

The Empty Coffin *Luke 7:11-17*

Nain was not on the road to anywhere. It was a clutter of khaki colored cubes clustered on a knob of a hill, It was an out-of-the-way little village with neither money nor minerals.

But it did have a view, a grand, glorious view. To the east, the snow capped peak of Mount Hermon punctured white clouds.

And each evening, the people of Nain stared across the green patchwork quilt of the fertile fields that stretched across the Plain of Esdraelon. The villagers watched until the sun slipped behind Mount Carmel.

The hills were littered with boulders. And the soil was thin and rocky. A few of the men grazed goats on the thin, dry grass that struggled up through the stones. Others worked at whatever they could to buy bread and feed their families.

The woman's husband was one of those. Sometimes he picked up work hoeing fields or clearing hillsides for vineyards.

It was a hardscrabble, hand-to-mouth existence. Sometimes the woman worried and complained. But her husband's answer was always the same.

"Jehovah Jireh, Miriam," he would smile. "Remember the Lord is Jehovah Jireh."

He said the same thing when she worried and wept that they had no children. "Jehovah Jireh, dear. The Lord is our provider."

And he was right. Fifteen years after they first stood beneath a canopy together, she had a baby.

They cherished the little boy. And neighbors said they spoiled him. But they just smiled and lavished love on him all the more.

A lean mountain wind was moaning around the corner of the house the winter night she first heard it. Her husband was sleeping on the mat beside her. And the sound was unmistakable. A deep rumbling gurgled in his chest with each breath.

Just as she always did, she arose when dawn was still cold and blue and stirred the fire into flame. At ten years of age, her son worked with his father. So she woke him, too.

"I'm worried about Father," the boy said that morning. "Yesterday, his chest hurt so bad, he could not work. For almost an hour, he sat in the shade of a cedar, pale and panting."

The man did not go to work that morning. He lay on his sleeping mat, moaning and panting. And with each new dawn, he was a little worse.

The woman would stare out the window at Mount Carmel. And in the hush of the evening, she would think about Elijah and pray for a miracle.

But there was no miracle. In a matter of weeks, the man's moaning fell silent. And a weeping procession of neighbors carried his gauze-wrapped corpse down the rocky road to a hillside cemetery east of town.

Eight years later, she was awakened at midnight by another rumbling cough. Then, like reliving a nightmare, she watched her son's face grow paler and his fever worsen each day. And once again, she stared out the window at Mount Carmel and prayed for an Elijah to come and heal her boy. But no one came.

It was spring. The hills were sprinkled with little yellow flowers. Swallows swooped and swirled in the sky. And once again, sobbing friends carried a corpse out the city gate to the tombs.

Now she was absolutely alone. The world seemed open and empty and endless. She had no means of support, at all. And she had not the slightest idea how she would live.

But that did not worry her. She had no appetite for life any longer, anyway. Everyone she loved was dead. She was alone.

And Jehovah Jireh was silent.

Christ's Providence

I suppose a man could walk from Capernaum to Nain in one day. But who would want to?

The hills were so steep and the dusty donkey trail was so rocky, it was an exhausting, leg-weary walk. And there was nothing waiting at Nain worth hurrying to. So Jesus probably took two days to make the trip.

While Jesus was still in Capernaum, the widow was sobbing out desperate prayers in Nain. Of course, Christ could have dropped everything He was doing and hurried to the hilltop village to help her.

But He did not. He waited, just as He would later do when His friend Lazarus was dying.

Even when our Savior did set out for Nain, He did not hurry. He had no fear He would be too late.

His disciples whispered among themselves as they walked. "Where is He going?" they asked one another. "And why?"

So the widow watched her son die. She remembered her husband's words. But she did not watch out the window at Mount Carmel and think about miracles any more. Her son was dead and Jehovah Jireh was silent.

What does it mean when our need is dire and desperate and God is silent? Our prayers are fervent and fevered. And we confidently claim God's promises. Yet sometimes our Savior does nothing.

Does it mean He does not hear, that He is preoccupied with other pressing matters? That was Elijah's sarcastic suggestion about Baal on Mount Carmel.

It was not true of that false god. Baal did not exist. But is what was not true of Baal true of our God? No, our God is both present and powerful. And His Word commands us to wait for Him.

Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord. Psalm 27:14

It requires great spiritual strength to wait for God during dark and desperate hours. David knew that better than anyone.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. Psalm 69:2-3 (ESV)

Yes, it is hard to wait for God. But we who trust in Jesus Christ can wait with confidence. No matter when He acts or what He does in our lives, He is actively working to bring blessings to us.

God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

The widow did not know that Jesus was on His way. And we cannot know what our God's plan is in our lives. But if we truly trust Him, we must not lose heart. And our faith must not fail.

Our God will surely come. But in His time. Not ours.

Christ's Pity

The widow's only son was a cold corpse—washed, spiced and wrapped in grave cloth. And friends were carrying him out of the city gate when Jesus finally arrived.

Soon afterwards He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large crowd. 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. When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, Verses 11-13

This was the second time the woman had made this terrible trip to the tombs. And as she prepared to bury only son, friends and neighbors wept. But she did not. She had no more tears to shed.

Her grief was too deep for tears. And her sorrow was beyond being soothed by sobbing. She was at the bottom of despair, alone in the world utterly without hope.

That is what filled our Savior with pity. It was not the death of one widow's son that kindled Christ's compassion. As the sovereign God of all creation, He had appointed a day and an hour for each man to die.

No, it was the loneliness and hopelessness Jesus saw in the woman's face that moved Him so. He had walked down dusty trails over steep hills to raise her son back to life.

But she did not know that. So her despair was a bottomless pit, a mire without a foothold. And that always brings tears to our Lord's eyes.

He never wants us to wander the depths of despair. When we do not know our God's purposes or understand His silence, He would have us to trust Him still.

More than that, our loving Lord would have us to praise and glorify His precious name in those dark valleys just as we do on shimmering, sunny mountain peaks. That was His first message to the widow.

He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." Verse 13

Literally, Jesus told her to stop weeping. Circumstances are not the seed of faith. No matter how dark the hour or desperate the need, God's promises are still true.

And our Savior still loves and cares for us.

Christ's Power

Clearly, Christ left Capernaum for one purpose. His heavenly Father heard the widow's desperate prayers. And He sent His own Son to meet her needs.

But did God turn a deaf ear to the widow's prayers while the boy was sick? Or was our Lord's timing all wrong? Did Jesus wait too long and linger in Capernaum too many days before leaving?

No, Jesus was in the very epicenter of His Father's will. In the widow's eyes, God had indeed waited too long. But we must never forget. Our Lord is never too late.

He was not too late to help the widow. And He is not too late to help you. The widow's son was not beyond God's help, and neither are you. No problem you and I can have is too far gone for Him to solve. And no sorrow is too deep for Him to soothe.

And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak. Verses 14-15

Jesus touched the litter upon which neighbors carried the young man's corpse. Jerusalem priests said that touching anything associated with a dead body was defiling.

But our Savior was not worried about that. He touched the litter to stop the funeral procession. They were on their way to the grave. And that was not at all the place He would have them go.

Our God would have us enter the house of feasting and rejoicing not into a house of hopeless mourning. He wanted the widow to laugh and dance with her son, not weep over him.

And our God would also have us to live in rejoicing and praise. No matter how dark the hour, He would have us to serve Him with glad and grateful hearts.

We must never think God is never silent because He lacks either the will or the power. He can solve any problem we have. And if He does not give us what we ask, He will give us something better.

So with the same mountain where Elijah called fire down from Heaven etched against the evening sky, God's Son spoke to the cold corpse. He commanded the boy to return from death and live again. That was His right and authority on earth.

...just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. John 5:21

Yes, both Elijah and Elisha restored life to the dead. But both men only did so with great effort after protracted prayers.

Jesus merely spoke to the dead man. And instantly, the young man was restored to life.

He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak. Verses 14-15

Jesus can give life to dead bodies. And He can just as easily breathe life into dead souls.

No one is so deep in sin or so hard of heart that the Christ of Calvary cannot call him to eternal life. So we must never despair that someone we love is past saving. Neither do we dare to stop praying for hard-hearted sinners to come to Christ.

Jesus is God's Son, the Lord of Life. And He can raise the dead.

Christ's Purpose

The crowd stood aghast. The corpse stirred and moved. Then the boy sat bolt upright and tore the grave cloth from his face. He smiled and looked around in wonder. Then he spoke to his mother.

There could be no doubt about what had happened. The man really was dead. Everyone knew that. They had wrapped his body.

And he really was alive again. So the Savior had the best of all claims upon the young man's loyalty. Our Redeemer had every right to command the widow's son to join the company of His disciples. But He did not.

The dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. Verse 15

There was nothing selfish about the Master's miracle. He did not raise the young man to serve His eternal kingdom.

Still, in a way the young man was restored to life to serve the Savior. He was sent home with his mother. By serving and supporting her, he was serving God.

But there was yet another reason why our Redeemer raised this young man back to life.

Fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet 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. Verses 16-17

Long centuries had dragged by since God had raised a corpse back to life. And people were wont to think that God did not work wonders because He could not. Or possibly He had so little pity and compassion He did not want to work.

Worse yet, some people even entertained the idea that there was no God. But now everyone knew how foolish an idea that was.

Suddenly, they were all filled with fear. And for good reason. After all, if God is so present and powerful that He can raise the dead, He is also able to bring judgement and condemnation to those whose hearts are full of sin and selfishness.

People from all over Galilee and Judea heard about the widow's son. And they realized that God had sent a prophet just like Moses said He would.

That is one of our Savior's purposes in working wonders in our lives. He would have people to know He is a powerful God, a present God and a God of pity and compassion.

That does not mean all those people confessed their sins and committed their lives to Christ. But they did hear about Him.

And if we have heard, we are without excuse.

