

## Compassion for a Grieving Mother

Joshua 14:1–5, Luke 7:11–17

Our Old Testament text records that Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun, as divinely-appointed officers of the people, divided up the Promised Land into allotments for the nine tribes of the children of Israel, as well as the half tribe of Manasseh, tribes that chose to take their inheritance in the land of Canaan. These nine-and-a-half-tribes were the tribes would inherit the land of Canaan proper. The two tribes of Gad and Reuben, and the other half tribe of Manasseh, had earlier received their inheritance in the land of Bashan to the east of the Jordan. They chose this land because of its suitability for cattle, of which they had an abundance.

Now if you're good at math you might have noticed that nine-and-a-half plus two-and-a-half total twelve, and with the tribe of Levi it would total thirteen—but were there not just twelve tribes—sons of the patriarch Jacob? The numerical discrepancy is accounted for by remembering that the tribe of Joseph became *two* tribes—Ephraim and Manasseh.

But the part of our text that I want you to notice this morning is the end of verse 4: it notes that Eleazar and Joshua “gave no part to the Levites in the land, except cities to dwell in, with their common-lands for their livestock and their property.” The Levites (that is, the descendants of Levi, the third son of Jacob and Leah) were divinely appointed to care for the public worship of God, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the tabernacle, and religious instruction. The Levites received no land as an inheritance. They did not labor at farming or business. Their goal was not to build a business or to acquire wealth. They did not work for their living, as such. Rather, their livelihood was to be supplied out of the voluntary tithes and offerings of the other tribes. The Levites lived in cities spread out among the inheritance of the other tribes. Some of their cities were designated as cities of refuge. If an Israelite accidentally killed a man, he could flee to the nearest city of refuge, where the elders could hear his case and take him in, and he would be safe from the avenger of blood. So why were the Levites given “suburbs for their cattle and for their substance,” to use the words of the King James Version? If the Levites were to devote their lives to assisting the priests with the various animal sacrifices, caring for the public worship of God, and religious instruction, then why were they interested at all in cattle?

The answer lies in this: what were cattle used for? For supplying milk. That should be fairly obvious. The Promised Land was “the land flowing with *milk* and honey”—a phrase occurring in Ex. 3:8 and *nineteen* other times in the Old Testament! Milk is used for human food. It's in a lot of products that we eat. The other night Annie served us delicious homemade oatmeal cookies that had just

come out of the oven. As I took a bite I said, “I taste coconut.” She explained that she used coconut oil instead of milk, as baby Esther is allergic to milk.

Last week I went to the grocery store to buy milk. There was a big sign on the dairy case saying, “Our milk is guaranteed to stay fresh for ten days past the expiration date.”

But in ancient times, the idea of keeping milk fresh for ten days was unheard of. There was no refrigeration, so if a family wanted to have milk, they needed to have a cow at hand. The Levites kept a few cows in the areas around the cities that were allotted to them, so they could have fresh milk.

But fresh milk comes at a cost. In ancient Israel some family member would have to care for the family’s cow and other cattle. Growing feed for the cow, keeping the cow appropriately tied up, so she doesn’t wander off, keeping the cow safe from robbers, milking the cow, daily carrying the fresh milk into the city to be served to their families, perhaps keeping a bull for breeding the cow. All this requires labor—lots and lots of labor.

Keep this fact in mind as we fast-forward to our New Testament text. Jesus has come. He went into a city called Nain. He did not travel alone. Many of his disciples went with him, and a large crowd that came along to hear his teaching and observe his miracles. The day before, Jesus had healed the valued servant of a centurion—a Roman, a Gentile. Jesus did this remotely. His power was such that he did not need to go and personally touch the man. He who at the beginning spoke the creation into existence with his powerful voice simply spoke the word, and the centurion’s servant was healed at a distance. The messengers who had been sent to request Jesus’ help returned and found him fully healed.

But on the present occasion, as Jesus came near the city gate, he and his entourage got there just in time to encounter a funeral procession. Observant Jews would never bury their dead within the city; rather, they would carry their dead *out of* the city and bury them in burial plots. When Jesus neared the city gate, there came a funeral procession. “*Behold*, a dead man was being carried out”—that is, carried out to the cemetery to be buried. There was an open coffin. There was no question that the young man was dead.

Our text observes that this young man was the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. There was a large crowd of mourners from the city in funeral procession. They had come with the widow to comfort her. This was not the woman’s first funeral. She was a *widow*; that means she had previously buried her husband. Not only was she bereft of her lover and companion; she had also lost her breadwinner—her only source of income. She had no one to care for her except her only son. He was a young man, coming of age, so she surely relied on him to do chores around the house and to labor at some sort of job to provide for the family’s needs.

But now he was dead. This was the boy she had given birth to. This young man represented her future—her son taking a wife and setting up a household. A household where she would be welcomed, perhaps to help when the family welcomed her grandchild.

Note that a large crowd surrounded Jesus. Not only his disciples, the “many disciples” who came with him; but also the large crowd of men and women who left their homes and followed, listening to Jesus’ teachings and hoping to witness a miracle—as well as “the large crowd from the city” that made up the funeral procession. The presence of this extra-large crowd is significant. Clearly, when Jesus performed a miracle, there were a lot of eyewitnesses—men and women who could attest to what they had seen. It would be the talk of the town for many days—“Remember when Jesus came to town and raised the widow’s son?” They knew his name; they were friends with his family. To them, he was not a nameless figure on the pages of Scripture but a fellow townsman now raising a family of his own.

The apostle John would later write in his first epistle: “the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—*that which we have seen and heard we declare to you.*”<sup>1</sup> John and the other apostles, along with Jesus’ many disciples, as well as many other bystanders, personally saw Jesus’ miracles—such as this one—and talked of them in their daily conversation.

The crowd that gathered that day at the city gate of Nain observed a dramatic miracle. But notice the human element of our text. We read that when the Lord saw the grief-stricken mother, “He had *compassion* on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’”

Now that is a strange thing to say at a funeral procession. Tears are very important at a time of grief. Tears are an emotional outlet for a broken heart. Here was a woman who was in mourning. Her tears were understandable. If she had been stoic and suppressed her tears, we would have thought that strange.

But not only are tears important to human emotions; amazingly, they are important to God as well. The Psalmist penned the words, “You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?” (Ps. 56:8). Think of it! The God of heaven—the one who flung the stars and constellations and heavenly bodies into space, the one who upholds all things by the word of his power—numbers our tears! That means he takes note of our tears. Our tears matter to him! They are not insignificant.

The Bible tells us that *all* events—even the bitter trials of life—work together for God’s glory and our ultimate good. No exceptions! The Lord of heaven works out all things after the counsel of his own will. Whatever he determines from all

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:2–3

eternity, by the counsel of his own holy will, he brings to pass in time. He makes no mistakes. At all times he loves his own with his everlasting love. That is our only true comfort in life and in death.

So as Jesus approached this funeral for an unnamed young man from the little village of Nain in the region of Galilee up near Capernaum, he took note of this grieving woman, bereft of her husband, and now bereft of her only son, facing a future alone. Jesus noticed! And he did not just go on with his day and forget about what he had seen. “When the Lord saw her, He had *compassion* on her.” Jesus is the compassionate Savior!

Five times the Bible uses the term “full of compassion.” Four of the times it is a characteristic of God himself. Once, the term refers to a godly man. God wants *us* his people to be compassionate. He also wants us to remember—to fix in our minds—that he himself is full of compassion. He takes note of our tears. He actually counts them and stores them in a bottle.

And Jesus *does* something—something that only he can do. Now there are other accounts of raising the dead in Holy Scripture. For example, the apostle Peter raised Dorcas from the dead. In the Old Testament, Elijah and Elisha raised the dead. But these saints did not do it by their own power. They did it by the power of God. But here is Jesus, the Lord and giver of life, the One who spoke and said, “Let us make man in our image.” It is *this* Jesus who raises a young man being carried out of the city to be buried in a cemetery to await the resurrection at the last day.

Jesus came up and touched the open coffin. The pallbearers carrying the body stood still. Jesus spoke and said, “Young man, I say to you, arise”—words that he would later utter at the tomb of Lazarus. And his words had effect. Something happened: “He who was dead sat up and began to speak.” Can you imagine the shock that went through the crowd! Jesus is the Lord and giver of life. The one who comes to him has life. Too many human rulers are dealers of death. Those who get in their way get killed. Not Jesus! Jesus came to give life. Jesus presented the boy to his mother. What a reunion that was!

The account ends with the note: “Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen up among us’; and, ‘God has visited His people.’”

The crowds did not miss the significance of what they witnessed. Only God can create life. Only God can raise the dead. This miracle verified and validated Jesus’ message. He had been sent by God to deliver his message to man—the Gospel. We are sinners who have no hope of eternal life apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. If we come to him, we will have life—abundant life now in fellowship with the Lover of our souls, and eternal life in heaven with the risen Christ forever.

Here was a woman who was suddenly penniless, facing a future of poverty and want, without a source of income—without her only son to help her out with daily chores, to provide his mother with a steady income. It is God’s intention that parents provide for their children when they are young, and children provide for their parents when they are old and dependent. A couple’s children are their source of income for their old age. There is no government-mandated redistribution of wealth in the Bible—redistribution of wealth at the point of a gun. Forced redistribution of wealth is a form of *stealing*—taking away people’s money by force of law in order to give it to strangers to whom it doesn’t belong. Enforced charity is not charity but theft. “Thou shalt not steal” applies to governments as well as to private individuals. The Bible says, “A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children’s children” (Prov. 13:22), but when the government seizes a man’s inheritance in order to give it to certain favored government clients, it is *not* good. The Bible nowhere authorizes stealing by government. It is wicked for government to steal. There’s no Social Security in the Bible. People are free to keep the fruit of their own labor and spend it on their own families. They learn the benefit of charity: helping out widows and orphans who are their neighbors. They learn from experience that those who help their poor neighbors—giving them a job when they are able, giving them charity when they are unable—are blessed of God. “He that hath a bountiful eye shall be blessed; for he giveth of his bread to the poor” (Prov. 22:9). Those who are charitable are blessed, but those who are stingy and self-centered never experience that blessing.

Couples have children so that they can help out around the house and work in the family business and learn a trade and become self-sufficient citizens. Then, when those children become established in business, they can establish homes of their own and become productive members of society. When they reach old age and can no longer work, their children take care of them. They have paid it forward, so to speak, and now they reap the benefit of belonging. Faithful Christians to whom God withholds the gift of children are part of the church, the family of God.

In our day there are couples who choose *not* to have children. They don’t want children because they want to spend all their money on themselves. They want to live the good life, to party and to have fun. They are hoping that Social Security will still be around to support them in their old age. They are net *takers*, not *givers*. “If riches increase, set not your heart upon them” (Ps. 62:10).

When Jesus gave life to the dead young man, he returned him to his grateful mother. But when Jesus himself, at the prime of his life, was hanged on a cruel wooden cross by the religious authorities that rejected him, he himself was leaving his mother. As he was lifted up to die—naked—as a public spectacle, what did he say? As he hung on the cross he said to his mother, “Woman, behold thy son!”

Then he said to the disciple whom he loved, “Behold thy mother!”<sup>2</sup> It was the will of God that the Lord Jesus would die in the prime of life, taking the sins of all his elect upon himself. He died, that we might live. “Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.”<sup>3</sup> But as he died, his concern was for his mother. He wanted to make sure that she was cared for, so he entrusted her to the care of his grateful disciple. The apostle John would care for the Virgin Mary for the rest of her days, and when the time came for her to die, he would gratefully lay her in her tomb, thankful that she had given birth to the Savior of the world.

In Bible times, providing food and drink for one’s family was hard work. No QD back then! One couldn’t simply go down the street to a store and come back with a gallon of milk. To have milk meant keeping a cow. Life was harder then. People did not travel or go on cruises or take weekend trips. Families worked together on the farm, preparing food by hand—the boys helping their dads out in the fields, the girls helping their mother keep house. There was not as much wealth. No small screens. Most people would typically not travel very far from where they were born.

We have so many advantages now, yet there is isolation and loneliness. We have lost our sense of community—our sense of belonging. People can be more independent. They see no need for the church. They lack a sense of community. It’s every man for himself. Yet young men struggle with porn addiction. Rather than getting involved constructively and purposefully with a woman—committing themselves, setting up a home, starting a family, being involved in the lives of their children, preparing them for adulthood, praying that God brings their children a mate with whom to share a life—there is loneliness.

Christ came to give us a sense of belonging. He takes the barren woman and makes her a joyful mother of children. He brings us into fellowship with himself and with the saints. He makes us to have an inheritance with the saints in light. He gives us every spiritual a blessing in the heavenly places. The essence of happiness is to have a loving, constructive, fulfilling life in fellowship with God the Father, through Christ the Son, in the power of the regenerating, sanctifying Spirit. And a constructive, fulfilling life in fellowship with the saints—those who have been brought to faith in Christ by the Spirit of God. Fellowship with God and fellowship with one another. This is the life to which God has called us!

How does this relate to suburbs for cattle? We are physical beings. We need space for a home. We need cities to dwell in, where we can experience prosperity by virtue of the division of labor—people doing what they are good at, serving others, and being compensated for their labors. In Bible times, people needed

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<sup>2</sup> John 19:25–27

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet. 3:18

suburbs for their cattle and possessions. Nowadays, we do not all need to be dairy farmers. There is specialization.

God cares for his creatures. He knows that we have need of milk. He promises to supply our needs.

When Jesus came, he was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Some of the first sounds he heard were sounds of cattle: "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes."

Jesus came. He was born in a stable. He could have chosen to be born in a palace. But he chose to be born in lowly circumstances. He humbled himself so that we could be glorified.

Jesus raised the dead. But he himself *rose* from the dead! He ever lives to make intercession for us.

Thank God for Christ, and thank God for dairy cows. Thank God that he provides for us both in life and in death. Amen.