

The Raising of a Widow's Son: The Compassion of Christ

The account of the raising of a widow's son in Nain is a prime example of Christ's compassion. Let's explore this in the passage, which reads as follows:

And it came to pass the day after, that he went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and much people. Now when He came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her, and said unto her, "Weep not." And He came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And He said, "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise." And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And He delivered him to his mother. And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. And this rumour of Him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.

Luke 7:11-17

This event happens the day after the miracle of healing the centurion's servant, when Jesus heads out to the city of Nain. It was about 25 miles away, so about a day's journey. Many of his disciples and a great crowd follow Him for this long journey, and they probably arrive in the late afternoon or early evening, when funerals most often took place.

Jesus was going to go and preach the Gospel in Nain, but instead his crowd meets up with another crowd – a funeral procession. You can imagine how probably the joyful and excited chattering in the crowd following Christ must have suddenly died out when they saw this procession.

In Jewish culture at the time, a dead person's nails and hair would be cut, and the body washed, anointed and then wrapped. It would be placed on a bier – a carriage or a frame of wood. The hands would be folded on the chest, and the face exposed. Even the poorest Jew was expected to hire at least two flute players and one professional mourner. The professional mourners would wail and chant mourning words throughout the procession.

As the procession passed people's houses, they would face their chairs and couches the other way. It was considered polite, in fact an obligation, to join the procession. People would bear the open coffin, changing from time to time, so that many could have the chance to carry the deceased.

At the front might be the funeral orator, who would be proclaiming the good deeds of the one who had died. Right behind him would have been the mother. Behind her would be the procession, with the actual coffin, and the mourning women, those playing their pipes, and the large crowd, expressing sympathy as they went.

Now ordinarily, it would have been expected that Christ's party join this funeral procession. But this was going to be different. Here a crowd mourning death was meeting up with a crowd following the Lord of life. And death was not going to triumph here. Jesus was not going to get in line behind the mourners.

Instead, he walks up to the mother, who would have been at the front, and says, "Don't cry." From there, He walks over to the open coffin, touches it, and the procession stops. It must have taken a few seconds for the wailing and piping to die down. And then Jesus says to a dead man, as if He were

talking to a living one, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the young man immediately sits up, and begins talking.

Now, talking is a sure sign of consciousness and life! We can only imagine the reaction around the young man when that happened. Perhaps shrieks. You’ve been to funerals – what would your reaction be if someone was raised up just before being put into the ground?

Then Jesus, in His tender way, presents him back to his mother, now no doubt shocked beyond words. The whole situation must be like a dream to her. She no doubt had only heard of such a thing like hearing about Elijah and Elisha raising a widow’s son, but never did she think it would be her! And so the people recognise that a great prophet is among them, and God is at work.

Yet the aspect of our Lord Jesus which comes so strongly out of this passage is His compassion. Consider that Jesus Christ is God the Son. It was He who would have been speaking to Adam in the cool of the day. And it was He who said, “*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,*” (Genesis 2:17).

And Adam and Eve disobeyed His command. They said, effectively – ‘We don’t want your authority to rule our lives, we want our own way – we want independence, we want to be gods. And on that day, they died spiritually. As **Romans 5:12** tells us – death passed upon all men.

This is the same Jesus. And if Jesus had our hard heart, He might look at this burial procession and shake His head and say, ‘Well, I warned them. I told them. They disobeyed me. I said this would happen, and here it is – death.’ But the compassion of Christ is such that He does not give us what we deserve.

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities.

Psalm 103:10

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not.

Lamentations 3:22

Consider God’s mercy compared to ours. You might see someone racked with disease, and feel great sympathy for them. It is another thing to see someone who seems to be suffering due to their own sin – like a man whose alcohol abuse has wrecked his family and finances and health. You may feel mercy, but you may say, ‘Well, he brought it on himself.’

It is another thing to see someone who is suffering due to something they did against you. For example, someone who lied to you and who’s now experiencing the consequences, or someone who went and did something you specifically warned them against, and are now suffering due to that defiance. Few of us have compassion on someone when they have sinned against us and are now suffering – rather, we say – ‘That’s right, they deserve it.’

There is no doubt that sin needs to be punished. But consider, God is in that last category. The whole human race has sinned against Him. We turned our back on His Lordship, we despised His beauty and excellence, and turned to worshipping ourselves and our possessions. The sickness, the suffering, the tragedy, the wars, the famine, the calamity – has all been brought about by our refusal to obey and love God.

However, God's compassion is that He does not give us what we deserve. He gave Christ the punishment we deserved, so that we could get the mercy and favour that we don't deserve. This is the wonderful thing about our Lord. He is unlike any other god – He loves to be compassionate.

Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

Micah 7:18-19

Five times in the Psalms we read that God is a God full of compassion. How we should praise Him, and love Him for being such a compassionate God to a race that turned away from Him!

If you are in Christ, then you are to be growing into that image. How is your compassion to those suffering – be it sickness, calamity, tragedy, poverty, difficulty – albeit because of their sin? Is your heart one of 'You get what you deserve' or of compassion? Here are four ways we can learn from Him.

1. Christ's compassion sees the need

The Bible says of the widow, "When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion on her." Our Lord's compassion has eyes that truly see. He looked, and He saw the dire need. Here was a widow – she had no husband to support her. If the husband was gone, it fell on the children to provide for her. But this was her only son. And without a husband, she was not going to have any more. She was bereaved of her husband, bereaved of her son – headed for a desperate and extremely difficult situation.

Sometimes people speak very hastily about God when they say things like, "If God is a God of love, why is there so much suffering in the world?" By that they imply, 'God does not see the suffering, or does not see it all, or does not see it clearly – or if He does see, He does not care.'

But this miracle alone is enough to show us the heart of God – He sees. He sees the starving; He sees the war; He sees the wicked murders and rapes and child abuses, and the terrible ways humans treat each other. He sees the earthquakes and floods and plane crashes and car accidents. He sees the HIV sufferers, the cancer sufferers. He sees the terrible harvest that we have sown and reaped.

Not only that, but He sees another side to it – He sees that we live these lives filled with the pain of sin, and our lives are not very long, in the grand scheme of things. As Moses said in **Psalms 90:10**: *"The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."*

Seventy to eighty years, and most of it spent in labour and sorrow. God sees that. And that is one of the reason He has compassion on us: *"For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust,"* (**Psalms 103:14**). God's great, eternal heart wishes, for some reason, to add joy and peace and significance to these specks of dust on this earth. He is compassionate – He sees.

Christian, I wonder, how compassionate are your eyes? As you look at the unbelievers passing you by at work, at school, on the roads, in your family, in the shopping centre – do you see them as people living painfully short lives – who will only go on to an eternity in hell if they do not receive Christ? Do you see them much like this procession – people slowly walking to their graves – trying to

amuse themselves before they get there, but as **Ephesians 2:12** says, “*having no hope and without God in the world.*”

Or do you see the people around you as annoyances – the people who steal your parking spot, and take up space in the queue at the shopping centre, and annoy you on the roads, and irritate you at work? How do you see them? Do you have Christ’s eyes – to see their real state – to know their real end?

As you come into church, do you see the multitudes of needs here? People needing counsel? People needing encouragement? People needing guidance, a visit, some fellowship, or a helping hand? You can’t see it if you keep church at a distance. Fortunately, Jesus did not stay far off. He came close enough to see the need.

2. Christ’s compassion feels the pain

The word for ‘compassion’ actually comes from a word which referred to the inward parts – the spleen, the bowels – because the ancients used that to refer to the emotions, the way we speak of the heart today. The word carries the idea of a great moving inwardly, like when we say, ‘my heart sank’ – just a heaving of inward emotion Jesus had at the sight of the widow’s situation.

Compassion is from two words – passion, which used to mean ‘suffering,’ and com – which means ‘together.’ To suffer together. And God’s compassion is not clinical. Compassion is not cold. Compassion is not something you switch on and switch off. Compassion is the state of your heart – if it is cold and stony, or warm and fleshy. Repeatedly in the Bible we see how God thinks of His people:

In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the Angel of His Presence saved them; in His love and in His pity, He redeemed them; and He bore them and carried them all the days of old.

Isaiah 63:9

“For though I spoke against him, I earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him,” says the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:20

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15

He does not just see and know our grief; He has borne it. On the cross He experienced all the weight of sin and its judgement – all its guilt and the God’s anger at it. As **Isaiah 53:4** puts it, “*Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*” And again and again, we see Jesus moved with compassion in the Gospels.

In **Matthew 9:36**, when He saw the crowds that seemed to be like sheep without a shepherd – languishing without real spiritual direction, suffering under the weight of dry and dead Rabbinical Judaism – He felt compassion. In **Matthew 14:14**, He saw the great crowds, and was moved with compassion and healed the sick. In **Matthew 15:32**, the crowds had been with him for three days, and had nothing to eat, and He did not want to send them away hungry.

Similarly, in **Matthew 20:34**, when the two blind men cried out for their eyes to be healed – Jesus had compassion on them and healed them. In **Mark 1:41**, when the leper came to Jesus and said, *“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me whole,”* Jesus had compassion on him and healed him. In **John 11:35**, when Jesus saw where they had laid Lazarus, He wept. And in **Luke 19:41**, when Jesus saw Jerusalem and knew of its coming destruction – He also wept over it.

And now I ask – what happens in your heart when you see the dire needs around you? May I ask, with trembling – when last have there been any tears? Jesus could look at a city and weep over it, and I daresay none of us would say anything derogatory about the strength and manliness of Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, as we have prayed for our unsaved family – have we been moved? As we have considered the lost around us – have we been moved to earnest prayer? As we have considered our nation, with millions dying of disease, with people wrecking their lives with corruption and crime and materialism, have we been burdened?

Paul had such a heart for the Jewish people, that he could say, *“that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh,”* (**Romans 9:2-3**). And later he says, *“Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved,”* (**Romans 10:1**).

As you meet Jewish people, do you have that desire? As you see Orthodox Jews in their black hats and yarmulkes walking to synagogue, do you feel great compassion for them? That they are trusting in rabbis who have long since forsaken the Word of God – the blind leading the blind? As we have considered one another in our church, have we ever felt a melting, churning inside that would cause us to pray, even fast, for spiritual growth and needs among us?

Consider **1 Corinthians 12:26**: *“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it.”* Where are our tears? I believe God honours prayer like that – not because the tears make the prayer more worthwhile, but because if they are genuine, then they are reflecting a heart like Christ's – and God certainly honours that.

3. Christ's compassion speaks to the need

Our Lord did not just feel great compassion; His compassion moved Him to action. First, He speaks comfort to the widow. There's nothing clinical about this. He doesn't breeze past her, raise the son, and then bring him to her. He first stops to tenderly say, “Don't weep.” From there, He speaks to the dead one, saying, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” And the son sits up and begins speaking.

We might extract a principle and say that when we have compassion, we will open our mouths to speak the Words of life. That means we will intercept the funeral procession of our colleagues and relatives and friends, and speak the Gospel to them. It means we will take the time with other believers to pick up the phone and find out how they are. It means we will phone those who have not been in church for some time and enquire.

It means we will seek to listen to one another, and provide counsel, and speak the Word of God to one another. We do not have Christ's intrinsic authority, but when we speak the Word of God – the truth – in love, it is powerful.

Sometimes our evangelism is met by cold responses, because it goes out with cold hearts. But words said with compassion can make the difference. It is not just about teaching people the Word, but teaching people the Word with compassion.

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."

Psalm 126:5-6

Evangelism is not a duty we tick off our to-do list. It is an irrepressible burden for others that comes from having Christ's heart – so that you desire their salvation, and long to lead the conversation to Christ. When you sit next to someone in the bus, or the plane, or wherever, you long to have them know the Saviour, to as it were, say to them, "I say to you, arise."

4. Christ's compassion heals the situation

His powerful words reversed the sting of death. He is always moved to meet the need, to alleviate the pain, to reverse the effects of the Fall. As **Luke 4:18** records Jesus saying, *"The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."*

Our compassion will go beyond motives, or even words; we will seek to be involved with one another's lives. **1 John 3:17-18** says, *"But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."*

Compassion is active. Compassion is not just looking on and saying "Shame." It is following Christ's Spirit to bring mercy in. When Jesus was asked what it means to love our neighbour, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is primarily a parable about being compassionate, particularly to someone who you might consider your enemy.

Compassion gets its hands dirty, so to speak, by being involved. That friend at school with the drug problem. That colleague with the wrecked marriage. That relative with the nasty habit or the continual depression. The bottom line is not that we invent something to do – but that we have tender hearts that will do what God wants us to do.

And notice the timing of Jesus' arrival – just at before burial. If we are sensitive to God's Spirit, we will be at the right place at the right time, and provide the mercy that God wants us to. We might say – well, how do I get that tender heart?

How do I gain compassion?

Firstly, growing in compassion begins with **repenting of a hard heart**. We must acknowledge that we who have received mercy are often not very merciful. We must confess this to God, not just once, but whenever it returns.

Secondly, we must **spend much time in God's presence**. In this passage, you can see the compassionate heart of Jesus Christ. And if you are a believer, then it would have resonated with you, because you are now made in His image, you are a new being is created in His likeness: *"And*

have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,” (Colossians 3:10).

And like plants that photosynthesise sunlight, believers ‘open their petals’ for light about Christ. They want to know Him, so as to be like Him, so as to show Him. This passage in Scripture is just a taste. You need to be before Christ in the Word and in prayer, allowing the Holy Spirit to show you more of His heart.

Pray that God would show you how He sees your family, your friends, your colleagues. Pray He’d show how He sees His body in your local church. Allow Him to show you His heart, and absorb that into your heart. And then, while you are praying for the right kind of heart, get busy being merciful. Share the Gospel. Invite people to church. Spend time after the service talking to people and getting to know them. Get involved in other people’s lives.