



CAPITOL COMMISSION

A Compassion That Intervenes (Luke 7:11-17)

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The introductory statement of this text indicates both a chronological and geographical transition in Luke's narrative. In the previous account, the centurion epitomized the nature and character of one who followed Jesus as prescribed by his teachings contained in the Sermon on the Plain. Here was a person who possessed such amazing faith that Jesus stopped, and announced this fact to the crowd that followed. He was a man who approached Jesus with a combination of humility about his unworthiness, and confidence in the authority of the Lord's spoken word. As the account of the centurion completes the section of teaching of Jesus by providing the audience with a living and breathing example, it also propels us forward to the section of Luke's gospel where the identity of Jesus will be addressed and eventually questioned by John the Baptist. In the matter of his identity, the healing of the centurion's servant speaks of Jesus' divinity. For he possesses the restorative power to heal at a distance on the basis of his inherited authority granted him by God. So while this healing was more of a character study of the centurion, it also revealed the identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah. He is shown to be the one who was promised by God, imbued with the authority of God, in order that the saving purpose of God may be secured for all his creation.

As the attention turns to the raising of the widow's son in comparison with the healing of the centurion, what stands out is the heart of Jesus in response to this widow. It is not the amazing faith of the woman, but the compassion of the Lord to intervene in dramatic fashion that speaks to God's willingness to provide hope to mankind in the midst of their brokenness and vulnerability. In this account, the miraculous demonstration of Jesus' power over death is a complementary concept to the presentation of him as one who was acutely aware of the suffering of the people. While the crowds spread the message throughout all Judea of this great prophet, one like Elijah who raised the dead, the impetus of this intervention finds its focal point in the compassion of Christ. What drove him to utilize the restorative power of God is the anguish of one crushed under the weight of this fallen world. From this passage we are called to understand the resurrection power of the Lord that proclaims the glory and greatness of God flows from the compassionate heart of the Lord who intervenes for those who are harassed, helpless, and without hope. This account not only reveals the heart of the Lord and the depth of his compassion; it also displays a pattern that he modeled for all who follow him, for all those who claim him as Lord of their life.

Luke 7:11-17 - (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.

UNHINDERED BY CIRCUMSTANCES

As he drew near to the gate of the town... and a great crowd went with him – Shortly after healing the centurion's servant Jesus leaves Capernaum and travels to the town of Nain with his disciples and a large crowd. According to scholars, the town of Nain is a small village on the slopes of Mt. Moreh which is associated with the modern village of Nein. The most common and slowest means of travel in antiquity was by foot. The archeological and literary evidence suggests that a normal day's travel covered between 17-23 miles.¹ Nain's location is about 25 miles SW of Capernaum. With limited and generally ill-kept accommodations along the way, this distance would likely be covered in one day. This excursion would have taken over eight hours traveling at a pace of three miles per hour. Add to this fact that Jesus was not travelling alone, the time for this journey would have increased substantially. Among his traveling companions were not only disciples, but also a great crowd. These crowds were originally with John the Baptist, but they began following Jesus because of their attraction to his public ministry. They came to hear his teaching or see the miracles he would perform, or even simply to be fed (John 6:26). They would have been numbered in the thousands filling the landscape of the road as far as the eye could see.

While this was the ordinary means of travel for people of this era, it does not stretch the imagination to see Jesus and his companions wearied from the day's journey. Especially when considering the demanding nature of the crowds who accompanied him on this excursion. In Luke 5:15 when Jesus heals the leper it mentions that great crowds followed him for the purpose of hearing him and being healed of their diseases. This is typical of what the crowds sought, and in this instance, those who followed would have been no different. As we compare our failures in this area to that of the Lord, we find that Jesus did not allow his physical needs or the surrounding multitudes distract him from recognizing and meeting this widow's need. As with Peter in the garden, we are all susceptible to allowing the frailty of the body to override the willingness of the Spirit (Matthew 26:41). In a similar fashion the overt pressure others exert over our actions is always present. The disciples were never shy about questioning Jesus' interactions with

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others, whether it was trying to keep the little children from seeking him or suggesting the crowds be sent away when needing to be fed. However, Jesus was a man who would not allow their lack of faith and love to dictate his actions. He was the one who had come to proclaim good news to the poor, and there was nothing or no one who would keep him from bringing the hope of the gospel to this widow who was hurting and without hope.

ONE WHO SEES

When the Lord saw her - As Jesus approaches the city gate he finds himself face-to-face with a considerable crowd in the midst of a burial procession. What a stark contrast between the two crowds, one with sadness, mourning, and wailing on their way to bury the widow's son, the other with the buzz of excitement that surrounded Jesus. One marching toward the finality of death and the other filled with the excitement of being in the presence of the author of life. What Jesus does in this encounter is shocking because in the midst of the distractions of the crowds who surrounded him and sought his attention he saw the widow. In a moment this opportunity would have been missed, the chance to extend compassion would have passed. The widow was not looking for help. This chapter of her life was closed and all that remained was living with the sad reality of her future. Jesus was not swept away by the clamor of those surrounding him or unprepared by an unexpected interruption. His attention was fixed toward those broken under the weight of this world.

He had compassion on her - It was this ability to see that produced the compassion in Jesus' heart. In stopping to notice the plight of this woman, his heart broke causing him to move both heaven and earth to restore hope to her life. By describing this woman as a widow with her only son recently deceased, Luke is not only communicating the emotional loss of the woman, but also the desperate economic straits she was now in. With neither husband nor son to care for her, she would have no means of supporting herself. So not only has the woman lost her son, any hope for financial stability was now dashed. The death of her son was a recent event and is known because the burial rituals for Jews during the NT period took place promptly and almost always on the same day. It is in this moment of personal heartbreak, loss, and devastation that Jesus is thrust forward by a compassion that could not be contained. In this we see the loving-kindness of God as revealed by the Son. However, the example that Jesus left not only demonstrates the love of God, but also, how those touched by Christ should extend his love through their interactions with the world.

Then he came up and touched the bier - The compassion of Jesus produced this willingness to intervene. But by intervening Jesus has now placed himself at

the center of this event. The crowds are breathless with anticipation, with the widow and the mourners in shock by this interruption. Jesus does what only can be accomplished by the divine and he does it yet again, through the authoritative power of his word. At his command this son becomes fully animated as seen by him sitting up and beginning to talk. One thing should be noted about the bier for clarity. This was not a closed coffin but a litter used to carry the body outside the city to its burial side. With the young man fully alive, we find Jesus with tenderness delivering him to his mother. This reunion is what drove Jesus to intervene and exert the power necessary to make the restoration of this relationship possible. Without a doubt, by intervening in this matter the spotlight was placed upon Jesus. And in this we find our purpose, to be people that quite simply and without apology point the way to Jesus and make him the focal point of the attention.

GOD'S GLORY MADE KNOWN

And this report about him spread - The crowds were once again amazed; the display of the miraculous that had been seen through the ministry of Jesus kept growing in magnitude. They had seen Jesus heal, but now they were eyewitnesses to his power to bring the dead back to life. In their minds the die had been cast; Jesus was seen to be a great prophet, the one who had come from God. This news was like wild fire and could not be contained, and soon filled the land of Judea and overflowed into the surrounding areas. This report spread by the crowds focused on the resurrection power of Jesus. He was now held in the same light as the great prophet Elijah, who also raised a widow's son (1 Kings 17:22).

While this re-animating power was the catalyst in spreading the news of the greatness of Jesus through the land, this power was only utilized because of his compassionate heart. How is it that the message of Jesus will spread through the land in our day? Will it not take place the same way? Without a doubt, nothing declares the resurrecting power of God to the world more than seeing the transformation of those who have crossed over spiritually from death to life. May those who have experienced this same power in their own lives live to see beyond themselves and intervene with a compassion that points to Christ, the only one with the power to breathe life back into the dead.

1 - Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).