

The Compassion of Jesus

The Real Jesus: Emotional Life

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Bible Text: Matthew 9:35-38

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Our Scripture reading this morning is from the gospel according to Luke chapter seven and verses 11 through 17 and you will find the passage in the pew Bible in page 863 and for our children who may have brought their children's Bible, it is on page 1266. We come today to the second message in a series, I think, of eight messages under this general title, "The Real Jesus: The Emotional Life of our Savior." And we are asking the gospels, particularly, the question that people might ask us. "So what is Jesus really like? We hear you speak about him in the creed. Well, the creed tells us who he is and what he has done, but what is he really like?" And today we come to the second of these studies.

So let us hear God's Word, Luke chapter seven and verse 11.

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. 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 and 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.¹

Well, this morning's second question is this. Of all the emotions of the Lord Jesus described in the New Testament and especially in the gospels, which is the most common one? Well, it is not a trick question and it is not a difficult question. The answer is in this passage. The answer is in the order of service. So you go to the bottom of the class if you don't know that the answer is compassion. It is mentioned about Jesus about 10 times in the first three gospels: Matthew and Mark and Luke.

¹ Luke 7:11-17.

But the context in which it appears in Luke's gospel is, I think, particularly interesting and I think is actually quite significant. It is significant because in verse 11 we are told when Jesus felt compassion.

“Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain.”²

Older versions, following a slightly different manuscript of the gospel according to Luke say the next day. Whether it was the next day or soon afterwards, the timing is significant for us, because the immediately preceding passage in Luke's gospel tells the very story that we were studying together last Lord's day elsewhere in the gospels. And so it seems fairly clear that Luke is making a point. First of all, in this marvelous encounter that Jesus has with the Roman centurion, although, as Luke makes fairly clear to us here the centurion did that through intermediaries. And the result was that Jesus was surprised. Apparently he didn't expect this. He was amazed. That is to say there was nothing in his experience of his own people that would have led him to conclude a Roman centurion is going to trust me. That was his human experience and apparently he was amazed. He was astonished at what had happened. And, indeed, he said, “I haven't found faith like this in all Israel.”

So it is so surprising. If you haven't found faith like this in the people who have had the Bible, you certainly don't expect to find it in a Roman centurion who doesn't have the Bible. And then immediately Luke moves on to say, “And this isn't the only human emotion that our Lord Jesus experienced as he took on our humanity.” And so Luke says to us, “I want you to notice that alongside surprise, the Lord Jesus in another incident very soon afterwards experienced compassion.”

But there is another interesting thing about the way in which this story is set in Luke's gospel and that is this. This is the only place where Luke records the compassion of Jesus. And there is something strange about that.

General physicians—and Luke was a general physician—good general physicians—and Luke was a very good general physician—he was the beloved physician—are very interested in people's emotions. People's emotions tell the general physician a great deal about the person's state of health, physical or mental. And so it is surprising that although Jesus had compassion in other situations, that this is the only situation in which Luke actually mentions it and we might, therefore, be led to the very mistaken conclusion that it is not all that important to Luke.

Actually, I think he mentions it only here because he wants to highlight it. He wants to hold it up as a unique occasion in which Jesus experienced compassion, because on this occasion it is as though we are able to get inside Jesus and learn what it means for Jesus to have compassion.

But there is another reason I think Luke mentions this here. Luke has a big picture and a

² Luke 7:11.

lot of small pictures that fit within the big picture. And the big picture for Luke is this, that what the Lord Jesus has come into the world to do is to do what Adam failed to do and to undo the destruction that Adam brought into the world through sin bringing guilt and shame and sickness and death and judgment. And that is rather strikingly portrayed right at the very beginning of this narrative. I think you will notice it immediately.

“Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold...”³

Look. Now you and I don’t go around saying behold. We say things like, “You see that? Look. What is coming out of the city?”

What is coming out of the city is another considerable crowd. This is the Jesus crowd meeting the mourning crowd. This is the prince of life meeting the company that is bearing death. And so Luke is painting this picture for us and he uniquely paints this picture for us to give us a sense that something grand and magnificent is happening here, that this is not Jesus sending a Hallmark sympathy card. This is two crowds confronting one another, one crowd that carries death and is in a situation of hopelessness and despair and the other crowd that is led by the prince of life, the Savior, the one who himself will conquer death. And it is within that situation, a very dramatic situation that actually Luke points attention to in the king, the prince of life, the Savior is that in this situation Jesus is filled with compassion. He is a Jesus who is full of the deepest sympathy.

If we are to understand I think there are several things that we need to notice. Actually the first of them I think I need to draw attention to is the nature of Jesus’ compassion. It is used interestingly in the gospels only of Jesus. We don’t hear of other people having compassion even although we know other people had compassion. There is a reason for the gospel writer saying exclusively that Jesus had compassion, because they want us to understand that what we experience may not be what Jesus experienced, but if we really want to know what compassion looks like then the person to whom we must look is Jesus himself.

That is actually brought out rather wonderfully, I think, in the Bible use of language about compassion. I think in the western world most of us who are 21st century people, if I asked you: Where does compassion come from? Although I would never say that. I would say. From where does compassion come? I think most of us would say, “Well, it comes from the heart, doesn’t it?” We speak of people who have a heart of compassion. But the politest way to explain the way the Bible puts things is to say in the Bible compassion comes from somewhere much lower down in the human anatomy. Compassion in the Bible—and we are to understand this in connection with Jesus—that when he sees this scene he is not standing there thinking, that is a terribly... somebody has died. That is a very sad situation. My heart goes out to them.

We are to understand that as Jesus sees this he experiences something that is profoundly gut wrenching, that goes right down, as it were, into the very roots of his being. We

³ Luke 7:11-12.

sometimes say, don't we, and after this sermon please never say this again. We sometimes say, "I feel your pain."

You never feel somebody else's pain. What you are feeling is your pain. You do not feel somebody else's pain. You may have very little idea of what pain they are going through. But this language does actually speak of Jesus absorbing, feeling within the very entrails of his being the pain of this situation. It would be colloquial, but it would be true to say when Jesus saw this scene it tore his guts out. It didn't just touch his heart, it ripped his heart out. That is compassion.

And we will see in a few minutes, I think, how it was that Jesus experienced that compassion. So compassion in the Bible is not mild. Compassion in the Bible is not a Hallmark sympathy card. Compassion in the Bible is your whole being experiencing a kind of deep emotional disruption because of the needs of someone else.

But then look, secondly, at the nature of Jesus' compassion. What was it that evoked this compassion? Very interesting in Luke's gospel when Luke mentions compassion he usually mentions it in terms of one of the senses, one particular sense. What sense would it be? He usually mentions it as here in connection with the sense of sight. Jesus saw and Jesus felt compassion. Now that is not incidental seeing. I don't just mean using your eyes. I mean actually seeing what is happening, seeing what this means is intimately related to Jesus' compassion.

I wonder if you have ever had this experience. I have had it too many times. I hear somebody describing somebody whom I know and I will make a few noises, but what I am actually thinking is: You have no idea who that person is. You don't really see that person. You don't know what I know about that person. We have all experienced that, haven't we? I mean usually it is somebody who is being praised who is actually a thug. And we don't seem to have the discernment to sense the atmosphere of their life, the driving forces in their life and we are taken in and we don't really see.

But what Luke wants to underline is that Jesus really saw what was here. And actually think this is true with compassion, isn't it? The person who doesn't see, who doesn't take in the reality of the situation isn't going to experience compassion towards the need. So what does Jesus see? He takes it in in a moment. I am sure the crowd are thinking it is a funeral, but Jesus is seeing something different. Jesus takes it in. He understands immediately this is a widow. He understands immediately this is the widow's son. He understands immediately why this is a situation of such desperate hopelessness and despair. He understands this Son was this woman's only son. He sees that immediately.

Now it is elementary, my dear Watson, isn't it? Now that we see he sees it, how does he know she is a widow, because there is no husband walking beside her as she leads this sad entourage. How does he know that this is the son? Because if it weren't the son she wouldn't be in this position. How does he know that she has got no other sons? Because there would be another son taking the place of the head of the household. He takes it all in

in a moment and he sees it. The picture is clear to him. And the thing he obviously sees most of all is the despair.

I mean actually there has been a time in the western world when people in the western world have seen so many Middle and Near Eastern funerals. Isn't that the case? We see them almost every week on television. They are horrific affairs. There are some of them are kind of triumphalistic, but the awful sense of hopelessness and the fear and the noise, the cacophony. My friend, it is not accidental that Christian funerals are not cacophonies. Although I have to say to you that some funerals can be in the western world, even some funerals in churches. Isn't that true? The cackle of the laughter that gets us over the uncomfortable experience, the saying what a great fellow he was and the glossing over of the reality that he or she was a deep dyed sinner and the sense of absolute hopelessness against which we fight by comparison with what the gospel has done for us in the depths of our loss and our pain and our sorrow and, in this case, all the sheer—and this is something contrary even to fallen nature that a mother should lose her boy. Some of us know what that means. We have a brother or sister who died. And you saw your mother or your father. You know you could never say to such a one, “I understand what you are going through. I feel your pain.” No, I feel my own pain.

And here is Jesus and the gospels give us every impression that his earthly father Joseph had died so he understood what it was for his mother to be a widow, but she was a widow, as we saw last week, surrounded by endless children. And here is this woman and Jesus sees the need. He... you see the tears. He sees what was meant to be. And he sees what actually is, the pain, the fact that she has lost protection, that she has lost a livelihood, that her heart is broken, unspeakable. And he sees it all. He watches it. And it is that he saw and then having seen he had compassion on her.

It is interesting, isn't it, usually when we see Jesus' compassion being drawn out {?} crying out in need.

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Heal the blind. Come and meet me in my need.”

Disciples in the boat, “Jesus, don't you care for us? Care for us. Show compassion to us.”

There is no appeal here. There is nobody in the crowd saying, “Look, it is Jesus.”

Fascinating thing here is that Jesus' compassion is stimulated entirely by the fact that he sees what ought to be in God's creative design and he sees the tragedy that is and nobody needs to say to him, “Is there anything you can do about this?” Nobody runs out of the crowd. But Jesus himself sees and has compassion. He knows what this family was meant to be.

Incidentally, do you see how different the Lord Jesus is from the television hucksters? And all the pomp and self exalting that takes place. And no sign of deep compassion. Charlatans many of them.

And here is the Lord Jesus and he is heartbroken, because he has seen the need.

But then I want you to notice the effect of Jesus' compassion, because this is so interesting, I think. This is the difference between feeling bad about a situation and actually having compassion. You know the first thing Jesus does he breeches all social etiquette. I don't know what is true of my brothers in the ministry, but every wedding I think I have ever conducted I have said these solemn words. "If any one knows any just cause why these two may not lawfully be joined together in marriage, let him now declare it." And I am yet to have somebody stand up. Don't you be the first. I have yet to have somebody stand up and say, "There is a problem here."

But if somebody did, can you imagine the atmosphere there would be? But think of somebody at a funeral service saying, "Stop."

You know, when we see a situation and we want to do something about it because we are moved with compassion, is this true of you? I am sure it is true of me. Sure if I stopped and thought about the times this was true of me. I would be able to keep you here the rest of the day when you have said, "But what will people think?" We don't do that kind of thing around here."

It would be so... people would feel so uncomfortable. Jesus broke social etiquette. He was that kind of Jesus.

My friends, if we have the Jesus of social etiquette we have got the wrong man. This Jesus, first of all, breaks social etiquette and then he breaks religious etiquette. You know, of course, that according to the Levitical law to come into contact with a dead body was to render one's self unclean. And this is what Jesus does. He comes and he stops the bier and he has the audacity to say to the mother... How foolish Jesus must have looked, not only breaking the social mores, but saying to this bereft mother, "You do not need to cry anymore." And then stopping the bier and then touching the body.

But the wonderful thing is as he touches uncleanness, the uncleanness of death, death's uncleanness is banished. As he absorbs, as it were, death's pollution, death is cleansed. And Jesus says to this young man in verse 14:

"Young man, I say to you, arise.' And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."⁴

Now you wouldn't do that today. You would put him on television. You see, you need to write a book about your experiences.

"Not a bit of it," says Jesus. "I am not about sensation. I am about restoration."

What a beautiful moment that must have been. And, you see, like so many of Jesus'

⁴ Luke 7:14-15.

miracles, they are also active parables. They are momentary glimpses into what Jesus in his glorious compassion one day will fully and finally do. Won't that be a moment when sons and daughters are given back to their mother? Isn't the gospel glorious even in the midst of the depths or sorrow? The way he will heal the broken hearted and in the grand resurrection raise the dead and give us back to one another in relationships that are transformed by his saving and restoring and ultimately transforming power.

And this is what Jesus is doing here. It is absolutely marvelous what Jesus is doing here. But I want you to notice how foolish it is, how utterly foolish from man's point of view to speak to this boy's dead body. Dead bodies don't hear. But Jesus speaks and this is so interesting because here just like the previous occasion, Jesus did it just by speech. I wish to God the Church of Jesus Christ would learn this, that Jesus' word has its own power, that we would understand that before we ever do we need to be done to. We need to experience the power of God's Word influencing our thinking, touching, our affections, transforming our will, changing our lives. Christianity isn't a matter of self help. It is a matter of word, power. It is what he does by the power of his word. If in his compassion by his word he was able to raise the dead, is he not by the word of his power in his compassion able to bring light into your darkness and comfort into your sorrow and transformation into your mess and give you light upon the way? And it is the word of Jesus that does it.

And that, of course, because of the sheer wonder of his compassion. Remember how Hebrews puts it. We ... I don't know why it is put in the negative, but it is really a very strong causative. We do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities means we have a Savior who feels with great profundity our need.

Now you might say, "But he was sinless."

Yeah, actually that is the point. You remember in *Pride and Prejudice*? You have seen the movie. You may have read the book. You have at least read the Cliff's Notes. How towards the end when Jane Bennett is all taken up with Mr. Bingley and she says to her sister Elizabeth, "I wish you could have my happiness." And Elizabeth Bennett says to her, actually quite a profound statement. She says, "I can never have your happiness until I have your goodness."

Isn't that interesting? You would never really be happy if you are not really good. That is what she is saying. I could never have your happiness unless I had your goodness.

I want to say this to you. You can never have real sadness either unless you are real goodness. And Jesus is really good. And Jesus was really sad. It broke his heart. He cared. You see, because my problem is I have been desensitized by my sin. I have become like—I am sure this isn't true of laurel Christ, but it has been true in other places that I have visited—elderly people together complaining that the food doesn't taste good and somebody needs to have the courage to say, "Actually you are losing your sense of taste, my dear. The food is terrific. It is your taste buds."

Or the people who never in this church, but in other churches complain they can't hear the preacher. And the preacher is far too gracious, values his job far too highly to say, "We have an entire organization of people in this church who will check your hearing."

"Oh, my hearing is not the problem. It is the preacher that is the problem."

No, my dear, it is your hearing. And the same with compassion. Our compassion is so poor, so warped, because we are such sinners. But his compassion is utterly unspeakable. He is the compassionate Jesus.

We had an elder in a church I served who had all kinds of personal challenges into which I will not go, but, you know, every time he prayed for years I heard him pray, we come... he always used the Authorized Version language. "We come to thee." And he had a little list actually. "We come to thee the sympathizing Jesus." They were magical words, because they told us all that he had found in Christ all he really needed, a compassionate Savior. He is yours by faith.

Lord, help us to know Christ better, to love and trust him more. We pray for his sake and for our good in his name. Amen.