

## “Compassion for Mothers” (Luke 7:11–17)

Can you remember the last time you felt lonely and defeated? Did you experience an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and helplessness? How long did these feelings linger? What did you do? Who did you turn to? Did you know that many ladies in our congregation and greater community deal with suffering and discouragement on a daily basis? Some attempt to hide their pain, but for others, it's a burden that's *always* before them. The questions that we must ask are: Does Jesus care about hurting women? If so, do we care about those whom Jesus cares about?

In Luke 7:11–17 the great physician, Dr. Luke, records an episode that is unique to his gospel. In this account we will see God's heart for a hurting woman. As we read this gripping story, may our lives be deeply touched.

**1. Jesus encounters a grieving widow (7:11–12).** Luke begins his account in 7:11 by setting the scene: “Soon afterwards<sup>1</sup> He [Jesus] went to a city called Nain;<sup>2</sup> and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd.” Jesus had just been in Capernaum, healing the sick. He had healed a centurion's son in dramatic fashion. Hence, as Jesus left Capernaum, a large crowd followed Him and His disciples. Undoubtedly, the crowd was rejoicing over what Jesus had just done. As they approached the little town of Nain, some twenty–five miles away, Jesus met a sad procession coming out of the city. It was a funeral. Luke writes: “Now as He approached the gate of the city, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a sizeable crowd from the city was with her” (7:12). Before Jesus even entered the city, He was met by a mourning crowd. A widow had lost her *only* son!<sup>3</sup> In Jesus' day, such a loss was devastating!<sup>4</sup> There were no social services, home help, or pension scheme. Rather, sons were the lifeblood of the family. It was their responsibility to perpetuate the family line. Sons were the ones who protected and provided for the family. This is still true today in third world countries. Often the poor have large families because the more children you have the more care you may have in your old age. Not a bad idea, parents! Children, did you hear that?! May we always be conscious of the need to care for our parents as they age.

It is particularly worth noting that this mother is a widow. Luke has a special fondness for widows, mentioning them on six occasions in his gospel and twice in Acts.<sup>5</sup> In fact, there are more references to widows in Luke-Acts than anywhere else in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> This implies that for Luke, widows have a special significance. Elsewhere, James, writes that pure and undefiled religion in God's sight is to visit orphans and widows in their distress (Jas 1:27). Paul also commands us to “honor” widows (1 Tim 5:3). On this Mother Day, perhaps God is calling you to reach out to a widow. Maybe you can stop by with flowers for a short visit. If you can't stop by a widow's home, perhaps you can give a special lady a call. Maybe the Lord is burdening you to go even further by ministering to widows (e.g., visitation ministry, card writing ministry, serving at the seniors potluck).

Now we're ready to envision this scene. It is likely that the mother was walking in front of her son's coffin. In those days it was customary for the family to precede the deceased, and in this tragic case, no one else was left.<sup>7</sup> The cries would have been especially deafening because of the loud mourning associated with the death of an only child.<sup>8</sup> In Jesus' day, death was an occasion for a public display of grief and emotion. Crying, weeping, and beating the breasts were common expressions of grief. Some people tore their outer clothes and wore sackcloth. Some mourners threw dirt over their heads, rolled in the dust, or sat dejectedly among ashes. It was the responsibility of the family to even hire professional mourners (usually women) who would lead a large, wailing crowd with flutes, cymbals, and frenzied cries.<sup>9</sup> The period of mourning usually lasted for seven days. Burial then came quickly after death. The Palestinian heat caused bodies to decompose quickly, possibly creating a health risk. Burial in ancient Israel was done outside of the city in order to maintain ritualistic purity.<sup>10</sup>

**2. Jesus resurrects the widow's son (7:13–17).** In 7:13 Luke records these powerful words: **“When the Lord<sup>11</sup> saw her, He felt compassion for her.”** When Jesus’ eyes locked on this widow, He “felt compassion for her.” The verb “felt compassion,” *splagchnizomai*,<sup>12</sup> is built from the cognate noun *splagchon*, which literally means “guts.” In the ancient world, the heart and kidneys were used as referents for the seat of emotions. So it is not going too far, then, to say that Jesus was having a “gut reaction”—a feeling of deep pity and compassion for the plight of this grieving widow. Jesus’ heart went out to her. He was sensitive to the woman’s sorrow. He could see that she was alone in the world, with no husband and no children. She was losing what little was left of her family companionship and financial support.<sup>13</sup> Instead of a flash back, I wonder if Jesus was having a “flash forward” to His own mother. Mary would soon be a widow, weeping over the death of her Son! She would experience these same feelings and deep hurts. Jesus likely feels the pain of both women.

You may have such an immense hurt that you cannot even voice it. Perhaps your trauma has left you speechless. Jesus understands completely and sympathetically. His compassion is sufficient for every need. Maybe you’re grieving a death, and you can’t quite shake your feelings of grief. Perhaps you’ve lost a relationship. You are feeling rejected and worthless. Maybe you feel betrayed and wounded, and you fear you’ll never trust again. Your hurts and failures are burdens that cannot be bore by anyone except Jesus. But He feels your pain, and His heart goes out to you with deep compassion. Are you afflicted and hurting? Jesus hurts with you!

Yet, Jesus responds to this grieving widow with some seemingly untimely counsel: **“Do not weep”** (7:13b). How did she respond to Jesus’ command? Did she ignore Him, or did she get furious? Jesus told her not to cry. It was bad enough to have lost her husband, but then to have lost her only son as well is brutal. And now this stranger tells her not to cry. Crying was probably the only thing she could do! But before we come down on Jesus, we must understand that He wasn’t saying: “Okay, chin up! Toughen up! Don’t be a baby!” Moved by her tears, Jesus gave this woman the gentle imperative, “Do not go on crying” as a prelude to what He was about to do. Jesus was not short-circuiting the grief process; He did so in light of the miracle He was about to perform.<sup>14</sup>

If I asked you to come up with names and titles for Jesus, I would guess you would be able to reel off quite a few. You would probably choose something like “man of holiness,” because, He was without sin. You might call Him a “man of authority” because no one ever spoke like Jesus. You might call Him a “man of love” because no one loved like Jesus. However, an incredible title for Jesus is found in Isa 53:3: “A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Now you won’t find this title mentioned on Christian television or in many of our American churches; however, this title is one that every believer needs to be familiar with. Jesus, “the man of sorrows,” easily identified with the widow’s heartache, and He can and will sympathize and empathize with you as well.

Jesus’ compassion for this widow led to a personal response. Hence, we could describe compassion as “love that leads to action.” In 7:14 Luke writes: **“And He [Jesus] came up<sup>15</sup> and touched the coffin;<sup>16</sup> and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, ‘Young man,<sup>17</sup> I say to you, arise!’”** If you read over this verse quickly, you will not catch its significance. The fact that Jesus touched the coffin is incredibly important. Touching a coffin meant sure pollution according to the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament (cf. Num 19:11, 16), but Jesus knew that the Law required mercy above sacrifice (cf. Hos 6:6). To make matters even more interesting, the word translated “touch” (*hupto*) isn’t an E.T.-like, one finger touch. Rather, it’s a strong word that can mean to “take hold of.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it indicates that Jesus grabbed hold of the coffin firmly to stop the procession. This seems likely because the moment Jesus touched the coffin the pall bearers came to a screeching halt! They were probably wondering how in the world this supposed prophet could seem to break God’s law. Can you imagine their surprise when He told the young man to get up?!<sup>19</sup> The pall bearers must have thought Jesus this man was mad! I suspect they also must have felt that He was rather insensitive to the plight of the widow to interrupt her mourning.

After Jesus' pronouncement, Luke writes: **"The dead man sat up<sup>20</sup> and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother"**<sup>21</sup> (7:15).<sup>22</sup> What a great verse! I like how Luke records: "The dead man sat up and began to speak." That must have been spooky!<sup>23</sup> The coffin was probably just a box without a lid, so the son must have sat up and the men let him down, or perhaps Jesus Himself helped him down. What an amazing miracle! Sometimes a miracle takes place because a needy person asked for it. Sometimes a miracle takes place because someone other than the needy person asked for it. This miracle took place just because Jesus had compassion.<sup>24</sup> Oh, how He loves us! Whether or not God comes through for you every time in the way you desire, don't ever doubt His love and compassion for you.

Not only does Jesus have astonishing compassion—He has awesome power to minister to your deepest needs. All He has to do is say "get up" and all the dead will rise! The same power is available for us in every trial or tragedy we encounter. Further, His power is mediated by His wisdom. He will not do everything you ask, but He will do what is best for your well-being and for His glory. He will bring His mercy and compassion to bear on the points of pain and need in your life. He will bring healing; He will bring life.<sup>25</sup>

As Christians, we must always remember that the greatest power there is in this world, other than God Himself, is the power of death. But Jesus' almighty power can reverse even death itself. In a matter of a few seconds a lifeless corpse becomes a living person. What Jesus did to the widow's son He can do in countless calamitous situations. He speaks and the dead are raised. His word is accompanied by His power. When the mighty voice of Jesus speaks, death itself is banished.<sup>26</sup> The story ought to breed great confidence in us.

After the boy got out of the coffin, Jesus gave him back to his mother. The word "gave" (*didomi*) is a reminder that life after death is a free gift of God's grace. Furthermore, without this detail the story would be incomplete. Remember that it was because of Jesus' compassion for the mother that He got involved with the situation in the first place. He was sensitive to her suffering. So when Jesus brought the young man back to life, He restored him to his mother's arms. I can just imagine Jesus approaching the young man, taking his hands and his mother's hands, and clasping them together. What a Mother's Day! This mother had experienced the best day of her life! It was the day her son's funeral was to take place, but then Jesus cancelled it, and instead they celebrated new life.

Luke's account concludes with these words: **"Fear gripped them all,<sup>27</sup> and they began glorifying God, saying, 'A great prophet<sup>28</sup> has arisen among us!' and, 'God has visited His people!' This report concerning Him went out all over Judea and in all the surrounding district"** (7:16–17). Luke stresses Jesus' compassion as well as His power.<sup>29</sup> The crowd's words are probably meant to suggest that Jesus is a prophet such as Elijah and Elisha, who also possessed such miraculous power (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:8–37).<sup>30</sup> However, the last words of the crowd, "God has visited (*epeskepsato*) His people," recall Zechariah's prophecy of Luke 1:68: "He has visited (*epeskepsato*) us and has accomplished redemption for His people." Thus, it is possible that there are also messianic overtones.<sup>31</sup>

The theme of this account is simple: *Jesus comforts with His compassion and power*. The raising of the widow's son points to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is one of the first hints in Luke's gospel that Jesus would rise from the dead. The miracle also shows that Jesus has the power to bring us back to life. He can do something more than show of sympathy. He can grant us eternal life through His death and resurrection. His resurrection is the promise and proof of our own resurrection.<sup>32</sup> When you believe in Jesus, you cross over from death to life and experience the assurance of eternal life based on the work of Christ. *Jesus comforts with His compassion and power*.

There are two crowds in this story: the crowd with Jesus and the crowd with the widow. The crowd with Jesus was full of joy and celebration. They are following Jesus because of His ministry of life. The crowd with the widow is full of sorrow and mourning. They are accompanying the woman because of a tragic death. Similarly, Mother's Day can bring two crowds. Some are excited for this day and consider it a special day of celebration. Many mothers are expecting to be taken out for brunch. (A simple word of warning: Don't ever let your wife or mother cook on Mother's Day!) Many others are anticipating a few gifts, cards, and words of appreciation. Some mothers are even hoping that their children might show their love and gratitude by cleaning their rooms, putting the dishes away, or vacuuming the house. (This may be wishful thinking.)

But there is another crowd that doesn't look forward to Mother's Day. For these ladies, Mother's Day is a day of dread. Often these women skip church so that they don't have to smile and listened to another Mother's Day sermon. For some ladies, Mother's Day reminds them of the passing of their own mother or loved one. Others may not like this day because their mother was not the woman they needed. Their mother may have been guilty of abuse or neglect. Mother's Day is another reminder of what they missed. Still others might mourn this day because they have longed to be a mother, and for one reason or another, that has not happened. So to see mothers everywhere honored is another reminder that God disappoints, and they are living with loss.

My hope and prayer for us today is that the two crowds who have gathered here today will leave joyfully together. I hope those who are excited for this Mother's Day will also be mindful of those who mourn. May we look for ways to encourage, lift up, and include those who struggle with this day. I also pray that those who are suffering look for a way for Jesus to enter their situation and bring His joy. I wish I could say Jesus will come and bring life back into you, but I don't know that He will work a miracle like He did for the mother in our Scripture. But I do know He will not hesitate to meet you where you are. Maybe this Mother's Day could be a turning point. Remember, *Jesus comforts with His compassion and power.*

May we all recognize that when Jesus saw the broken heart of a mother He was moved to offer a miracle. There is something about a mother's heart that really connects with Jesus and with God. I think it is because they are so similar. God's heart for His children is full of unconditional love and grace and this is at the core of an ideal mother. As people we do not always live that out perfectly, but God's unconditional love for us is amazing in how it reaches out to us. So I hope we can leave this place as one crowd that can praise God today for His heart for us, His children. *Jesus comforts with His compassion and power.*

### **Scripture References**

Luke 7:11–17

Mark 12:18–23

Mark 12:41–44

Matthew 15:21–28

Luke 7:36–50

John 12:1–11

Proverbs 31:10–31

### **Study Questions**

1. How do I react when I see a funeral procession (e.g., sadness, grief, indifference, even anger or annoyance)? How has death impacted me? What has the Lord taught me through the death of a loved one? How can I share my perspective on death and dying with an unbeliever?
2. What unique needs do widows have? Why is ministering to widows so important? Read 1 Timothy 5:3 and James 1:27. How can Jesus use me to minister to widows? How can such a ministry honor the Lord? Who can partner with me in my ministry to widows?
3. When have I experienced Jesus' compassion? How has He comforted me? Read Isaiah 53:4 and Matthew 5:4. How have I, in turn, comforted others? Read 2 Corinthians 1:3–4. Do I notice people in pain, such as grieving parents, lonely widows, and the chronically ill? How can I be more sensitive to the needs of others?
4. How have I observed Jesus' power over death? What personal testimonies can I share? How often do I discuss God's power with others? What have I learned about God's power from the Scriptures that has transformed me? Read Hebrews 2:14–15.
5. When did I experience God's free gift of grace? How has God revealed His grace to me since I first believed? How does God's grace help me to treat others with grace? Who do I need to extend God's grace to this week? How will I show this person compassion and grace?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Luke's customary introductory words to a new narrative *kai egeneto* ("and it happened") loosely connects this particular story to the preceding events (7:1–10). See C. Marvin Pate, *Luke*, Moody Gospel Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 167.

<sup>2</sup> The name Nain in Hebrew meant "Pleasant Place" and was said by the rabbis to be a reference to the promise given to Issachar that he would inherit a land that was pleasant (Gen 49:14–15). Nain is only mentioned here in the Bible. It is generally held that the site is the modern Nein, about six miles southeast of Nazareth on the slopes of the Little Hermon and a day's journey from Capernaum.

<sup>3</sup> Trites observes: "Only three times does Luke use the word 'only' (*monogenes*). In each case, there is a touching poignancy in the situation and a hint of compassion on the part of Jesus for a very needy case. The 'only' son in 7:12 is the sole hope of support for a widow who would naturally expect her son to provide for her. The daughter of Jairus was his 'only' daughter, so her loss would be particularly painful (8:42). The suffering epileptic boy was the 'only' child of his father, who begged Jesus for help in a tragic situation (9:38)." Allison A. Trites, *The Gospel of Luke*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), Electronic ed.

<sup>4</sup> Bock remarks: "The description of the woman as widowed and childless is important. She has no family now and in effect is an 'orphaned parent.' The emotion in the verse carries deep pathos." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994), 648.

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 2:37; 4:25–26; 7:12; 18:3–5; 20:47; 21:2–3; Acts 6:1; 9:39–41.

<sup>6</sup> Trites, *The Gospel of Luke*, Electronic ed. remarks: "The devout Anna, a widow, was present to recognize and praise God at the coming of the infant Christ (2:36–38). Widows from the time of Elijah are mentioned (4:25–26; cf. 1 Kgs 17:18–24). A persistent widow is the subject of one of Jesus' parables on prayer (18:1–8), and some widows are mentioned as the victims of shameless exploitation (20:47). Jesus gives one widow's sacrificial offering special recognition (21:1–4). In Acts, the needs of the Hellenistic widows are attended to, and the presence of the weeping widows at the raising of Tabitha is noted (Acts 6:1–7; 9:39–41). Luke was clearly aware of the concerns of widows, and that awareness finds expression in this case, where a widow's needs were acknowledged and met by Jesus."

<sup>7</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 223.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall explains: "Mourning was all the greater for an only child (Jeremiah 6:26; Amos 8:10; Zech. 12:10; cf. on mourning customs SB I, 521-523, 1047-1051)." I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 285.

<sup>9</sup> Luke does not mention professional mourners, but they would have been there. Morris explains: "Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman" (Ketuboth 4:4). Leon Morris, *Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 153.

<sup>10</sup> Coffins were generally not used, but wealthy people cut chambers in rocks for burial. In NT times bodies were wrapped with linen cloths, and the folds of the cloth were filled with aromatic spices (John 19:38–42). See Bock, *Luke Volume 1*, 650 for more burial insights.

<sup>11</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 140 notes that this is the first time in Luke's narrative that he calls Jesus "the Lord."

<sup>12</sup> BDAG s.v. *splogchnizomai* has the meaning "have pity, feel sympathy." For other uses, see Matt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; Luke 10:33; 15:20.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke Volume 1: Chapters 1–12*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009), 318.

<sup>14</sup> Pate, *Luke*, 168.

<sup>15</sup> Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 286 comments that whenever the term *proserchomai* ("to come up, approach") is used of Jesus' coming to someone, it precedes his acting with authority (Mark 1:31; Luke 7:14; 9:42; Matt. 28:18).

<sup>16</sup> The term "coffin/bier" (*soros*), is used only here in the NT and refers to an open coffin, a plank, where the shrouded and anointed corpse lay.

<sup>17</sup> This man's age is uncertain, for in Jewish society one was considered to be a young man up to the age of forty!

<sup>18</sup> See BDAG s.v. *hapto* 2 a.

<sup>19</sup> Jesus also calls out to Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:41/Luke 8:54) and Lazarus (John 11:43) and resurrects them.

<sup>20</sup> The word *anekathisen* ("sat up") appears elsewhere in the NT only at Acts 9:40, where it refers to Tabitha's resuscitation by Peter.

<sup>21</sup> The phrase "gave him back to his mother" is the same phrase used in 1 Kgs 17:23 when Elijah raised the boy from the dead and "gave him back to his mother."

<sup>22</sup> Green notes: "That Luke's central concern is with the widow is evidenced by the inclusio formed in vv 13 and 15.

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At the beginning of this encounter Jesus saw, had compassion for, and spoke to her; at the close he returns her restored son to his mother.” Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 292.

<sup>23</sup> Bock writes: “This miracle is reminiscent of the Old Testament resuscitations performed by Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:32-37). Those healings took a little more effort: Elijah lay on the boy three times and Elisha touched the boy with the staff and then lay on top of him. When Jesus hands the boy back to his mother, the language recalls 3 Kingdoms 17:23 LXX (1 Kings in English). So even as Luke tells the story, he points to prophetic models. Such historical background explains why the crowds come to see Jesus as a *great prophet*. The Old Testament precedents help explain the event.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, [1994] 2006), Electronic ed. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 286 explains: “The comment that Jesus gave him to his mother (cf. Luke 9:42 diff. Mark; 1 Kings 17:23 LXX verbatim; 2 Kings 4:36) serves to remind the readers of the Elisha typology and also to indicate the widow.”

<sup>24</sup> Michael Eaton, *Luke 1–11*, Preaching Through the Bible (Tonbridge: Sovereign World, 1999), 95.

<sup>25</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Luke Volume 1: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, [1998] 2004), Electronic ed.

<sup>26</sup> Eaton, *Luke 1–11*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Luke often expresses the emotional reaction to God’s work in terms of awe and respect (Luke 1:65; 5:26; 8:25, 37; Acts 2:43; 5:5, 11; 19:17).

<sup>28</sup> Bock, *Luke*, Electronic ed. writes: “The exact force of the title *great prophet* is disputed. (1) Is Jesus merely seen as one of the greatest of the prophets? Luke 9:7-9 suggests this may be what the crowd means. (2) Are they seeing Jesus as the great, eschatological prophet who comes at the end of time? The absence of a specific article to specify the title and the general answers of the populace presented in other texts suggest that this latter force is not intended (Cullmann 1959:30; Lk 9:19). Of course under the first category Jesus would not be seen as Messiah.”

<sup>29</sup> Morris, *Luke*, 139.

<sup>30</sup> Bock, *Luke Volume 1*, 646. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 292 argues for a messianic reference to Deut 18:15.

<sup>31</sup> Mark C. Black, *Luke*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, [1998] 2009), Electronic ed.

<sup>32</sup> Ryken, *Luke Volume 1*, 322.