

# Truth for Today

*The Bible Explained*

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## Luke's Gospel: The Centurion and the Widow of Nain - Luke 7:1-17

Hello, good morning and welcome to this morning's talk. Today we are going to look at two wonderful encounters of our Lord with two very different people which are recorded for us in Luke 7:1-17.

As we have previously seen, each of the four Gospels focuses on a slightly different aspect of the Lord's ministry. In Luke, we see the perfect Man and how He showed wonderful compassion for suffering humanity, perhaps more than in any of the other Gospels. Doctor Luke delights to show us how divine power is used to bring blessing and relief to the sick, sorrowing and demon possessed. In our passage today, Luke 7:1-17, we see someone who had a servant who was ill and someone whose son was dead. We can see throughout Luke's Gospel how the blessing of God goes out to the Gentile, the dead and the degraded; two out of the three are highlighted here.

At the point in history and the part of the world where our stories took place, the Romans were an occupying army and in general despised, while women were treated very much as second class citizens; so it is against this background that we pick up events. We have just been told about what the Lord had been saying now we see action. How good it is if we as Christians are not only known for what we say but for what we do!

He now enters a place called Capernaum which stood on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was the chief commercial and social centre of the area at that time. It was on the great highway between Syria and Palestine from which the Romans collected custom taxes and established a garrison there. It was from here that Matthew was called from the receipt of customs and where Peter lived. The Lord predicted its downfall and today the heaps of ruins extend a mile along the shoreline. Two particular ruins are of great archaeological significance: Peter's house and the synagogue. Some believe that this is the very synagogue that our story refers to but some archaeologists feel that the original building was replaced in the second or third century AD on the same spot.

So into this town the Lord arrives and meets a centurion who was greatly concerned for his servant who was ill and near to death (Luke 7:1-3). How many people in that day would have been so concerned about someone who was in essence a slave? So it would seem this was a good man marked by human kindness. However, he recognised he had a need and that Jesus of Nazareth was the person who could meet that need. How quick are we in recognising this same fact? How often do we try to work things out ourselves or seek help from other sources before simply taking it to the Lord in prayer and leaving it there believing that He can help?

Knowing that Jesus was the person to help, he then recognised that the way to access this great power in that day was through the elders of the Jews. The Jewish people are God's chosen people and up until the moment Jesus died on the cross and the veil in the temple was torn in two by God, it was the best option for him. We now live in a period where the blessing of God can come to us through simple faith in Christ and belief in His Word as directed by the Holy Spirit.

When these elders came to Jesus they were very keen to show why they felt that this man was worthy of the Lord's attention (Luke 7:4). Would they have had the same desire for anybody else? What about the woman we read about elsewhere who was caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-12) or the woman who had had multiple husbands and met Jesus at the well? (John 4:1-42). What about the man who was mad and possessed by demons? (Luke 8:26-39). By what criteria did they gauge whether this man was worthy or not of God's blessing? The real truth is we have all come short of God's standard because we are all sinners. This is made very clear in Romans 3:23. The situation we have here, however, is that the Jews deemed this Gentile centurion worthy on the basis of what he had done for them! He loved their nation and he had also built them a synagogue. These were indeed good things to be and to have done. They did not, however, have any real understanding of grace. Instead of seeing how their own law condemned them, they became self-centred; they made themselves and how other people treated them as the standard by which others would be deemed worthy or not of God's blessing. So on this basis, this Gentile was a good man.

I have to confess that I often look at or hear about other people who have perhaps committed a crime or are living a life that we would not believe was in keeping with God's desired standard and feel that they are less worthy than I am of the love of God and God's wonderful salvation. In doing so we make ourselves exactly like these Jewish elders. I am reminded of Philip Yancey's words in the book *"What's so amazing about Grace?"* He states that there is nothing I

can do to make God love me more neither is there anything I can do to make God love me less. If we really grasp the wonder and truth of these words and put them into practice, I believe it will both address thoughts of low self-esteem and also thinking too highly of oneself.

The centurion on the other hand, however, had the correct understanding of both his own standing and who the Lord was. In Luke 7:6-7 we see that he did not feel it was worth bringing the Lord all the way to his house but rather it would be better to exercise the power that he believed the Lord had just to say a word and his servant could be healed. We also notice that he did not even feel himself worthy to come to the Lord himself but rather he sent a deputation. His knowledge of the Jewish religion and evident contact with the Jewish elders had obviously made him realise that by birth he had no claim on God's blessing.

It is also very interesting to see in Luke 7:8 that although he appreciates that he has some authority within his own jurisdiction or circle of influence, it is still limited by the fact that he is also under authority to someone else. He sees in the Lord, however, someone who has ultimate power and can heal his servant even though He is not in the same building. The Lord therefore responds to this "great faith" by healing his servant. This admission of his authority underlines again the point made earlier of how kind a man he was that although in this position he had great care for those in his charge.

The Lord then stops when the messengers tell him the news and declares that his faith is so great that it exceeds those who should have known better (Luke 7:9), that is the people of Israel. This is a challenge to all of us who feel we are in anyway knowledgeable in the things of God that we should always ensure we are exercising the faith practically that would justify the knowledge we have in theory. I often feel that we are so reliant on medical science in our western culture that we forget that the God of creation still has the same ultimate power and authority to do anything that He wishes as He did all those years ago. This centurion recognised this and his faith was rewarded in a remarkable way.

Then the next day we read from Luke 7:11, that as the Lord moves into the city of Nain He faces a far bigger challenge, the ultimate challenge, death itself. As we stand now on the far side of the Lord's resurrection, it should be easier for us to understand and believe these verses and take comfort in the face of death. For this poor mourning widow and the family and friends around, it must have seemed all hope was gone and their lives would never be the same again.

This is the only mention of this city in Scripture as it would appear to be different from a similar sounding place in the Old Testament. One thought is that the name is a derivation of an old Hebrew word meaning "pleasant". This seems to sum up the area and the views from it as it was at the top of a rocky and steep ascent. However, for this family it was anything but pleasant and I suppose apt that they were carrying him out of the pleasant place to the place of burial. It reminds me of the scene at the very beginning of creation when Adam and Eve found themselves in the most pleasant place earth had ever seen, total paradise. Yet death came to that "pleasant" place when disobedience of God's prohibition brought God's judgement and spoiled everything (see Genesis 3:1-7).

In the previous story, Luke 7:1-10, the faith of the centurion is evident and it is this which instigates the contact with the Lord. Here it is a different matter and no faith is evidenced at all. This is all about the sympathy, concern and affection of the Lord for this poor widow. He goes to meet them. How often in the darkest moments and circumstances of life the Lord comes to help and support us, perhaps at times when our faith is lacking!

I often like to picture what these scenes must have looked like. Imagine this group of people, we are not told how many but there were many, following the Lord. They would be excited and amazed at the things they were seeing every single day as they witnessed the dealings of the Lord with ordinary people. How good it would be if we also were able to still find that same wonder and amazement as we have the privilege of reading these things that have been preserved for us in the Gospels.

So here was this excited group of people, some who were already His followers and also others who were not at that time, meeting this other group of people who were in a very different state of mind. It was like a procession of life meeting a procession of death.

We have three accounts in the New Testament about Jesus raising the dead (Luke 7:11-17, Luke 8:40-56, John 11:1-44). The resurrection of the dead is something that is integral to the Christian faith as we are reminded by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 15 He explains that if Christ has not risen from the dead then our preaching and even our faith itself is worth absolutely nothing (1 Corinthians 15:14). On the other hand, then if we believe Christ has risen from the dead then it should make all the difference in the world as to how we live our lives and even how we ultimately view our own death as we will have that confidence that we also shall be raised to eternal life in that coming day of resurrection. How often Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 are read at the open grave when someone is being buried. They give us the wonderful assurance that the dead in Christ

shall rise first, then those who are still alive shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air when He comes in the first part of His second coming, often referred to as the rapture. He goes on to tell the Thessalonian Christians to comfort each other with these words and this is still the only basis today on which we can have comfort in the face of death.

I am reminded about the story told by the well-known preacher Billy Graham. After he had enjoyed a game of golf with President Kennedy, the President asked him if he truly believed these very words written in the epistle to the Thessalonians. Dr. Graham assured him he did but the President did not make his own thoughts known. One thousand days later, Dr. Graham read those exact scriptures at the burial service of the President after he had been assassinated in Dallas. So as these words bring comfort to the believer in Christ they also bring a challenge to the unbeliever as the Bible also makes it clear that there will also be another resurrection many years later when everyone else shall be raised to be judged at a place called the Great White Throne. We read about this in Revelation 20:11-15. It was the reading of these verses that made me realise as a young boy that I needed to get right with God and accept Christ as my Saviour.

I am always impressed by the words of Luke 7:12 when John sees in his vision the dead, small and great, stand before God. In life, there is always a class system that exists whether we like to admit this or not. It is in our nature to see other people as either better or worse, richer or poorer, more or less important than ourselves. All over the world there are many ways by which people are distinguished. However death is no respecter of persons and it does not matter who we are in life or what we have accomplished, the Bible says we will all stand before a righteous and Holy God. In fact, it makes it even more specific than that as it tells us in Acts 17:31 *"that God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by a Man He has chosen and that He has given the assurance of who this Man is by raising Him from the dead."* So the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives hope to the believer and assurance as to how God will deal with this world in the future.

So it is hardly surprising, then, that when the Lord was here as a Man He wanted to show that He had power over death itself, the great and final enemy. So as we have said earlier, we have three accounts when the dead are raised. This young man, the daughter of a man named Jairus in Luke 8:40-56 and the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1-44. I like to think about these three instances in the context of different points of death and am encouraged that the Lord is not daunted by what we would see as impossible situations. With the daughter of Jairus, she had just died and nobody witnessed the miracle apart from her parents and three of the Lord's closest disciples. In our story here, they were on their way to the cemetery and all the mourners witnessed this. In the case of Lazarus the situation was even more advanced as he had already been in the tomb for four days and decomposition had already started. It is in this story of Lazarus, in John 11:35, that we get the shortest verse in the Bible where it simply says, *"Jesus wept."* He did not weep because His friend was dead as He knew what was about to happen but rather because of the impact that sin had had on His fair creation in bringing death. This was never what was meant to happen in the beginning of creation.

So as we go back to our funeral procession as it moves out of the city of Nain making its way to the cemetery, we see Jesus again touched by compassion for this poor woman (Luke 7:13). She had already lost her husband and now her only son was dead. Not only must this have been a great sadness to her in a natural and emotional sense but, at that time and in that part of the world, it would have been very difficult for a woman to live without the support of a male breadwinner. So she was emotionally and financially in a desperate situation and nobody on earth other than the Lord Jesus Christ could have resolved her situation. Many people today face great challenges in life and perhaps someone is listening today who feels that all hope is lost for whatever reason! If this is the case, then I feel there is a lesson to be learned from this story. Just as Jesus was the only solution for this woman so long ago, He still is today. My mind goes to the old hymn that we so often sing:

*Christ is the answer to my every need,  
Christ is the answer He is my friend indeed.  
Problems of life my spirit may assail,  
With Christ my Saviour I need never fail.  
For Christ is the answer to my need.*

T William Maltby

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So He instructed this woman to stop crying (Luke 7:13) and He went and touched the coffin and told the young man to rise up (Luke 7:14). Again, to compare with the other instances of people being raised from the dead, here He touches the coffin not the young man himself. In the case of Lazarus where He had already been dead for four days Jesus only spoke a word (John 11:43) and with Jairus' daughter He takes her by the hand (Luke 8:54). Although there are differences of approach, the outcomes were the same and these people were raised to life again. The Lord's methods may change but His desire to bless is always the same! The young man immediately sat up and spoke and Jesus restored him back to his mother. What a joy it must have been for her as her mourning ceased and she would never be the same again!

In Luke 7:16-17, we get the response to these wonderful miracles in the people praising and giving glory to God. They also recognised that Jesus was indeed someone who had come from God and that God was taking care of His people. We are then told that this news of Jesus and what He had done spread throughout all Judea and in the regions round about. We must always remember that no matter how much the Lord blesses us or indeed the people of this time, this is not the main reason for Jesus coming into the world. He came to make the Father's love known to this world and win for Himself a company who will be to His praise and glory for all eternity.

I trust we will all have been blessed and encouraged as we have thought this morning of these two miracles that Jesus did when He was here and that it will make us all the more desiring to learn more of Him day by day.

May God bless you and thank you for listening.

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