. The Meaning and Hope of Resurrection

- This scene outside the city gates of Nain is a glorious picture of the resurrection that is to be found in Christ alone.
- It is certainly a similar scene to that in Bethany, outside of the tomb of Lazarus.
- After that particular incident, we read in John 11:25-26: “²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”
- And so it was here.
- Yet, we must not forget that the widow’s son, as well as Lazarus, will eventually die again. This was not intended to be a “permanent miracle.” Rather, it was intended to point to Christ and His resurrection.
 - This is why signs, wonders, and healing miracles are not sufficient for faith. They only address a temporary problem.

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- The permanent hope, however, is **Resurrection**.
 - We read in John’s gospel about the future resurrection:

John 5:25, 28-29: ²⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live...²⁸ Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

- This morning, around the world, Christians celebrate the resurrection of Christ from the dead.
- But, as I have each year for the past several years, I ask, why is the Resurrection of Christ from the dead so central to the Gospel?
 - It is not simply because “Jesus is alive” for He never ceased to exist. After His death on the Cross, His spirit was with His Father in heaven.
 - Yet, what Resurrection means is that the power of sin and death is destroyed.
 - Death is the separation of the (physical) body from the spirit. It was God who, in the Genesis account, made man both body and spirit. He picked up dust from the earth and breathed life into the nostrils of man. Yet, because of sin, the two are separated.
 - Furthermore, **sin has ravaged Creation and our lives.**
 - But, sin will not have the last say.
 - Resurrection declares that God will not abandon His Creation, but will redeem and restore it!
 - Similar to the widow’s son, we will be raised **bodily** not just *spiritually*!

“If death is the dissolution of this body, never to be reassembled, then death has succeeded in saying present creation is bad and is going to be abandoned. But resurrection says, „No.“ Present creation is good. It is corruptible and transient, not least because of sin, but God, having dealt with sin in the cross of Jesus Christ, will deal with corruption. And the result therefore must be the reaffirmation of the good creation, including the reaffirmation of human bodies.”

N.T. Wright

- After the Fall, God did not decide that He would simply abandoned this present Creation.
 - So often when we as fallen and imperfect people sit down to create something, we rarely “get it right” the first time. In fact, imagine sitting down to write a paper or paint a picture. We start, look at what we’ve done, decide we don’t like it, trash it, and start over. We continue this process until we produce something we are at least somewhat pleased with.
 - I remember as a child getting a Rubik’s Cube and was so excited to take it out of the box and mix it all up and then restore the colors back to how they were when I first got. Unfortunately, the last time the colors were together were when I took it out of the box. The only thing I could do, in my mind, if I wanted it back to the

original colors, was to buy a new one. I had messed it up, but I did not have the power to restore it. Therefore, I no longer had any use of it. **Yet God is not like this.**

○ **He created once, and He will one day redeem His fallen Creation.**

- Unfortunately, because of our common misunderstanding of the **doctrine of the bodily resurrection**, our understanding of heaven and future glory is even slightly distorted.
- I believe that many – if not most – Christians, when they think of heaven, think of a purely spiritual existence. I would submit that if many Christians were asked to describe the “body” of believers in heaven, they would describe **disembodied spirits “floating” around in a blissful existence**. Yet, this was the type of afterlife taught by the Greeks (“The Island of the Blessed”), such as Plato – **not** the heaven of the Scriptures.
- Yet, because of Resurrection, we will be bodily raised and redeemed.

• **Resurrection declares that there is nothing that sin has destroyed that Resurrection will not restore...and BETTER than before.**

- Over a hundred years ago, the Southern Presbyterian preacher Benjamin Morgan Palmer and his wife had to bury their teenage daughter. 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 brook.
- But as they began to dig, they made an unexpected discovery. Palmer recalled the scene:

“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 on 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.”

- This is, indeed the hope of resurrection. The grave will be no more and the power of death will be destroyed!

Revelation 21:4: “⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”