

# The Greatest Story Seldom Told

Luke 7:11-17    October 29, 2023

Have you heard about *The Greatest Story Never Told*? That's the title of a 6-hour documentary produced in 2013 that suggests Adolf Hitler and his Third Reich really weren't so bad. It has a *shocking* number of 10/10 ratings on IMDb, calling it excellent, eye-opening, life-changing truth.<sup>1</sup> I don't know about you, but I'm glad this is a story that's never told.

The Gospel of Luke contains a true story that is *less-often* told. Obviously it's right here in our Bibles but, when it comes to the stories about Jesus we frequently reference, or write songs about, or put in curriculum and children's Bibles, *this* one isn't usually in the list for some reason.

Even when we think about the people Jesus raised from the dead, this story seems to be the last one we remember. There's Lazarus, of course, and Jairus' daughter. But there's another story, found only in Luke, full of hope and full of tenderness and full of God's heart toward you. One commentator writes, "*In many ways this is the loveliest story in all the Gospels.*"<sup>2</sup>

Our story begins in verse 11, with Jesus on the road.

**Luke 7:11 - <sup>11</sup>Afterward he was on his way to a town called Nain. His disciples and a large crowd were traveling with him.**

After what? It was after Jesus gave what we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount - only in Luke it's the Sermon on the Plain.<sup>3</sup> It was a teaching Jesus gave multiple times. After finishing, Jesus was asked to come and heal a centurion's servant. He did, without even entering the house, proving that He wasn't just a guy with good ideas or valuable philosophy - He was something much more.

That healing took place in Capernaum. Now, Jesus and the crowd with Him, started walking 25 miles or so<sup>4</sup> to this little city of Nain, which was at the base of Mount Hermon.<sup>5</sup>

The question is: *Why* was Jesus going to Nain? Jesus said He only did what the Father wanted Him to do. He was led by the Spirit from place to place. *Every* single place He visited, He could've stayed forever doing His work of healing and teaching. So, why Nain *that day*?

As far as the Bible is concerned, *this* funeral we're about to see was the only reason. There are no other stories recorded about this place or Jesus't time there.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3526810/reviews>

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay *The Gospel Of Luke (Revised Edition)*

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:17

<sup>4</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible Notes*

<sup>5</sup> *The New American Standard New Testament Greek Lexicon*

**Luke 7:12** - <sup>12</sup> **Just as he neared the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the town was also with her.**

In verse 14, Jesus will call him a "young man." The term means a youth, under 40, in the prime of life.<sup>6</sup> So, I'm sorry to report that I and many of you are no longer in the prime of our lives.

There would be no celebration at this funeral. No appreciation of a life well-lived. The young man's death would've been practically a death sentence for his widowed mother. No husband, no other sons. This woman is now "all alone in a hostile world."<sup>7</sup> Today, she's crushed by grief, tomorrow she'll be helpless,<sup>8</sup> totally dependent on the charity of others.

Her son probably died within the last 24 hours.<sup>9</sup> It was customary for Jews to bury the dead quickly. But that means that while Jesus was healing the servant of a Gentile occupier, this young man was taking his last gasps of breath.

Now, remember: A crowd is with Jesus. The disciples were with him. They knew Jesus *could* heal from afar. I think it's very possible that at least a few of them thought, "*Why were we helping a Roman soldier while a son of Abraham was left to die?*"

We might think something similar today. God *could* heal everyone of every sickness and injury. Every cancer patient. Every amputee. Every quadriplegic. If He's a God of love, why doesn't He?

One reason is that *more* than a physical healing, you need a *personal encounter* with God. There's a work of the soul that is more pressing, more urgent than any physical suffering we face. When the lame man was lowered through the roof, to Jesus the first thing He did was forgive the man's sins.

Now, God *does* care about physical suffering. This story and so many other prove that. And one day God *will* heal every single sickness and sorrow, every single malady and hurt in His forever Kingdom. But in the here and now, though God *does* still heal in some cases, more often we are called to endure suffering that His strength may be made perfect in our weakness.

Let's look back at these crowds. There's a large crowd with Jesus and a large crowd with the woman. They meet on the road outside the city. The crowd with Jesus had, undoubtedly, been full of excitement. "*Look at what Jesus can do!*" But I wonder if the wind came out of their sails as they heard the wailing and the screams of sorrow. After all, this young man wasn't *dying*, like the servant of the centurion had been. This man is *dead*.

By the way, it's not a case of people not realizing someone isn't actually dead. That happens from time to time. Remember: Luke is a doctor. He's *dead*.

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<sup>6</sup> Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary, A Concise Dictionary Of The Words In The Greek Testament And The Hebrew Bible, Bill Mounce Greek Dictionary

<sup>7</sup> Darrell Bock Luke

<sup>8</sup> R. Kent Hughes Luke: That You May Know The Truth

<sup>9</sup> Bock

**Luke 7:13 - <sup>13</sup>When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said, "Don't weep."**

There were many people gathered - many more than are here today. But Jesus had specific, personal focus on this *one* person. It was the *woman* Jesus had compassion on, not the young man. I suspect the young man was enjoying the glories of paradise in the place called Abraham's Bosom. And at the polar opposite was his mother. It was her darkest hour.

The people of Nain came to mourn with her. But other than helping to bury her son, there was nothing anyone could do for her. In the future, they might be able to throw her some scraps so she wouldn't starve. But other than that, there was no hope. All of them felt bad for her, but then there's *Jesus*. And His heart *went out to her* in action.

Luke uses the strongest word possible to describe Jesus' pity on her.<sup>10</sup> The root word refers to the yearning of the viscera.<sup>11</sup> His heart was going out to her. This is a God of *active* love.

He walks over and says, "Don't weep." Now, this is *not* something you should say to a person at a funeral. But Jesus can. We read it and we think, "Well, He's about to do something, so it's fine." That's true, but *no one* in this scene knew He was going to raise this man from the dead. Jairus' daughter hadn't been raised yet. Neither had Lazarus.

Luke gives us a subtle commentary on this scene when he says, "the *Lord* saw her." This is no mere rabbi. This is *the Lord*. The "supernatural master over all. The ruler who exercises authority."<sup>12</sup> His words of comfort weren't empty cliches. When He speaks, the cosmos bends.

Did you know the Lord has the same compassion for you that He did for this woman? Psalm 145 tells us His compassion rests on *all* He has made. He knows your hurt and your fears. He knows the thoughts that fill your mind. The tears that fall from your eyes and evaporate He collects and stores in a bottle.<sup>13</sup> He is a loving, merciful Rescuer Who wants to envelop you with His grace.

**Luke 7:14 - <sup>14</sup>Then he came up and touched the open coffin, and the pallbearers stopped. And he said, "Young man, I tell you, get up!"**

Let's notice: The funeral was still happening - the pallbearers were still walking. And notice that *no one asked Jesus to do anything*.<sup>14</sup>

But this is Who the God of the Bible is. Without being asked, He brings Himself into humanity's need. While Adam and Eve were in rebellion, while they were fleeing from God's presence, He comes and calls to them. When Hagar runs, hopeless into the wilderness, God goes there to save

<sup>10</sup> Hughes

<sup>11</sup> *CDW, Hughes*

<sup>12</sup> *The Dictionary Of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 56:8

<sup>14</sup> Leon Morris *Luke*

her. As Saul of Tarsus plunges headlong into hate and murder and blasphemy, the Lord meets him on the road to make him an offer of peace. At just the right time, while we were helpless and destined for an eternity in hell, Christ died for us, the ungodly, the undeserving, the undesirable.<sup>15</sup>

This young man would've been carried not in a coffin like we think of, but on a bier - a slab of wood, essentially.<sup>16</sup> And though his body was dead, it's clear that this fellow was alive *somewhere* because Jesus could speak to him and he could hear.<sup>17</sup>

Touching a coffin would've made Jesus ceremonially unclean.<sup>18</sup> But as usual, Jesus didn't care. He wasn't afraid to lay his hand on a coffin. He wasn't afraid to enter a Gentile's house. He wasn't afraid to embrace lepers. *That's* how great His tenderness and compassion are for the people of earth.

And so, Jesus stands in front of the procession. The pallbearers are forced to stop. And Jesus says, "Young man, *I* tell you."

The doctors had said there was nothing they could do. The neighbors had said, "It's time - we have to bury him." The grave smiled and said, "You are *mine*." But *Jesus Christ*, the Lord and Savior said, "I tell you, *get up*." Someone wrote, "*Jesus claimed as His own what death had seized as his prey.*"<sup>19</sup>

If you are born again, if you've been saved by Jesus, death has no power over you. It does not rule you. It cannot threaten you. All the sting and all the victory has been taken away from the grave.

Jesus has authority to tell death what to do. *All* authority on earth and in heaven has been given to Him.<sup>20</sup> You may be dying, you may be sick, you may be weak, you may be poor, you may be afraid, you may be confused, you may be discouraged or depressed or in doubt. Jesus Christ is *Lord* and His compassion does not fail. He has love for you and grace for you and wants to walk with you day by day in this life, ultimately uniting with you in eternity where you will live forever with Him. There is no other rescue from death. There are no other options that lead to life. It is Jesus, only Jesus.

### **Luke 7:15 - <sup>15</sup>The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.**

Luke's training leaks through again in his writing. "Sat up" is a technical medical term for a patient sitting up in bed.<sup>21</sup> What did he say, I wonder? Of course it's not recorded. He had been conscious in the next life, and so I imagine him saying, "You can't believe who I saw over there!"

This would've been an absolute *scene*. I watched some videos of medical professionals pulling pranks on their coworkers. When the body bag starts moving, people *freak out*. Wouldn't you? It's

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 5:6

<sup>16</sup> *The NET Bible First Edition Notes*

<sup>17</sup> Hughes

<sup>18</sup> Bock

<sup>19</sup> Barclay

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 28:18

<sup>21</sup> William Hobart *The Medical Language Of Saint Luke*

amazing that Jesus didn't have to raise a few more dead people after the heart attacks they might've suffered!

According to the Mishnah written between 30 BC and 200 AD, when a Jew was prepared for burial, the jaw would be bound shut.<sup>22</sup> And so, similar to Lazarus being unbound, this young man was set free from his bonds and became a living testimony of God's power and grace. God saves *and* He frees us. Frees us to preach and to testify and to share the Good News of what He does.

What was now the purpose of his life, more than ever before? To support and serve. Jesus "gave him to his mother." She was in need and the Lord met her need by giving her another *person*. The Lord *could've* done a miracle of money or a miracle of food supply. Instead, He gave her a *person*. This man would have to *die again* someday. But, aren't we glad?

Now, similarly, God sends *us* to serve others, to support one another, to be in relationship with others as living representatives of God's grace and power and kindness. Yes, we will have to suffer in this life. Yes, we will face physical death one day. But we know what's on the other side. And we know a life lived in service to the Lord is worth it the trouble and the difficulty.

Paul once said, "Listen, I'd *rather* be physically dead, because then I get to be in heaven. But if I stay in this life, that's a benefit and a *necessary thing* for the people God has sent me to serve."<sup>23</sup>

**Luke 7:16 - <sup>16</sup>Then fear came over everyone, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us," and "God has visited his people."**

The people weren't wrong, their understanding of Jesus was just incomplete.<sup>24</sup> We can't blame them. Even the disciples didn't really understand the Lord until after His resurrection. *We* on the other hand have the full revelation of Who Jesus is and we should respond accordingly.

Why did they call Jesus a prophet when He didn't prophesy? It's because this scene closely mirrors the story of Elijah. In 1 Kings 17 we read about how Elijah, the great prophet, encountered a widow at the city gate. Shortly after, her only son became sick and died. Elijah had compassion on her, appealed to the Lord, the son was raised and then he "gave him to his mother." Luke uses the *exact* phrasing that we find in the Septuagint version of 1 Kings.

Jews knew this story. And they knew that they should be watching and waiting for another great Prophet to arrive. One that would arise from among them and have the very words of God in His mouth. Jesus was demonstrating He was the Prophet. He was greater than Moses, greater than Elijah. Elijah had to cry out to the Lord multiple times, asking *God* to raise the widow's son. Jesus walked up to the coffin and said, "*I say get up.*"

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<sup>22</sup> Joel Green *The Gospel Of Luke*

<sup>23</sup> Philippians 1:21-23

<sup>24</sup> Bock

The people were starting to catch on. They gave Him the highest title they could think of<sup>25</sup> and said, "God has visited His people." Fred Craddock points out, "God's visitation may be in wrath or in mercy, but for Luke it is always an act of grace."<sup>26</sup>

Do we recognize God's grace? Have we understood Jesus as He has been revealed to us? Have we given Him the highest title of honor and praise from our hearts? Do we realize He's visiting us now?

**Luke 7:17 - <sup>17</sup>This report about him went throughout Judea and all the vicinity.**

This was a story worth telling!

Let me tell *you* a story - one that's about *you*.

The God of heaven and earth knows you and loves you. He hand-made you in your mother's womb. Because of sin, you're going to die one day. Whether you acknowledge God and receive His forgiveness or not, *one day* He is going to call *you* out of the grave. Only He has the authority to do so. But He will for every single person listening today, and every other person to ever exist. Those who have been born again will be called out the grave like children being called home into an everlasting inheritance in heaven. Those who are *not* born again will also be called out of the grave, not by a Father, but by the Judge. And they will be brought before the Great White Throne judgment. They will each be found guilty of sin and the wages are death. Their destiny is eternal, conscious torment in the Lake of Fire. Which version of that story will be told of *your* life?

Recently, we watched the epic classic *Ben Hur* with the kids. There's a great scene where Judah Ben Hur stands before Pontius Pilate and he must make a choice whether he is going to pledge himself to Rome or to the Jews. Pilate is standing in the room where he officiates, his throne in the background. He says, "*I crossed this floor in spoken friendship...but when I go up those stairs I become the hand of Caesar, ready to crush all those who challenge his authority. If you stay here, you will find yourself part of this tragedy.*"

Christ Jesus is not worried about you challenging His authority. *All* authority forever belongs to Him. He is concerned that you will *perish* for your sin. He does not want that - His compassion is too great. He came from heaven into the horror of earth so that He could make a way - *one way* - that we could be rescued from sin, rescued from death, and have hope.

He's going to call you out of the grave one day, but He's already calling to you now. Calling for you to be saved. Calling for you to walk with Him and to receive His strength and His grace and His love *even now*. It's not only about the *next* life, it's about *this* life, too. His love extends from eternity all the way into *this* very moment. Will you hear Him and follow Him and be a part of the story?

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<sup>25</sup> Morris

<sup>26</sup> Fred Craddock *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching And Preaching*