

August 7-11, 2023 Edition

The Year^(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 84

Jesus & The Widow Of Nain

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we'll be looking at what happened when Jesus and His friends were on their way to a small village in Galilee called Nain. Nain is about 9 miles from where Jesus grew up in Nazareth and other than this story right here found in Luke chapter 7 you'll never hear of the town again in the Bible. But something pretty cool and pretty important happened there one day and what I'd like to do is read the story and then we'll spend the week reflecting on it:

Soon afterward Jesus went with his disciples to the village of Nain, and a large crowd followed him. A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow's only son, and a large crowd from the village was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry!" he said. Then he walked over to the coffin and touched it, and the bearers stopped. "Young man," he said, "I tell you, get up." Then the dead boy sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him back to his mother. Great fear swept the crowd, and they praised God, saying, "A mighty prophet has risen among us," and "God has visited his people today." And the news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding countryside. Luke 7:11-17 (NLT)

Ok so what's happening here. First the background of this story. Luke tells us this story occurs "soon afterward". After what? Well, after the events that we've been looking at for the last few weeks. If you remember Jesus gave His Sermon On The Mount and as He was coming down off the mountain (with large crowds who had been at the Sermon On The Mount) He met a leper who He healed. Then He went on into Capernaum and met a Roman Centurion who begged Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus healed the servant (again in the presence of a large crowd) and then sometime "soon afterward" He left Capernaum to travel around Galilee preaching and teaching and healing the sick (and as it would turn out, raising the dead).

And what we see if we're paying attention is that Jesus is doing what He would consider to be Messiah-type-stuff but nobody else recognizes or understands that. What everyone expected the Messiah to do was to drive the Romans out of Israel by leading an armed rebellion. Jesus seems to have zero interest in such a thing. In fact at one point the Jews try to force Him to become their king and He's having none of it:

When the people saw him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, "Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!" When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself. John 6:14-15 (NLT)

Now I'm not sure how someone would "force" someone else to become a king against their will but John seems to indicate that's something Jesus was not interested in sticking around and finding out. Any time Jesus was asked to do something political or military in nature He declined. It wasn't what He'd come to this earth to do. He'd come to be Messiah, yes. But his definition of what the Messiah is and would do is vastly different from everyone else in first century Israel- including John The Baptist as it turns out (we'll look at that tomorrow). Maybe for today we can spend some time reflecting together on what Jesus' mission on this earth was and what that means for us as followers of His nearly 2,000 years later.

Tuesday Reflection: This week we're reflecting on the time that Jesus resurrected a young man from village of Nain and what we can learn from this story. So let's start by looking at what we see in this story when Jesus raises a dead man to life. First I guess I'd say in this story we see Jesus being Jesus and doing (what He would consider to be) Messiah type stuff. Nobody else saw it but it's not like God was hiding it- it just got lost in plain sight. In His first sermon after He began His mission at 30 years of age Jesus preached a sermon from the book of Isaiah:

The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come." He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!" Luke 4:17-21 (NLT)

This passage from Isaiah is what theologians call a Messianic passage or prophecy. It's one of the hundreds of prophecies explaining what the Messiah will do when He arrives. So what does Isaiah say the Messiah will do? Well it turns out He'll have the Spirit of the Lord upon Him and that will spur Him to preach good-news to the poor. He will proclaim that captives will be released and that the blind will see. He will set the oppressed free and He will proclaim the time of the Lord's favor. What would you think that meant if you read it without knowing anything about what Jesus did? The Jews took it to mean that the Messiah would raise up an army and destroy Rome and then this Messiah would establish God's throne and Kingdom in Jerusalem where He would reign for all eternity.

But Jesus shows zero interest in raising an army or establishing a political government with geographical boundaries. In fact the things He's doing seem very un-Messiah like. He's alienating the power bases of ancient Israel rather than courting them for their support. He's doing miracles, sure, but He's not capitalizing on the popularity that brings Him to further His military and political ambitions. It was so confusing that even John the Baptist can't figure it out and so He sends a few of his friends to ask Jesus a question:

"John the Baptist sent us to ask, 'Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?'...Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard- the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor."

Luke 7:22 (NLT)

Why is John confused? Because everybody thought the Messiah would raise an army. This isn't John The Baptist doubting that Jesus is sent by God- but it is John being confused with what he's seeing. Why? Because in the first century the rabbis looked at all of the hundreds of Messianic prophecies and saw that they broke down into basically two categories- the conquering king and the suffering servant. The conquering king prophecies foretold of a Messiah who would come and trample the enemies of God under his feet and then establish God's throne upon which he would rule for eternity. The suffering servant

was a mysterious figure whose sacrificial death would bring about the healing of the nations. The rabbis couldn't see how one person could possibly fulfill both kinds of messianic prophecies. The conquering king who would rule for eternity couldn't possibly be the same person as the suffering servant who would die for God's people. How could they be? It's impossible they figured. They figured right from a human perspective but Jesus would show them once again how He could take two seemingly mutually exclusive things and harmonize them perfectly as on the cross He trampled the enemies of God [sin- not people] and in so doing established God's throne which after His resurrection and ascension He would reign upon for all of eternity.

You can see how even John the Baptist would be confused. Jesus isn't doing any of that messiah type stuff so John's question isn't a sign that he's doubting that Jesus was sent by God- I believe John's question is him wondering if maybe Jesus is the suffering servant and they would still have to wait on the conquering king. And what does Jesus say? Go tell John that the blind, lame, lepers & deaf are being cured. Oh yeah and tell him I resurrected a guy recently. What is Jesus telling John with that reply? That He is doing messiah type stuff but John along with every other human who was watching what was happening didn't understand the signs. Turns out the messiah had come to save the world- not conquer it. And what's fascinating (at least to me) is that in Matthew chapter 25 when Jesus tells a parable about what will happen at the end of time He paints a picture of what kinds of works His followers will be engaged in. It's also where He says we can find Him if we're looking:

Then the King will say... 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me...' 'I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!' Matthew 25:34-36 (NLT)

If you look at Jesus' life and teachings what you'll find is that if you want to find Him and be about His business you'll have to go looking in the trenches. Not trenches dug for armies to wage war with one another but the trenches where the poor, the sick and the oppressed have been dumped. Want to find Jesus? He told us exactly where He'd be. Do we have the moral courage to follow Him there?

Wednesday Reflection: Yesterday we reflected on the idea that one of the things we learn in the story of Jesus resurrecting the young man from Nain was that when we see Jesus raising the dead what we're seeing is Jesus being Jesus- doing Messiah type stuff. It didn't seem to anyone else like what He was doing was Messiah type stuff but Jesus assures us it is. Today we're going to look at another aspect of what this story shows us- it also shows us Jesus being God and demonstrating one of the most important aspects of God's nature- compassion.

I don't know what you think of when you consider the God of the Old Testament. Most of us would think about a God of judgment and retribution and anger. And while there are times in the Old Testament when God metes out His justice swiftly and severely those

aspects of His character are not the whole story. In fact, I'd wager that there is more grace, mercy and forgiveness in the Old Testament than judgment and retribution. Whether you think I'm right or not, I can tell you that when God describes Himself he sees something entirely different than we do. When God shows Moses His glory He also describes Himself in a way that might seem unusual:

Then the Lord came down in a cloud and stood there with him; and he called out his own name, Yahweh. The Lord passed in front of Moses, calling out, "Yahweh! The Lord! The God of compassion and mercy! I am slow to anger and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness. I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected- even children in the third and fourth generations." Exodus 34:4-7 (NLT)

Boy does that description change directions quick, huh? How is this not about God describing Himself as the God of justice, guilt and retribution? Well I don't have the time or space to go into detail but it's the difference between the words "forgive" and "excuse". They are two different concepts and basically I believe what God is saying is that He forgives us but we'll still have to deal with the consequences of our sin. Yes there are consequences that go along with our failures and flaws and sins but it doesn't negate Who God is. Notice who when describing Himself He focuses on compassion, mercy, patience, unfailing love and faithfulness. Even when He brings in the consequences we have to deal with- even after being forgiven- He doesn't call Himself the "God of judgment and retribution. And the Israelites didn't really focus on that last part of His description of Himself either. As it turns out this description that God gives us of Himself is the most often quoted scripture in the Old Testament. In other words, when the rest of the writers of the Old Testament want to describe God this is their go-to definition of Who God is. And most of them leave out the last part of God's description dealing with consequences.

So when we're told in Luke chapter 7 that Jesus' heart was "overflowing with compassion" what we're seeing is just Jesus being God:

A funeral procession was coming out as he approached the village gate. The young man who had died was a widow's only son, and a large crowd from the village was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. "Don't cry!" he said. Luke 7:12-13 (NLT)

And if you're wondering if Jesus ever claimed to be God the answer is, yes. Over and over again. That's not really what this reflection is about but He does it over and over. He also shows us how much like His Father He is in stores like this where we see His compassion (the first adjective God uses to describe Himself) overflowing for this poor widow. Why did Jesus feel so strongly for her? Because she was all alone. She had lost everyone and now she would lose everything because a woman in first century Israel needed a male protector and provider- even if that male protector was a child. She couldn't inherit the estate that had passed from her husband when he died to her son. She was destitute.

I wonder if Jesus felt so badly for the widow of Nain because He knew what His own mother would have to go through one day when He died? We'll never know for sure but

Jesus' compassion wouldn't allow Him to let the funeral procession continue on to the young man's final resting place and so He stopped them and turned this funeral into a re-birthday party. And that's one of the biggest reasons Jesus came to this earth- so that death would never have the last word. One day every single one of us who has lost someone we love will have that loved one returned to us courtesy of Jesus the Messiah.

Thursday Reflection: Today we're going to look at how the humility found in this story. I know the idea of a story about Jesus raising someone from death seems like it couldn't be about humility but hear me out. After Jesus stops the funeral procession because of His overflowing compassion this is what happens next:

Then he went up and touched the stretcher they were carrying him on, and the bearers 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. Luke 7:14-15 (NIV)

How in world is this about humility we ask. Because humility isn't about what we think humility is about. We think that Jesus' miracles are raw expressions of power designed to dazzle the mind and delight the senses and while they may do that there is one thing miracles are terrible at- instilling faith. Sure people are amazed by miracles but look at the track record miracles have of making people believe and trust God.

First up we've got the Israelites who God brings out of Egypt and shepherds through the wilderness. They saw TONS of flashy and impressive miracles. They didn't doubt that those miracles came from Yahweh but those miracles didn't instill faith and trust in the Israelites. In fact the Israelites were filled with doubt, complaining and criticizing God in spite of the miracles.

And while there must have been tens of thousands of Jews who saw Jesus' most impressive miracles on this earth do you know how many people were still there on the day the church began almost 2,000 years ago? 120. That's right- you read that number right- 120. So miracles aren't the thing that instills faith in God. You might have thought (or heard someone else say this) that if you could just see a miracle then you'd believe.

But it's just not true. If it would take a miracle to make you believe then you're never going to have faith and learn to trust Jesus. That's why whenever the Jews demanded that Jesus show them a flashy miracle and then they'll believe in Him Jesus always says, "no".

We will never find Jesus because of His power- it is always in humility and humble circumstances that we find Jesus. Jen Hatmaker has a quote in one of her books that has always made me stop and think:

We've been invited into a story that begins in humility and ends in glory. Never the other way around.

It's the road Jesus Himself walked- what makes us think that if our job is to follow Him that our story would be any different. Sure Jesus' miracles are impressive but it's His humility and love and compassion that actually change the world. If Jesus had stepped aside and let that funeral procession proceed on to the graveyard His ministry wouldn't have changed much. The miracle of Jesus raising the dead man of Nain didn't change the world- but it changed that one widow's world and that's why Jesus did it.

Not to be impressive. Not to get more buzz and publicity going. Only because He cared for that one woman and couldn't let her go by when He could do something to change her life.

So He did.

Now the question is, what are we willing to do to change someone's life?

Friday Reflection: There's one more aspect of this story I want to look at and it's something that is said at the very end of the story. When Jesus raises the young man from death the people are amazed and Luke tells us what they said:

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 7:16-17 (NLT)

What I want to focus in on today is a word in that second statement that the people make when they see what Jesus did- "God has come to help his people." The verb in that sentence is the word episkopete (pronounced Ee-pis-ko-pet-ay). It is translated as "has come to help" and it comes from the root word in Greek, episkopos.

Episkopos is from two words- epi which means hyper and skopos which means to look or see. But the word also includes the aspect of not just being watched but also that the watcher wants to help who he/she is watching. In the first century it wasn't a religious term even though today it is used almost exclusively in the religious realm. The word is translated into English as overseer or bishop and it was used in ancient Greece to describe someone who is sent to a group or person to oversee a process that the group was going through to help them achieve their goal.

In ancient Greece there was a city-state called Athens that was the first government to institute democracy. When other city-states in Greece saw how successful that was they sent emissaries to Athens asking for help or guidance in creating a democratic form of government in their towns. So Athens would send an episkopos to "oversee" the process. They were advisors and didn't force the cities to adopt democracy but helped them achieve their goal. If they saw something that the city was doing wrong they'd point it out but their main goal was to help.

When the people of Nain saw what Jesus did they cried out that God had sent an episkopos- someone to help them. He did that in Nain by raising the dead son of a widow and giving her back her life. How does Jesus function as an episkopos to me and you? Peter puts it this way:

For "you were like sheep going astray," but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer (episkopos) of your souls. 1 Peter 2:25 (NIV)

When you decide that you want Jesus help to discover what you're doing on this earth. When you ask the question, isn't there supposed to be more to this life than this? Jesus responds with an enthusiastic, YES! Peter says Jesus won't force this upon you- He waits for us to return to Him but when we do He becomes the overseer of the process of

reclaiming our true selves. Yes He points it out when we're going the wrong way but His role is to help us achieve our goal- to become what we were created to become.

Maybe today we can all spend some time reflecting on how we will return to Jesus. What does that look like? Where will you find Him. It's not the whole answer to this question but don't forget that Jesus told us that if we're looking for Him we'll find Him with the marginalized, the powerless and weak. If you feel like you can't find Him maybe you're looking for Jesus in all the wrong places.