



Luke 7:1-10, 11-17
“Understanding Spiritual Authority”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

VA: LUKE 7:1-10, 11-17 "UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY"

RICH GENTILE OFFICER'S SLAVE

1) 7:1-10 HEALING OF A CENTURION'S SLAVE (Mt. 8:5-13, Jn. 4:46-54). ENEMY = DISEASE

Quest Story, Type Of Believing Gentile In Jewish Territory

a) vv.1-3 Problem: Beloved Slave Is Ill.

See Elisha, Naaman, 2 Kgs. 5:1-27, Lk. 4:27

1 After he (i.e. Jesus) had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered CAPERNAUM. Home Base

2 Now a centurion had a slave who was dear (valuable) to him, Uncircumcised, Oppressor //23:47, Acts 10

3 who was sick and at the point of death. //Acts 10:1ff., Dominical Precedent

When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his slave. 6:19, L = vv.3-6

Go-Betweens, Double Delegations

b) vv.4-6a First Envoy of Grateful Jewish Elders: "He is worthy".

Meritorious Act

1 And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, 3 Parts: Envoy/Speech/Jesus

2 "He is worthy to have you do this for him, Assume Jesus Must Be Convinced

3 for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue." 4:33, Benefactor, Reciprocity Needed

3 And Jesus went with them. Jesus Completes Pagan Piety/ Light It Has, Acts 10:34-35

Love/Do Good To Enemies, First Encounter With Gentiles

b') vv.6b-9 Second Envoy of Friends: "I am not worthy." 1 Pt. 1:8, He Never Sees Jesus =

1 When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying, Faith Without Sight

2 "Lord, do you trouble yourself, Later Second Thoughts, 3 Parts: Envoy/Speech/Jesus

3 for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 5:8, Trusts Jesus' Goodness, Not His Own

therefore I do not presume to come to you. 5:17d, Who Has Authority Here?

But say the word, and let my servant be healed. Ps. 107:20, Utter Trust In Jesus' Word

For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: Not His Own Worth

and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; Mt. 8:9, Power Over Soldiers, Not Over Disease/Death

and to another, 'Come,' and he comes;

and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." Jesus Also Issues Powerful Commands

3 When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, Faith = Confess Sin, New Authority

and he turned and said to the multitude that followed him, None Earn A Miracle

"I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." Faith Praised, Not His Works (v.4)

Will You Trust? Acts 15:9-11, Affirms Jew/Gentile

a') v.10 Solution: Slave Cured With No Direct Contact (//Mk. 7:24-30).

10 And when those who had been sent returned to the house, No Spatial Limitations, The Two Principals Never Meet!

they found the slave well. Healed By Trust, Divine Timing, At A Distance

Lk.'s Typical Pairings, **POOR JEWISH WOMAN'S SON**

2) 7:11-17 RAISING OF THE WIDOW OF NAIN'S ONLY SON (L Only). ENEMY = DEATH

Heals Sick With A Word, Raises Dead With A Word!

a) vv.11-12 Problem: Dead Son. 4:25, Elijah And Widow's Son in I Kgs. 17:8-24, 2 Kgs. 4:32-37

11 1 Soon afterward he (i.e. Jesus) went to a city called NAIN, 25 Miles S. Of Capernaum

12 2 and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. Many Witnesses, Lead Character + Crowds (2x)

12 1' As he drew near to the gate of the city,

behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; Sad State

2' and a large crowd from the city was with her. Timing! Processions Of Death/Life Meet At The Gate!!

When Obedient, Expect Coincidences!

b) v.13 Jesus Speaks To The Mother Out Of Deep Compassion. //6:21

13 And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion (pity) on her Compassion = Sign Of Spirit's Work

and said to her, "Do not weep." 8:52, No Vacuous "He's in a better place." Command No. 1

Human Affliction + Jesus' Sight + Emotion + Action + Speech + Outcome

b') v.14 Jesus Speaks To Her Dead Son Out Of God's Power. Num. 19:11

14 And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. Corpse Impurity, Num. 19:11, 16

And he said, "Young boy, I say to you arise." Speaks To The Dead! Spirit-Empowered Prayer Of Command

5 Resuscitations (8:40-42, 49-56, Acts 9:36-43, 20:7-12), Command No. 2

a') vv.15-17 Solution: Boy Raised. (resuscitated to die again later).

15 And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother. 4:18, 7:22-26, Wow!! I Kgs. 17:23

16 Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, Two-fold Response: Fear, Praise

"A great prophet has arisen among us!" 9:8,19,24:19, Jesus Restores Relationship Death Destroyed, I Kgs. 17:24

And "God has visited his people!" Jewish Hopes For God's Return, Zech. 1:68, Dt. 18:15-18

Not A Magician/ Sorcerer, The Saving Visitation Of God Has Come

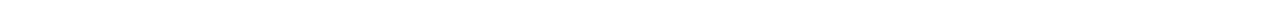
17 And this report (word) concerning him spread through the whole region of Judea and all the surrounding country.

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 7:1-10, 11-17

Here we enter a new *internal essay* in Luke’s biography (7:1-8:56) which opens and closes with pairs of miracle stories (a. 7:1-10, 11-17 // a’ 8:26-30, 40-56). In each cluster male/female are paired, as are Jew/Gentile. Each contains a resuscitation (7:11-17//8:40-56). Between the frames are blocks of material on discipleship (b. 7:18-35 // b’ 8:1-21) and Jesus’ identity (*Who is this?* c. 7:36-50 // c’ 8:22-25). Luke is a careful organizer of his sources (Mark, material in common with Matthew: *Q*, Luke’s own source: *L*). It’s helpful to think of 7:1-10, 11-17 as a pair because of the similarities and contrasts. Both are miracle stories using the standard form (problem, encounter, action of healer, cure, evidence/response). Each begins with a place name (Capernaum, Nain). Both have the same concentric structure (a-b-b’-a’) and are linked by the words *Lord* (vv.6b, 13) and *word* (vv.8, 17). In the first a slave is near death, and in the second the son has died, thus progression: Jesus has power over disease and death. The officer is Gentile, the woman a Jew; the officer rich enough to build a synagogue, the woman a sonless vulnerable widow. The two end with a publicity report (v.17) which marks them as a pair. Since the first is parallel to Mt. 8:5-13 and the second only in Luke, it’s clear the author deliberately joined them to demonstrate the kingdom at ground level. Jesus is Lord over our daily (disease) and final enemy (death). God is merciful.

When the Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49) ends, Jesus returns to his ministry as traveling healer. Capernaum was his base of operations. A pagan officer in the employ of Herod Antipas is a good man. He shows concern for a slave, built the Jews a synagogue and demonstrates humility and faith towards Jesus as an agent of a higher power. In a world of benefaction, the centurion asks a favor of Jewish leaders who are in his debt. The use of go-betweens was common in an honor/shame culture, particularly in cross-cultural exchanges. He’s heard of Jesus and finds the reports credible. The local elders then present Jesus with the centurion’s resume; as a fellow Jew, he should help them by balancing obligations with a powerful man. That Jesus goes does not imply he accepts their arguments, only that he is full of mercy towards all-including Gentiles who work for oppressors! A second entourage of friends then comes with a report of quotations from the centurion. Jesus is addressed respectfully as *Lord*. The centurion denies his worth and affirms Jesus’ ability to heal with a command at a distance. As a soldier he understands the *command and control* he as with a hundred men, but which Jesus has at a high level. Jesus stops and teaches the crowd as he praises faith greater than he has yet seen among God’s people. When the friends return, they find the slave well. The currency of the kingdom is trust and mercy, not worth and reciprocal obligation. Our centurion foreshadows the Gentile mission, of those who believe in Jesus without having met him.

After an indeterminate time, the second story begins twenty-five miles south in Nain, which reminds us how selective the gospels are and how much of Jesus’ time was spent walking from place to place. Luke highlights the disciples and crowd with Jesus in v.11. At the gate they meet another crowd, the burial procession of a widow’s only son. Life and death collide! Knowing what this tragic scene means, Jesus is flooded with *compassion*- a sure sign something’s about to happen! In response to divine revelation from the Father through the Spirit, Jesus issues a command not to weep, stops the procession by touching the bier, and calls the boy back to life with a command, “Young boy, I say to you arise!” When he sits up, speaks up, and is returned to his mother, the crowds explode in awe and testimony. As a prophet Jesus speaks for God, and -in sharing God’s power over death- it is true to say that in him “God has visited his people.” Such wonderful events cannot be kept from the public (v.17). Our widow now has a future. Jesus is open to all: male/female, rich/poor, Jew/Gentile. His new reality is catholic.



UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

“I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.”

Faith is where you find it, and Jesus has eyes for it!

LUKE 7:9

The phone rings. From an unfamiliar voice you hear a single sentence, “Remember, you must die!” then the sound of the receiver going dead. That is essentially the plot of the novel *Memento Mori* by Muriel Spark. It tells of a group of friends, all over sixty-five, who one by one receive anonymous phone calls bearing the same message, “Remember, you must die!” The novel, partly serious, part humor, tells how the selected come to terms with the call. A common reaction is fright. The caller causes the characters to think over their lives, to assess the good they’ve done as well as the not-so-good. The message of death forces reflection.¹

Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, charged a slave to awaken him each morning with the same words: “Philip, remember, you must die.”² The 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody observed, “If I can get a man to think seriously about death for five minutes, I can get him saved.” Dag Hammarskjold, former head of the U.N., reflected, “The hardest thing of all- to die rightly, an exam nobody is spared, and how many pass it?”³

Death will come knocking, and at such times only Jesus Christ is sufficient, either to heal you from death’s tool of disease, as in the case of the centurion’s slave; or to extract you from death back to this life for a temporary extension, as in the case

¹ Edited, Brian Cavanaugh, *The Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 50.

² Robert M. Wells, Jr. *Inspiring Quotations* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1988), 55.

³ Last two quotes are from Wells, *Inspiring Quotations*, 54.

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of the widow's son and some in our day who have so-called *near-death-experiences*;⁴ or, thirdly, to take you through death, there in heaven's paradise to await the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age.⁵ We may be healed *before* death, *in and from* death, or *through* death by Jesus Christ. As Christians we must break the conspiracy of silence about death and speak about it openly. After all, we are followers of the only one who beat it. Jesus is our champion and trailblazer. Saying No to death in all its forms is one way to understand why he showed up in our neighborhood and why all his healing miracles are finally windows into the great miracle that happened to him and is promised to us: resurrection from the dead, the complete reconstitution of the whole human person in God's glory.

Two stories preserved by eyewitnesses are before us this morning, a pair Luke intended to be considered in tandem with one another⁶. The first presents a powerful Gentile soldier and his dear slave, the second a pitiful Jewish widow and her dear, dead, only son. By this pairing Luke covers a lot of ground: male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, powerful and poor. Jesus is an equal opportunity Savior who regularly ignores religious and cultural barriers to bring life and a joyful glimpse of God's kingdom. The first is a slave just before death and barely clinging to life, the second a son just after death and on the way to a same-day grave. In the first they seek Jesus out; in the second the collision between the processions of life and death is a happy accident of providence, what some call *a divine appointment*. One is a healing at a distance, the other a resuscitation up close. Jesus never meets the first beneficiary- the slave, or his sponsor- the centurion, but he speaks to the widow and

⁴ For a recent treatment, see John W. Price, *Revealing Heaven: The Christian Case for Near-Death Experiences* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2013); also Sam Parnia, Josh Young, *Erasing Death: The Science That Is Rewriting The Boundary Between Life And Death* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2013); for an NPR interview with Dr. Parnia, www.npr.org/2013/02/21/172495667/resuscitation-experiences-and-erasing-death. The window for return, with proper intervention, is much longer than earlier thought!

⁵ On the church's classic teaching of a two stage post-mortem existence, i.e. *life after death* followed by *life after life after death*, see N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2008). This is one of the ten best books I've ever read!

⁶ Luke 7:1-10 is parallel to Matthew 8:5-13 with no parallel in Mark, thus Q tradition, whereas Luke 7:11-17 is found only in Luke (L). Thus the paring of these two is a Lucan decision, as is the pair (8:26-30, 40-56) that ends the section. Tending to the details of source and literary criticism reveals the author's theology and intent.

son face to face. In the first there is great faith on the part of the centurion; in the second miracle the only faith in operation is that of Jesus who quickly obeys divine guidance. In the aftermath of the first story it is Jesus who marvels; in the second it is the crowd that is astonished. But note that both miracle stories have essentially the same structure: problem at the beginning, solution at the end, speeches and actions in between. It's just the way such stories are remembered and retold. Together they demonstrate the spiritual authority of Jesus over two of the big *d*'s that spoil human life: disease and death. The third *big d*, the demonic, is dealt with in other stories the church preserved.

Luke has brought these two miracle stories together for another reason. The first has a parallel in the ministry of the prophet Elisha and the healing of a Gentile soldier: Naaman the Syrian; the second in the prophet Elijah and the raising of a widow's son. Jesus stands in the line of Jewish prophets who also work miracles; he is the one to whom others point. "A great prophet has arisen among us!" the people cry, and they are right. But he is even more than a voice. In Jesus "*God* has visited his people." Jesus is the immediate echo of God's own voice. What he says and does raises the question of who he is, which Luke answers twice with the use of the word *Lord*, once in each story. To do business with Jesus is to do business ontologically- at the level of the most basic reality- with God the Father who sent him and God the Holy Spirit who empowers his actions. Jesus is the access point to the Triune God; he is God the Son hidden in ordinary human flesh, made accessible and near at hand to do the stuff we read about and finally to shoulder the full effects of our rebellion against God. He demonstrates God's compassion for one at the top- a centurion on his way to faith, and two at the bottom of the social ladder- a dying slave and a grieving widow. This tells us where the church can expect to discover God's power, not in self-aggrandizement but in ministry with both the up-and-out and the down-and-out, both of whom have hearts that can be broken.⁷

One day we will know what the centurion's slave did with life after a long distance encounter; we will know what the widow of Nain's son did with life after resuscitation. Did they respond to the mercy? Did they become followers of Jesus? One day we will know about each of us, what we did with the gift of life and the

⁷ Perhaps the best book on power ministry as a form of evangelism remains John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2009); I have found the stories and teaching of Robby Dawkins, a Vineyard pastor, in his book *Do What Jesus Did* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2013) to be a faith-building read on cooperation with the Spirit.

church’s offer of new life in Christ. The secrets of every life will be in full view. By the Spirit’s power Jesus pushed death back from it’s prey and extracted victims from its jaws. But we would not even have such stories had Jesus himself not voluntarily entered death and been raised beyond it’s power by the One he trusted.

As classic Christians who confess Jesus’ bodily resurrection,⁸ we read such stories not in Jesus’ absence but in his presence. The hero about whom these stories are told is alive and available. Reading stories about Abraham Lincoln is one thing. But what if he was seated beside you? You could speak and expect a reply. This is what church is, not stories about a long-dead hero but stories about one who is here for interaction. We read and study and preach in order to understand more of the One whose footprints are all over our lives and up and down the aisles of this church. And when we gather we sing him love songs, brag on him in sermons, eat at his table and pour out our needs before him in prayer. And if we have any wisdom at all, we listen for his living voice. And if what we hear lines up with the stories we read about him, we know the inward conversation is more than imagination. And when we obey what he says, we generate stories that intrigue and annoy other people, just like the two before us today. And when someone complains, “That can’t happen!” we respond, “But it did.” There is no argument when someone says, “Let me tell you what happened to me....” especially if on other accounts they are truthful.

The centurion and his slave were able to bear witness, “I believe in Jesus even though I never met him.” The widow’s son could tell his story, “Something powerful sucked me out of death and back into life to show mercy on my mother. When I came to, there was Jesus smiling at me!” Our most powerful tool is not abstract theology and clever argumentation; it’s witness, “Let me tell you what happened to me....” More people are won to Christ by the testimonies of ordinary folk who gossip the good news than by all the learning of the preachers and theologians, important as we are to protect the church from error.

A Powerful Man With A Breaking Heart (vv.1-10)

Peter’s home in Capernaum served as Jesus’ operations base. Out for a mission trip

⁸ Article III of the United Methodist “Articles of Religion” reads: “Christ did truly rise again from the dead, *and took again his body* (ital. ad.), with all things pertaining to the perfection of man’s nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day” (*Book of Discipline 2012*, 64).

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and kingdom patrol, then back for a break. The crowds went home after the teaching, and Jesus went to Peter's. That's verse 1 of chapter 7, "After Jesus had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people, *he entered Capernaum.*"⁹ Verse 2 quickly presents three levels of bondage. Israel was under the boot of Rome, and so the bondage was political and spiritual; God's once-free people now ruled by pagans who worshiped multiple demonic powers as if they were gods. The centurion was an extension and symbol of that heavy-handed power. A second level is that the slave was owned by his master; here the bondage is inter-personal, one human owning another. At a third level, the slave himself was gripped by a disease that was about to take his life, so the bondage was bodily. Bondage was within and without and all around. Unfreedom was everywhere: political, personal, and bodily oppression. About the only positive force was the unusual care the centurion had for his slave. At some small level love had found an opening in a world of bondage. It didn't undo the wrong of the system, but it took the edge off, and motivated the centurion through respect and affection to seek help from Jesus.

Jesus did not overtly address the first two levels of bondage, only the third. He said nothing about Rome and nothing about the institution of slavery. This is not an argument for slavery or political oppression but a recognition of Jesus's strategy. Deal with people first, then let the implications of radical love spread out through the web of relationships. The rings of influence that move out from Jesus are still rippling through the world. You cannot account for the fall of communism in Poland and the Soviet bloc apart from the gospel witness of John Paul II. You cannot account for the Civil War apart from a conscience stirred by the church.

Dr. David Swoap tells of a meeting with Mother Theresa. "I asked, 'Don't you ever become angry at the causes of social injustice you see in India or in any of the places in which you work?'"

Her response? "What should I expend energy in anger that I can expend in love?"¹⁰

That was Jesus; his energy was love which is wiser than evil and stronger than death. The slave was healed; the affection between he and his owner was likely increased by their new, common faith in Jesus, and the rest of his career the centurion

⁹ First mentioned 4:23, 31-39.

¹⁰ James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1988), 115.

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knew the top-down power in which Rome specialized was not ultimate. One level of bondage, the disease, was removed. Two other levels were relativized. Three centuries later the faith took over the Empire, and everywhere that the church has been established slavery has eventually been overcome. The gospel is not primarily about social justice; it's primarily about who God is and what God has done, and that has implications for all relationships and all issues of social justice.

Our anonymous centurion was a remarkable man. Military officer, leader of a hundred, with enough regard for a sick slave to seek out Jesus through those who owed him a big favor. He was also on a spiritual journey. He had moved away from the pagan polytheism and ethical laxity of his peers to belief in the one God of Israel and to generosity to the Jews. As a local broker of Roman resources, he'd either arranged funding or personally financed the building of the Capernaum synagogue where Jesus taught and performed his first exorcism. We Methodists would say that the prevenient grace of God had been working in his life, drawing him step by step towards an encounter with Jesus Christ, in whom both Judaism and the best of other religions find ultimate completion. Here was a man who was already moving in the right direction by obeying the light he has; more is soon to come!

All roads do not lead to the top of the same mountain. We Methodists are not universalists; not all are finally saved,¹¹ so be careful before you say something popular and trivial and vague and trendy like, "Oh, they've gone to a better place." How do you know that about a person with no allegiance to Christ? All roads do not lead to the top of the same mountain, but all serious roads do lead from the *no god* of atheism and the *many gods* of polytheism to the one God of Israel and ultimately to Jesus Christ as the human face of that God. God is self-defined and self-revealed in Jesus Christ as nowhere else. General revelation through the created order and in the conscience must be completed by special revelation in Scripture and in the person of Jesus. A vague sense of God, a feeling after him in the darkness and teaching of other faiths, must be completed by the biblical revelation which culminates in the one whose bio we read in four gospels. Roads that do not lead to Jesus are all dead ends.

How God works that out with faithful adherents of other faiths is not made

¹¹ The United Methodist Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and the Future State, "We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation" (*The Book of Discipline* 2012, 74).

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clear in Scripture in all the details to satisfy our curiosity. My speculation is that there may be opportunities at death not afforded in life to those who would have responded if given the opportunity. That they have not heard is not their responsibility but the fault of the church that has failed in missions. I fear that in heaven we will be asked by many, “Why did you not come to us sooner?” or “Why did you not come at all. Life would have been so much better with a clear knowledge of the Jesus my heart longed for all my life.” The church must evangelize, and we must trust to God’s mercy those who have never had a chance to hear. I rest my case on Peter’s words in Acts 10:34-35, “Truly I perceive that God’s shows no partiality, but in every nation any who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”¹²

Our job as Christians is to learn to discern where people are and to pray for and encourage them in either their walk *towards* Christ or their subsequent walk *with* him. The Capernaum centurion was ripe, spiritually prepared, and it was the illness of one he cared for that was the occasion of his conversion. He was drawn to Christ not primarily by his own need, but that of another. God used it, just as he uses the troubles of those we love to drive us to Christ in prayer.

I catch myself in a fault from time to time, particularly when praying for some faithful saint. I start the prayer listing reasons God should help them, “She is worthy to have you do this for her; she tithes and serves on committees and reads her Bible and is such a nice lady to top it off,” as if good works gave leverage on God. What I pray is a much better indicator of what I believe than what I preach. You can fake it in a sermon, but ones true beliefs always leak out in prayers since they are primary heart language. As soon as I say such I feel foolish because I know there’s only one ground of healing prayer: God’s willing mercy shown to us in Christ. I start with the *worthy* argument, repent of it, and then dive into God’s mercy. I understand the human logic of the ambassadors the centurion sent, but we don’t play tit-for-tat with God. They owed the centurion one and wanted Jesus to pay the debt. Jesus willingness to go is a result of the Spirit’s leading and Jesus’ curiosity, not the argument that God owes this man anything because of good deeds. It is human need that motivates Jesus, not supposed spiritual or moral accomplishments. They are right about the centurion’s remarkable spiritual journey towards their God; they are wrong in the interpretation of it. They claim he is worthy; he knows differently.

It is through the second group of friends that the centurion’s self-evaluation

¹² For a fuller discussion of these issues in Luke and Acts, see Charles Talbert, *Acts* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 78-83.

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comes to the fore. And here his stature grows. Sensitive to Jewish law, he knows Jesus will be ritually defiled by entering the home of a Gentile. There is no need to come into his home. But his supreme grace-given insight is that he recognizes Jesus as the representative of parallel kingdom and yields to his higher authority. He has seen into invisible reality. His government is ruled by raw power and sharp swords; Jesus' kingdom is ruled by love and mercy, not the power of coercion but the power of service. This man knows about giving commands and expecting obedience, "Go... Come... Do this..." His word makes things happen. So with Jesus, "But say the word, and let my servant be healed. I move soldiers around, but you have the power to defeat disease!"

Our Roman friend makes a confession of his own lack of worth and places himself under Jesus' authority. That is conversion: confession of sin and trust in Jesus, and that at a distance! He is just like us who've never seen the Lord; he's our father in the faith, the first Gentile convert. He shows us the long journey from false religion to true religion, from seeking to finding, and from building a resume with others to doing business with the Lord. Saint Augustine summed it up, "The centurion did not receive him into his house, but he had received him into his heart."¹³ The work of the Spirit in leading people to Christ and to physical wholeness is thereby pictured in one incident involving two people with different needs. The centurion's heart and his slave's body are both touched. And for God the one is as easy as the other, though in our history we tend to believe that conversions are many and healings few. We trust God to save souls and stir emotions with inspiration but not to heal bodies. Our anthropology is divided. In the Bible body and soul go together, which is finally what the resurrection of the dead is all about. God does not save isolated souls but ultimately whole people made new.

Verse 9 reveals that Jesus was stunned by the man's faith and understanding. We misunderstand the humanity of Jesus if we rule out the capacity for genuine surprise. His being led of the Spirit does not require detailed foreknowledge of all things but a moment-by-moment sensitivity to what the Spirit is doing both on his and on the other end of the relationship. Jesus was delighted at what the Spirit had been revealing in the centurion's life! It is a teachable moment, a time to call attention to the work of God and correct the Jewish elders, "... and he turned and said to the multitude that followed him, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.'" God is at work among the outsiders! Israel needs to look and listen.

¹³ Michael Harper, *The Healings of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 1990), 104.

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Whatever good works we do before conversion are not independent but evidence of a desire, however vague and unformed, to respond to God. Our works do not put God in our debt; they are not bargaining chips with the Almighty. A desire to do good is an indicator the Spirit is at work deep in the heart.¹⁴ We should always encourage good works of all sorts at all times but not be fooled by them; look underneath for the root of faith and pray it be increased as God gives more light. What Jesus praised was the man’s trust, not his works; he’s impressed by different stuff than we are. For the emissaries, it was a journey of hope to come to Jesus and then return to see if anything happened. They came in two waves and all the went back together, “And when those who had been sent (i.e. both Jewish elders and Gentile friends) returned to the house, *they found the slave well.*”

Sick unto death, now healed at a distance. “While you were away, something came over me. The fever broke. An invisible hand moved over my body. Do you think Jesus and his God cares about slaves like me? How cool is that?”

And they said, “Let us tell you about this man Jesus.”

One had an experience of power and another the word of interpretation. They had a multi-level testimony meeting. A centurion converted, a slave healed, bad theology corrected, intercession encouraged, the kingdom of love revealed in a world of oppression. Not bad! It started as an interruption, became an opportunity, and ended as a special occasion. Remember, church, people are our business, and we must learn to draw on the resources of the invisible, parallel kingdom that the centurion understood so clearly if we are to be more than the society for the preservation of irrelevant religious teaching. Some of this same stuff is supposed to be happening with us! It should not be at all uncommon for us to see answers to our prayers at a distance, including both conversions and healings.

One day a small boy was trying to lift a heavy stone but couldn’t budge it. His father, passing by, stopped to watch his son’s heroic efforts. Finally he asked, “Are you using all your strength?”

Exasperated and straining the boy cried, “Yes, I am.”

¹⁴ The U.M. Articles of Religion Article X: Good Works: “We believe good works are the necessary fruits of faith and follow regeneration but they do not have the virtue to remove our sins or to avert divine judgment. We believe good works, pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, spring from a true and living faith, for through and by them faith is made evident” (*The Book of Discipline 2012*, 66).

“No you’re not,” the father said calmly. “You haven’t asked me to help you.”¹⁵

Joseph Scriven wrote it in 1855, but it is the centurion’s song. You know it, “O what peace we often forfeit, O, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”¹⁶ Everything. All worries. All pains.

Interrupting A Funeral (vv.11-17)

Verse 11 opens the second story, and in it we find Jesus and his entourage on another ministry trip. Jesus, his disciples, and a great crowd of *whomevers* are moving south from village to village with the word and deeds of the Father’s kingdom, “Soon afterward Jesus went to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him.” Same message, new place, new surprises.

There are times as a pastor when I end up at just the right place at just the right time and know that God has arranged the appointment. It’s fun when God takes over your calendar and ministry is more than a paint-by-the-numbers and cover-the-to-do-list routine. But for Jesus it was a constant experience. He was always in the right place at the right time, never rushed, never late. He followed the Spirit’s lead, not in fits and starts as we do but in a steady flow. He was as comfortable walking and talking with friends as engaging in some act of spiritual power. Some have called him *supernaturally-natural*, and that says it. He was headed south and open to divine interruptions. Jesus lived expectantly under an open heaven.

This was the mother’s second trip to the cemetery. First her husband, now her only son: his body washed, placed on a board and carried on the shoulders of men out of the city to be buried before the sundown as required by Jewish law. Hot climate, no embalming, concern about odor, same day burial, not in an expensive cave tomb with carved ledges but on top of the ground with rocks piled over the corpse to warn passerbys of ritual defilement if they touched the grace.¹⁷ The ritual weeping and wailing of hired mourners was heard from a distance. This is as bad as it gets in a society where women have few options and depend on men for sustenance and social

¹⁵ Brian Cavanaugh, *More Sower’s Seeds: Second Planting* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 37.

¹⁶ “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 526.

¹⁷ Marvin Pate, *Luke* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 1995), 167.

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status. The trauma was emotional, social and financial. The family name ended when her son breathed his last. Her future was now a big question mark; all hopes died with him. Some in the village wondered what secret sin she committed to bring such double tragedy on herself.

There is no greater loss than the death of a child. Yesterday afternoon I stood by a graveside in Coward, SC as a ninety-two year old father buried his second son and my cousin in a little Methodist Church graveyard where generations of our larger Turner clan are interred, and my heart was again pierced. The potential for such loss strikes fear in the heart of every parent. We should never minimize the grief of miscarriage, of abortion, of stillbirth or sudden infant death, or of later loss due to disease, crime or tragedy. Our *Book of Worship* now contains healing services and special prayers for those who've lost children. Who will remember the anniversary and send a card? Who will say, "You are dangerously depressed and need help." Who will wade through the rage and anger with them?

It is with a high sense of drama that Luke presents the collision of two processions in verse 12. The procession of life meets the procession of death. The warm front of God's kingdom meets the cold front of death. "As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her."

A little girl was sent on an errand by her mother. She took much too long in coming back. Her mother demanded an explanation when she returned. The daughter explained that on her way she had met a little friend who was crying because she'd broken her doll. "Oh," said the mother, "you stopped to help her fix her doll?" "Oh no," replied the little girl. "I stopped to help her cry."¹⁸

Human compassion is a wonderful gift and a form of grace. But divine compassion goes beyond human resources. To tell a grieving mother not to weep is bad psychology on a human level. Grief that is buried comes out through every pore instead of the tear ducts. There is no way to understand Jesus' word to the woman without acknowledging he'd already heard from the Father through the Spirit on the matter at hand. The feeling of compassion that stirred his bowels was an indicator God was about to act to roll back the power of death, so when you feel compassion, stop and pray, "What are you doing here, Lord, and what am I to do?" To squelch compassion is spiritually dangerous because it leads to hardening of the heart. If God

¹⁸ Hewett, *Illustrations*, 113.

can't move you with his love, how will he move you at all? It is bad psychology to tell the grieving not to cry, but it is sheer lunacy to speak to the dead, unless you're sure you have God's mind on the matter and a good track record of being correct, which is precisely what Jesus has: God's immediate direction and a perfect batting average. "And when the Lord saw her, *he had compassion on her* and said to her, 'Do not weep.' And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young boy, I say to you arise.'" Jesus *hears* the mourners, *sees* the procession, *knows* exactly what it means culturally, is *flooded* with compassion, and *receives instruction* for three acts of obedience: speak to the mother, touch the bier, and issue a command to the boy. And when he obeys, the impossible happens and a boy is handed back to his momma. By the Father's will and the Spirit's power and the Son's obedience death is frustrated.

Earlier I mentioned NDE's, near-death-experiences, which are a fascinating field of research. Not all the stories are positive. Most speak of light and warmth and love; a small minority describe experiences of isolation and anguish that sound more like the Christian doctrine of hell. What happened to this young boy was not an NDE in the technical sense. He was not in the process of dying but already dead. His body had been handled, washed and prepared. These people dealt with death up close and often. But neither is this a resurrection in the technical sense. Only Jesus has been raised in this sense, gaining a new body freed from the limits of space and time and living beyond the power of death. Technically this is a *resuscitation*; the boy returns to this life temporarily only to die again later. Same with Lazarus and Jairus' daughter. Their rescue was temporary, a sign of God's great mercy and a promise of coming attractions. The slave went up and stopped just short of death's revolving door; the widow's son when in one side and came back out the other; Jesus went all the way through, was then raised and sent back as a witness. One was saved *from* death, one *in* death, but Jesus was saved *through* death.

It was my father, a Navy man, who first told me this apocryphal story. Three sailors were out for a night and all three at various levels of inebriation. When one passed out, the two decided to teach him a lesson. They dragged him from the bar to a local funerary establishment where they paid the owner twenty bucks to rent a coffin for a few hours. There they laid him out and set up watch. He slept until the diuretic effect of the alcohol pressed for attention. He stirred; his eyes opened, and after a moment of silence was heard to say, "If I'm alive, why am I in this coffin? And if I'm dead, why do I have to go to the bathroom?"

Verse 14: "And the dead man sat up, and began to speak." "What am I doing

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on this board? It's hot out here! Will someone please put me down! I've got to go to the bathroom. Why am I wearing these funny clothes? What happened?"

"Friend, you were dead, and then this man Jesus stopped your procession."

Then one of the most poignant moments in all the Bible: "And Jesus gave him back to his mother." Tears of grief became tears of ecstasy. Death had severed a relationship and ended hope; Jesus restored both. And if this incident is an insight into the nature of God's kingdom, it means Jesus delights to reunite parents and children who've been separated by death. Part of the hope that sustains parents and part of the joy of heaven will be just this scene repeated millions of times over. A mother and father meet a child they lost at any point after conception, while all the saints and angels cheer. No life is lost to God, and the joy of heaven is not earthly loves destroyed but fulfilled and raised to a whole new level. This is a part of our faith we so easily skip over in the phrase from the creed "I believe in the communion of the saints." This is at least a part of what it means. We will know each other; in fact we won't know each other fully until then, when the truth is told in the context of God's healing love. God has a plan to heal the wounds between the generations, and in Jesus we see a glimpse of what it means, "And he gave him to his mother." Guess where Jesus and his friends ate supper that evening?

CONCLUSION

One day we will know, won't we? About the centurion and his slave, about the widow and her son, about you and me, what we all did with the gift of new life. God's love shown to us in Christ is more powerful than all the forms of death that threaten our lives and our loves. Believe it. Count on it. Act on it. Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God. You will not be disappointed, now and when you breathe your last. It's where my faith is placed.
