

# Jesus vs Death and Despair

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[0:00] 1,035 in the Pew Bibles. Luke chapter 7, verses 11 to 17. And it's entitled here, Jesus Raises a Widow's Son.

Soon afterwards, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.

As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother. And she was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her.

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, Don't cry. Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearer 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.

[1:16] They were all filled with awe, and praise God. A great prophet has appeared to us, they said. God has come to help his people.

This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. May God add his blessing to his holy word.

Amen. Thank you. Well, if you could keep your Bibles open for me, that would be very helpful to me. So we're going to be unpacking this story a little bit. And on the surface, it is a joyful story about a wonderful miracle. But inevitably, we will have to touch on really the theme of this passage, which I believe is, you know, Jesus' place in death and despair.

And the three points that are going to come up, which is going to be our basic three-point structure for this evening. But I just want to say at this point, before we kind of begin, that if it does kind of dredge up anything for you that you feel you want to speak about afterwards, there are people here who would be more than happy and delighted, in fact, to do that this evening after the service.

[2:32] So certainly myself or James, Naomi, probably Michael or Emily, there's lots of us that would be very happy to do that. So don't feel alone if anything that I say kind of strikes a chord.

So we are going to look at three points. Firstly, where is Jesus in death and despair? Secondly, how does Jesus respond to death and despair, according to the Bible story that we've just read?

And how should we respond in that light to death and despair? So there's no shying away from it.

We are talking tonight about death and despair. So let's get to it.

I wonder if you can call to mind the last time that you felt utterly helpless or in despair. Certainly just before my daughter was born, there were multiple complications with my wife, Lisa.

I was also in a very bad place in terms of my mental health and being self-employed, had no paternity leave and no break on the horizon. Lisa had gone into hospital for a routine blood pressure check over three weeks before the due date, sorry.

[3:47] And without going into details, she would not come out again until the baby was born and another two weeks had passed. None of the medical staff were being clear about what was wrong, though it very quickly became evident that the baby would need to come out soon, one way or the other.

I remember the feeling well. A wall of pain that shut down every other emotion, not daring to hope because I knew that if the worst happened, it would completely crush me.

And by God's grace, we have a beautiful, healthy little girl, and the only sickness that remains is the memory of that black to spare. Not so for the widow from the town of Nain, a village not far from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.

When we unpack the historical context, we appreciate that Luke's brief description paints a picture of a woman who is utterly helpless. Just have a look with me there at the beginning of the story.

As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out. And this brief description says it all. The only son of his mother, and she was a widow.

[ 5 : 00 ] See, there's no welfare state in Judea 30 AD, and women could not earn an income. A family relied on their children to provide for them in their old age. On top of the pain and grief of losing a child, this woman would have been destitute and at the mercy of any extended family or the community.

This is why there's such an emphasis on caring for widows and orphans in the Bible. No one else would. Jesus later calls the corpse a young man. He may have just been a teenager.

And so we probably think of widows as being old. This woman might actually have been in her late 30s or early 40s. Who knows? But unless she could remarry, which was unlikely unless an extended family member was available to marry her and did so out of compassion, unless she could remarry, she'd be dependent on charity for the rest of her life.

One can imagine the thread of the widow's thoughts as she followed that grim funeral procession. Imagine her saying, When my husband died, I refused to despair.

God had granted me a son, a hope. He grew strong and healthy, and I could see my way ahead once more. My child would grow and provide for us as I once provided for him.

[ 6 : 14 ] One day he would marry, and I would be blessed with a daughter-in-law to love and to serve. Perhaps the Lord would even grant me the joy of many grandchildren, and we would be a family filled with peace and compassion, renowned for our care of the widow and the fatherless.

But no. My hope is lying there, dead on that beer. A few verses earlier in Luke, we read of another miracle of Jesus.

A centurion sends word to Jesus. He has power. He has good works. And yet he comes with great humility on behalf of another, his servant.

The elders of the Jews pleaded with Jesus and said, This man deserves to have you do this. Which is incredible, given that he was a Gentile. He wasn't one of them.

He must have been, by human standards, very deserving. What does the widow of Nain have? As far as we can work out, she has nothing.

[ 7 : 20 ] We hear of no great acts of charity to her name. No one's running to Jesus to commend her. And in fact, she does not even approach Jesus herself.

That's the remarkable thing. He approaches her. So where is Jesus in death and despair? He's right there.

And how does Jesus respond to death and despair? That's what we really need to know. And that's our second point. Look at me with verse 13, if you would. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her.

And he said, Don't cry. Then he went up and touched the beard 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. With astounding compassion and power, Jesus intervenes in the woman's situation in a way she could never have believed possible.

[ 8 : 29 ] Death is transformed into life. Despair into hope. This is just one of the many situations where the scriptures give assurance that Jesus feels our pain.

Death is a brutal enemy. Jesus sees this cruel scene and his heart goes out to the woman. We can be certain that whatever sense of injustice, hurt, and indignation we feel about death and decay, Jesus feels it more.

The difference is Jesus has the power to do something about it. And he has. Jesus Christ defeated death by his crucifixion and resurrection.

We serve not a mere shadow from history who now lies buried in the ground, but a living Savior who, as the Creed says, is seated at the right hand of God the Father and will come to judge the living and the dead.

So if Jesus cares so much and death is defeated, why is it still all around us? A few years ago, there was a most tragic event where an acquaintance of mine found his six-year-old son had a life-threatening blood disease which is called meningococcal septicemia.

[ 9 : 45 ] And many of you may remember the media attention as the sincere Christian family inspired the nation by asking everyone to pray for their son and the eloquent Facebook updates from the father as they wrestled with the reality that little Caden Began might not win this battle.

Well, I was at the gravesite in Motherwell as the tiny casket was lowered into the ground. There was no dramatic resurrection. Jesus did not appear and give Caden back to his mother.

Why? Well, the story of the widow of Nain does not promise that Jesus will not allow his followers to experience death. After all, the widow's son must have died again eventually.

Otherwise, we'd be able to ask him about it ourselves 2,000 years later. No. But it does promise that Jesus hates death even more than we do, that he can deal with it and that he will deal with it. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death. So while sin is in the world, so will death be. When Jesus comes again, he will finally judge sin and death and death will be no more.

[11:01] At Caden's gravesite, the minister reminded us of this promise in Isaiah 11, 6. The wolf will live with the lamb.

The shepherd, sorry, let me start again. The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard will lie down with the goat. The calf and the lion and the yearling together.

And a little child will lead them. Suffering, pain, and death. They will all be gone one day, but not yet.

Actually, a common theme with any biblical story involving resurrection is waiting. Take Jesus' friend Lazarus. Jesus waited until he had been dead four days before he raised him, and though it must have cut him to the core to do so.

With Jairus' daughter, he stopped to heal a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. So the 12-year-old girl who had just died before he arrived. With his own resurrection, he was in the grave three days, just as he had said.

[12:12] At every opportunity, Jesus taught his followers to trust his promises above what they see. In the film *Gladiator*, the wicked emperor is trying to provoke Maximus to attack him by giving him the harrowing details of how he tortured and killed his family.

Maximus simply looks him in the eye and says, the time for exalting yourself will soon be at an end. Majesty. You know what?

This is the perfect answer to evil. It's the perfect answer. I've never found a better one. It's the perfect answer to death. Jesus is coming again.

He really is. At the end of the age, all the messy chaos in your life will finally make sense. Your heavenly father will sweep you up in his arms and tenderly wipe the tears from your eyes and say, never again.

You're home now. Forever. How does Jesus respond to death and despair? He says, your days are numbered.

[13:21] In that light, how should we respond to death and despair? That's our final point. Well, let's be honest. The trouble with pain is it hurts.

I can stand here and assure you that Jesus cares, that he's going to deal with it eventually and encourage you to trust his promises, but it won't take away that pain. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says, brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

There are healthy ways to process grief and pain, and in general, we don't do them at all well in British culture. Jesus' example makes it clear it is right and good to feel sadness, to mourn, and sometimes to do so publicly.

I have a friend who is an organist at a crematorium and witnesses over 900 funerals a year. The majority of the funerals tend to go in one of two directions. He tells me, either people reenact their favorite soap opera with all the drama of public grief, or, more commonly, they want the funeral to be a celebration of the deceased's life.

No tears, no sadness, just jokes and a party. My friend often sees the same folk again a year or two later, and they are, in simple terms, not coping.

[14:54] You see, at the heart of both approaches, is a denial of the reality of death. Paul warns the Thessalonians that the way they grieve is a powerful witness.

Folk really do notice the difference when they go to a Christian funeral and they experience deep sadness, but without the despair. Perhaps those words are daggers in your heart.

Perhaps you've tried for too long to fight the despair, though you believe the promises of Jesus. The battle of pain is getting the better of you. Perhaps you're in the numb blackness of depression, and you find yourself crying out, Lord, I believe you care, but I can't feel you.

If you're not there now, the chances are you have been or will be at some point in your life. And this is where the true story of the widow of Nain is such an encouragement.

Even in our total helplessness, Jesus is there. When you wake up, Jesus is there. When you go to sleep, Jesus is there.

[ 16 : 08 ] When you're willfully sinning, Jesus is there. When you're at your very worst, Jesus is there. When you turn your back on God, Jesus is there.

And when you're lying on your deathbed, Jesus is there. I've just got back from an incredible week serving children on a scripture union camp.

As anyone who's done similar events will know, there's usually a crushing feeling after the emotional high of an amazing week of Christ-centered mission that I call the Camp Blues.

Particularly when I used to live alone, I really felt as if I'd come from a place where Jesus was and had come home to a place where he was not.

Of course, that was not true. I wrote a poem to process these raw feelings. I'd like to read it to you in the hope that you find it helpful. You see, there's something that feels so right and good about serving in a joyful Christian community because it's what we're intended for and it's where we're headed.

And when we have to leave that, it feels wrong. Much in the same way that death just feels wrong. And though these sentiments are about a particular experience, they express feelings that most of us feel in some context.

[ 17 : 27 ] Silence reigns though peace is gone. Alone again, but life goes on. Sleep is here, but rest won't come. Task complete, yet work begun.

We built a family, safe and strong. And can it be that it is gone? Love and laughter made us one. And is it true that it is done? The children needed us and we gave all we had and tried to be the safest home they've ever known.

Now suddenly, we're all alone. And so, into a world of scorn, we lift our crosses and are torn between the road we now must find and all the joy we left behind.

But do we really think that he who strengthened us so faithfully will now forget us in our need or leave the lambs he bade us feed?

[ 18 : 27 ] Jesus has not left your side. He feels the loss that fills your mind. And when you pray, you'll know it's true. The Son of God is praying too.

And pray we must, our hearts ablaze with shepherd's love to seek and save the priceless treasures who by God's grace have glimpsed through us the Father's face.

So with the shield of faith we stand, the sword of truth firm in our hand, the Spirit's peace, our hourly food.

Oh, taste and see that God is good. Look with me, if you would, at verse 16 of the passage there.

Look at this response. 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.

[ 19 : 33 ] God is good, truly. Even in death and despair, he's still good and worthy of all our awe and praise. No matter how we feel in the moment, our only logical response to the God we serve is to worship him and give him all the glory for what he has done and what he will do.

Don't pretend that pain doesn't hurt, but don't grieve as those who have no hope. Our Savior has conquered death and he's coming back very soon.

How should we respond to death and despair? Remember, Jesus is here. Amen.