

Condolences That Come True

By: Keith Keyser

At funerals people tend to say all manner of things attempting to express sympathy, comfort, and love for the bereaved. The list of possible phrases ranges from the cliché to the genuinely heartfelt – and sometimes the theologically ridiculous, such as “I bet he is playing golf in heaven right now” and other similar absurdities (as if the ineffable realm of glory where God resides is a country club!) Sometimes it is better to follow the approach of Job’s friends who remained silent for seven days – if only they had stayed that way, they might have preserved their mourning friend from undue stress. Perhaps no more significant words were ever spoken at a funeral, however, than when the Lord Jesus Christ told a grieving widow to stop weeping.

A Seemingly Hopeless Scene

The Lord Jesus met the funeral procession coming out of the city of Nain in Galilee. In keeping with Jewish custom, it was probably led by the deceased young man’s widowed mother. Luke 7:12 succinctly sets the painful scene: “...Behold¹, a dead man was being carried out, the only son² of his mother; and she was a widow.” Ryle depicts the pathos of the situation in these words: “All funerals are mournful things, but it is difficult to imagine a funeral more mournful than the one here described. It was the funeral of a young man, and that young man the only son of his mother, and that mother a widow. There is not an item in the whole story, which is not full of misery.”³ Another historian adds: “The fact that this youth was ‘the only son of his mother and she a widow’ would convey to Jewish notions a deeper sorrow than it even does to ours, for they regarded childlessness as a special calamity, and the loss of offspring as a direct punishment for sin (Jer. 6:26; Zech. 12:10; Amos 8:10).”⁴ In addition to the emotional stress, this pitiable woman was economically vulnerable, given that her hope of financial support from her two male relatives was gone. There were few opportunities open to her as a means of making a living. She likely stared the wolf of destitution in the face.⁵

Busting Up A Funeral⁶

No one told the Lord of the needs of the widow. Her plight was evident to His all-searching eyes. As a Bible teacher of a former generation expressed it: “He was not indifferent to that widow’s bereavement. Power He could indeed put forth, the power of resurrection. Ere, however, doing that, He evidenced His tender pity. ‘Weep not,’ were the first words that He uttered.”⁷ Dennett adds:

The Lord saw her, estimated as no other could the depth of her need, and thus, moved by His own heart, He went to her relief. We do not sufficiently understand this. All can comprehend that the Lord should listen to the cries of His people, but how many of us live in the power of the blessed remembrance of the fact, that our own griefs and sorrows find an answering response in His heart? ‘In all their affliction He was afflicted.’ (Isa.43: 9.) ‘We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all

points tempted like as we are — without sin' (sin apart) (Heb. 4:15.) If a parent bends over his suffering child with yearning pity, 'like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear Him' (Psalm 103: 13.) Some who read these lines may be lying on beds of pain and affliction; others, bereaved, may be weeping over their dead; and others again may be mourning over those who are dead in sins. Surely, then, it will be a comfort to all such to remember, that He who, when He saw the widow of Nain following the bier of her only son, had compassion on her, has the same heart for their griefs; that He stands by them with infinite tenderness, waiting both to succour and to console.⁸

Under the circumstances, the Lord Jesus' words must have seemed absurd to the point of brutality. Indeed, if anyone else had the temerity to say to the afflicted widow "Stop weeping" (v. 13, NASB mg.) one would reckon them to be foolish at best or sadistic at worst. Happily, Christ is neither cruel nor cunning. He sympathizes with human grief, instead of augmenting it. Of course, He could say this, because He was about to remove the source of this sorrowing woman's tears. Only Christ can banish weeping in the face of death, for He is the one who vanquishes sin and its effects. While establishing His messianic identity, the miracle in Nain was also a harbinger of a better resurrection to come (1 Cor. 15:20-23.) What is more, it gives one insight into God's heart. As one writer notes:

In view of such miracles, possibly we dwell too exclusively upon their purpose as authenticating the mission of Jesus, or as demonstrating his divine message. These purposes are real, but we must never forget that such works were also manifestations of the nature of the ministry of Jesus and revelations of the very heart of God. Such recitals dry the tears of mourners and bind up broken hearts and inspire the despondent with eternal hope. Surely Jesus is the Lord of life and he will yet wipe away all tears from the eyes of those that trust him.⁹

Who Can Cheer The Heart Like Jesus?

Christ is the comforter par excellence. Ironside alludes to this with a poignant question: "Who can dry tears like Jesus? Some day He will wipe away all tears from the eyes of His redeemed (Rev. 21:4), for He is God as well as Man. When He bade the widow dry her tears, He did not merely seek to soothe, but He was about to work a miracle that would fill her heart with unexpected joy."¹⁰ In the same vein, another writer comments: "The Lord's words expressed His compassion, but they proved to be far from merely hollow words of encouragement. He would shortly give her reason not to weep but to rejoice."¹¹ The Lord told her to stop weeping, knowing that moments later He would restore the dead man to life by His powerful word. A contemporary commentator elucidates the key words in the aftermath of this sign: "Notice the verb: he gave him to her. In that wonderful moment, no conditions were laid down, no promises extracted. The awesome gift of new, unexpected life was apparently an unconditional gift, an action of the unqualified grace of God."¹²

The Lord Jesus triumphed over death at the cross by dying for sin. By removing the cause of death, He disarmed this feared weapon (Heb. 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:55-57.) A classic hymn poetically puts forth the stunning contrast:

*Lord of life to death once subject,
Blessed yet a curse once made.
Of Thy Father's heart the object,
Yet in depths of anguish laid.*¹³

Christ tasted death for everyone, so that those who receive Him by faith could live eternally. It is this certain and unwavering hope that consoles the saints as they travel through the valley of death's shadow. He draws alongside sickbeds and gravesides and says: "Stop weeping." There is substance and power behind these words; true comfort that only the Lord Jesus offers.

¹ The word "behold" is emphatic in the original language, as Nolland notes: "An emphatic καὶ ἰδοὺ..." John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 35A. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002, p. 320.

² F.W. Farrar points out that having the dative case of the Greek phrase "καὶ ἰδοὺ τὸν υἱόν σου καὶ τὴν μητέρα" saying: "The dative is here expressive of more tender feeling than the ordinary genitive would have been. It is the dative of advantage, and expresses the preciousness of the son to the mother." F. W. Farrar, *The Gospel According to St Luke*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), p. 198.

³ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Vol. 1*, (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), p. 208.

⁴ Farrar, pp. 147-148.

⁵ Hendriksen's remarks are apposite: "With the death of this only son the woman's final source of support and protection is gone and the hope of perpetuating the family line has vanished. Is this death, after the earlier death of her husband, also a severe trial for her faith in a God who loves and cares? Though the text does not indicate this, we must at least consider this possibility. Her condition is indeed *tragic*." William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, New Testament Commentary, Vol. 11. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 384.

⁶ "Someone has said that He broke up every funeral He met." J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary*, electronic ed., Lk 7:16 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997).

⁷ C.E. Stuart, *From Advent To Advent (Luke)*, (Galaxie Software, 2004), p. 82.

⁸ Edward Dennett, "The Three Raisings of the Dead." *Christian Friend*, Vol. 7, 1880, p. 260. Electronic ed.: <http://www.stempublishing.com/authors/dennett/3deadrai.html> Accessed on 7/10/12.

⁹ Charles R. Erdman, *The Gospel of Luke: An Exposition*. Philadelphia: 1921, p. 75.

¹⁰ H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of Luke*. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1947), p. 218.

¹¹ Thomas Constable, *Constable's Notes: Luke*. pdf., p. 85; accessible here: <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes.htm> Accessed on 7/11/12.

¹² David W. Gooding, *According To Luke*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, pp. 132-133.

¹³ Richard Holden, "Lord of glory, we adore thee"; accessed here: http://www.stempublishing.com/hymns/data/Dv1881_3.htm#134 On 7/11/12.