

Part 1

Love Shows Compassion

A Mind Full of Someone Else

Love Looks and Acts

Jesus lived 2,000 years ago in a time very different from our own. His world was almost entirely Jewish; only an occasional Gentile appears in the gospels. His was a world of close-knit families—individuals didn't exist apart from their extended family. All a person had were family and clan. If you lost them, you lost everything.

When Jesus is about thirty he gathers a group of disciples and begins walking from town to town throughout Israel, teaching people. One day while approaching the city of Nain, Jesus and the disciples encounter a funeral procession. Luke records what happened:

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don't cry.”

Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country (Luke 7:11-17).

Nain is nestled in a beautiful valley in southern Galilee where the Jewish tribe of Issachar had settled. The Old Testament tells us that *the land is pleasant* (Genesis 49:15). Nain sounds like *pleasant* in Hebrew, but for this mother the day was anything but pleasant.

Her son—her only son—has died. And this is not the first time she has had to bury a loved one. She is a widow. The greatest joy for a Jewish woman was to bear a son; to lose a son, the greatest sorrow. The loss of her husband and only son means a life of poverty. With them she has lost the equivalent of her pension, Social Security, and Medicare. Guilt is likely compounding her despair, as the premature death of a child was believed to be the punishment

for sin.¹ Possibly the town gossips were wagging their heads, wondering what she did to deserve losing everything.

Jewish funerals were usually held at six in the evening, after the day's work was done. Earlier in the day she'd laid her son's body on the floor of her home, groomed his hair, dressed him in the best clothes she could find, then placed his body on an open wicker basket, face up, arms folded. The town had gathered at her door to help bury her son. The women lead the procession because the Jews believed that a woman's sin brought death into the world, so women should lead it out—adding shame to sorrow. As the funeral procession winds through the streets, many symbolically share the mother's burden by taking their turn holding the basket. Paid mourners and flute players follow in the rear, chanting, "Weep with them, all you who are bitter of heart." Most of the 500 or so people from Nain would have come because this loss was so significant.²

The graveyard is to the east of the city, along the road that winds its way down to Capernaum, Jesus' home base. The Greek text suggests that the crowd with Jesus is larger than the crowd coming out of Nain—probably more than a 1,000 people are with Jesus.

Jesus arrives just as the funeral emerges from the gates of the city, and the two groups meet.

He Feels What She Feels

The first thing Jesus does is look at the woman. *When the Lord saw her*—not the crowd or the dead son. Jesus singles out the widow in the confusion of two colliding crowds. And when he sees her, *his heart went out to her*.

Compassion is the emotion most frequently attributed to Jesus. How can you tell that a person feels compassion? What did people see on Jesus' features in this scene? After all compassion is quite subtle compared to anger or fear. When I ask people what compassion looks like, they say it's communicated through a person's eyes: they are soft and tender, attentive, concerned. The entire body pauses and listens, absorbing the feelings of another. Perhaps Jesus stops mid-sentence and becomes quiet, transfixed, as he looks at the widow. Or maybe his eyes moisten and a tear rolls down his cheek. Whatever his reaction, it is noticeable despite the

1 Alfred Edersheim, *Home Life*, p. 153.

2 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), pp.552-9.

commotion and distraction of hundreds of milling people.

Jesus sees a woman who is half-dead. While we think of death and life as two separate categories, the Hebrews thought there could be an in-between state. In the Old Testament when Naomi returns home after burying her husband and two sons, she told the town folk: *“Don’t call me Naomi [means ‘pleasant’], call me Bitter, because God has made my life very bitter”* (Ruth 1:20). Naomi was alive, but she felt dead. The widow, like Naomi, has entered a living death, cut off from life, from hope.

Jesus knows this, and he experiences her pain: *“His heart went out to her.”* Literally he was “moved with compassion.” Jesus enters this woman’s world, feeling what it’s like to be in her place.

He Brought Hope

“Don’t cry,” Jesus tells her. He feels her anguish, but he is not lost in it. He feels what she feels, yet is separate from her.

Someone might say that Jesus has interrupted her grieving process. Today we’re told not to tell someone how to feel. But when my daughter scrapes her knee and comes in crying as if she is about to die, I tell her, “Don’t cry; it will be okay”—because it really *is* going to be okay. And Jesus knows this woman has reason to hope and not weep.

Respect for the dead led to a right-of-way in traffic, so Jesus’ crowd has likely divided and pulled off to the sides to let the widow and her dead son pass. At this point Jesus stops the funeral by quietly touching the coffin. Most men would stop a large crowd by shouting or waving their arms. People with less power tend to overstate it, like a teenager who slams the door because of a parental curfew. But people with real power tend to understate it, like a Caesar who decides life or death with only the slight gesture of a thumb. His action has the subtle majesty of an ancient king. What Jesus does next is pure, raw power for good. He says, *“Young man, I say to you, get up!”* The once-dead young man “obeys” Jesus, sits up, and starts talking.

The crowd is *filled with awe and praised God*. *“A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said.* After four hundred years of silence, a prophet had come. Less than three miles away the prophet Elisha had raised an only son to life 800 years previously. Elisha had gone through many gyrations in his miracle, but Jesus effortlessly raised the widow’s son to life. Someone greater than Elisha is here.

Word about Jesus spreads far and wide. People are reminded of God's power, and they worship him because of what they saw Jesus do. They sense they are no longer alone with their problems, because God is visiting them in Jesus.

He Never Loses Sight of Her

With the addition of the funeral procession, the size of the crowd has nearly doubled. Every eye is on Jesus. Nothing like this has happened before. It's even unusual for Jesus—only two other times does he do a miracle like this. The miracle is rife with possibilities—book deals, movie rights, and talk show appearances!

But Jesus' eye is on the widow. He takes her son by the hand, helps him off the basket, and walks him over to his mother. He's not thinking about himself and how he can benefit from this amazing display of power. He isn't distracted by his own miracle—he remembers the person. He cares for both the son's physical need and the mother's emotional need.

Jesus possesses both tenderness and power. Usually tender people lack strength and strong people lack gentleness. But Jesus shows both goodness and strength.

Not Efficient

Charles Spurgeon was a famous preacher in London over 100 years ago. Though a caring husband and a gentle man, like all of us, he was flawed. His wife, Susie, once told about a time when she went with her husband to a large auditorium where he was to speak:

“We went together in a cab, and I well remember trying to keep close by his side as we mingled with the mass of people thronging up the staircase. But by the time we had reached the landing, he had forgotten my existence; the burden of the message was upon him, and he turned into the small side door where the officials were awaiting him, without for a moment realizing that I was left to struggle as best I could with the rough throng around me.”³

Sound familiar? A large crowd, a frightened woman, and a religious teacher. Except here the teacher forgets the woman because he is thinking about what he wants to say. Jesus forgoes a

³ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p.58.

sermon for the sake of a person. But Spurgeon ignored a person for the sake of a sermon.

It got worse:

“At first, I was utterly bewildered, and then...I was angry. I at once returned home, and told my grief to my gentle mother. She wisely reasoned that my husband was no ordinary man, that his whole life was dedicated to God and that I must never, never hinder him.”

Then Spurgeon returned home, upset that he couldn't find his wife:

“My dear mother went to him and told him all the truth. Quietly he let me tell him how indignant I had felt, and then he repeated mother's little lesson pointing out that before all things, he was God's servant.”⁴

Did you notice how God got dragged in? Somehow God was the reason Spurgeon ignored his wife. So his wife gets lectured by both her mother and her husband for feeling hurt. God isn't revealed through Spurgeon's life in this incident, he's the excuse for not loving.

Spurgeon and I have a lot in common. When Jill shared her heart—both good and bad—I would “fix” her. One time when she was agonizing over Kim, I told her, “Why don't you just give her to God?” Her reply shut me up: “I do. I do every day.”

Other times I was unaware of what Jill was feeling. I didn't realize what having a disabled child had done to her friendships, her future, and her dreams. Even though I did things for her, I began to understand why Jill wondered if I loved her. I realized that I was good at “raising the dead son,” but I didn't take time to look, feel, and walk with Jill. I was already looking for the next “dead son”. When I focused on the task and not Jill, she felt the difference. Jesus' tenderness suggested to me a new, less “efficient,” way of relating.

Love, I realized, is not efficient.

When the Exxon *Valdez* spilled thousands of gallons of crude oil along Alaska's shoreline, the company's president dismissed the suggestion that he go and see the

⁴ Dallimore, p. 58.

damage—implying that a trip would be a waste of his time. He had the power, but he lacked goodness. What might it have done to his heart to have got down in the muck and cleaned a few geese?

Jesus has shown us how to love: look, feel, and then help. If we help someone but don't take the time to look at the person and feel what he or she is feeling, our love is cold. And if we look and feel, but don't do what we can to help, our love is cheap. Love does both.