

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #13 Raising the Dead; Believe It or Not!

Scripture Luke 7:11-17; 8:40-41, 49-56

In the previous messages we have thought about, there were many references to the miracles performed by Jesus. When people heard about the ability of Jesus to rebuke fevers, make broken bodies whole, heal diseases, restore sight to blind, and cast out demons, many came to Jesus from all over the north central parts of Israel for help. In addition, Jesus displayed His power over nature by calming a storm and helping some of His disciples to catch a huge amount of fish.

These miracles authenticated that Jesus was the Messiah. He was the fulfillment of the words of the Old Testament prophets. The words of Isaiah certainly applied to Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me," ... and "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed" (*Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:18*). The miracles were evidence that Jesus was who He said He was. This was recognized by everyone except the religious leaders. They refused to believe that He was God in flesh.

Actually there were a few exceptions even among the religious leaders. For example, the Gospel of John informs us that one of the Pharisees, a member of the Jewish ruling council, came to Jesus one night with some questions. He began his conversation with these words, "We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." This was an acknowledgement of both the miracles and that the presence of God was with Jesus. All the people of Israel, if they had been honest with themselves, would have recognized that Jesus had the authority and power of the Messiah.

Jesus performed other kinds of miracles which we have not yet talked about. For example, the Gospels mention three occasions in which Jesus restored life to individuals who had died. Two of those episodes are described in the early chapters of Luke. They are our subjects for today.

Read Luke 7:11-17

Nain was a small town about six miles from Jesus' home town of Nazareth. Luke explains that Jesus was traveling to Nain with His disciples and a large crowd of people. Often, as Jesus traveled from place to place, He was accompanied by large numbers of people who surrounded Him with pushing and shoving in their efforts to be close to Him. No one wanted to miss the next spectacular miracle that Jesus might perform. When there was too much crowding at the seashore, Jesus sat in a boat anchored a few meters out in the water just so He had some space around Him. However, on the roadway on this day there was no escaping the jostling of people who were curious, hopeful, maybe rejoicing, undoubtedly noisy.

As Jesus and His entourage approached the entrance of Nain, they encountered a large crowd of people who were exiting through the town gate. It was a funeral procession heading out to a burial site. The members of this group were grieving the death of a young man. Typically there would be loud wailing. According to custom, family members would be wearing torn clothes. In this case, the only family member might have been the mother of the dead boy.

Probably the boy had died earlier that day since Jewish customs required a quick burial for health and sanitary reasons. The corpse would be wrapped in a burial cloth and carried on a wide flat wooden plank. The verse in the passage we read uses the word "coffin," but it was not anything like we would be familiar with.

And so there was an meeting of these two processions. In one group the people were filled with anticipation. The other group was filled with despondency. When Jesus saw the mother of the deceased boy, the text explains that His heart went out to her. As a widow, she had endured the loss of her husband. Now she was deprived of her only son. Widows in Jewish society faced significant difficulties. Women were not permitted to earn wages. Without family support, widows became destitute. Without a son, there would be no one to care for her in future days.

Jesus went up to and touched the funeral bier. By doing so, He became ritually unclean according to the Jewish law, but that was not a deterrent for Him. Then Jesus did something that, to listeners, seemed useless and foolish — He spoke to the dead person, whereupon the young man sat up and began to talk.

Luke recorded the response of the people: “they were all filled with awe and praised God.” The word “all” undoubtedly referred to the people in both groups. Those already familiar with the miracles of Jesus got to witness another supernatural event, this one more spectacular than any previous ones. The crowd from the town, which had been lamenting with tears of grief, suddenly became deliriously joyful. All the people had witnessed the most awe-inspiring event imaginable. Restoration of life to a dead person was on a higher order of supernatural than any of the previous healings.

The mother’s tears of grief and sorrow would have changed to tears of joy. She had been powerless in the face of death, but Jesus had restored her hope. The help and support that her son had previously provided to her was reinstated. Jesus had brought about changes in attitude as well as a change in physical circumstances.

Verse 16 informs us that the people declared Jesus to be “a great prophet.” There is probably a good explanation for that statement. Roughly 860 years previously, in the days of Elisha the Prophet, there had been another restoration of life near the town of Nain. II Kings 4 has the account of Elisha praying over the dead son of a woman of Shunem, a community very near to Nain. The memory and tradition of that restoration still lingered in the time of Jesus, as it does even unto today. In the minds of the people, Jesus was “a great prophet” like Elisha, and they rejoiced because such a prophet was once again, after many generations, among the people.

The people also said, “God has come to help his people.” This statement is probably not an acknowledgement that Jesus was God in flesh, but that God had sent a prophet to help the people. As a result of Jesus’ display of authority over death, His reputation was enhanced. Information about the restoration of life spread throughout the region.

The second episode of restoration of life is described in chapter 8.

Read 8:40-42, 49-56

The words, "Now when Jesus returned," refer to the arrival of Jesus back on the western side of Galilee following His encounter with the demon-possessed man. We talked about that last week. Among the crowd which welcomed Him was Jairus, the father of a twelve year old girl who was dying. He fell at Jesus' feet and pleaded with Jesus to come to his house.

As the leader of a synagogue, Jairus was in a awkward situation. He was a prominent member of the community. It was his responsibility to organize the regular activities of the synagogue, choose the individuals who would read the Scriptures, lead in prayers, and preach the sermons. He was a lay leader who served under the authority and influence of the priests and teachers of the law, the same religious leaders who were critical of Jesus and refused to acknowledge His deity or accept His teachings. Yet Jairus was not like his overseers. He had some degree of faith in Jesus, and, in his desperation over the precarious condition of his daughter, he went to Jesus and asked for help.

Jesus agreed to go with the man but there was a delay. Another person was in need of healing and the attention of Jesus was diverted for some minutes. For Jairus, those minutes must have been filled with anxiety as he waited for the journey to his house to resume, and then his hope was crushed when someone came from his house to announce that the daughter had died and that there was no longer a need for Jesus to come.

On hearing this information, Jesus immediately gave assurance that the girl would be healed. Jesus did not want Jairus to lose hope. Jairus had demonstrated confidence in Jesus by falling at His feet and making his request on behalf of his daughter, but his faith in Jesus' power to restore life was not the same as his faith in Jesus' power to heal. Jesus' words, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed," required him to believe at a higher level, that Jesus had authority even over death.

It is interesting how Jairus and other people recognized Jesus' ability to heal all manner of diseases in living people, but no one understood that He also had the authority and power to reverse the effects of death. It seemed as if that possibility never entered anyone's thinking. The assumption was, "Your daughter is dead, ... don't bother the teacher any more, there's nothing more that anyone can do."

On arriving at Jairus' house, Jesus was ridiculed when He told the wailers and mourners to stop their lamenting because the girl was only sleeping. His statement implied that her death was not permanent and that she could be awakened from her condition, but no one understood His meaning. They stopped their lamenting only long enough to express their skepticism through laughter at Jesus.

Verse 51 informs us that Jesus did not let anyone enter the house with Him except three of the apostles and the child's father and mother. And after the spirit of the girl returned to her and she stood up alive and well, Jesus ordered the parents to not tell anyone what had happened. Jesus did not want any details of this miraculous episode to become public knowledge. The situation of the restoration in Jairus' house was different from that of the raising of the son of the widow in Nain, when the news about Jesus spread everywhere. The question is why Jesus insisted on different ways of handling the two miracles. I think the reason has to do with differences in the attitudes of the spectators.

In Nain, there were no skeptics. The motives of the people following Jesus were not necessarily pure, but they were with Jesus for the specific purpose of seeing Him perform miracles. Likewise, there were no skeptics in the crowd going out to the burial site. They had no inkling in advance of what Jesus was going to do. The raising up of the boy was a total surprise to them.

The situation at Jairus' house was different. The individuals at Jairus' house had no appreciation for who Jesus was or for His supernatural abilities. They knew that the girl was dead and they had no expectation that her condition could change. They laughed at and ridiculed Jesus.

Now think back to what Jesus had said on a previous occasion. "Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him" (*Luke 8:18*). That statement was at the conclusion of the parable of the soils. The statement meant that people who have faith will see the results of faith, and this will be encouragement to exercise more faith, the basis for gaining more faith.

On the other hand, people who have no faith to begin with, and who reject even the possibility of God's supernatural activity will never have the opportunity to experience God's authority and power. The sad reality is that people who fail to respond to the little glimmers of truth they are given will be unable and unqualified to receive more truth. Those who close themselves off from God will never have a personal relationship with God.

When Jesus said that the girl was sleeping, His words were like a parable. There was one meaning for those who were trusting Him to change the situation and another meaning for those who scoffed. For those who believed, there was the hope that death could be overcome, but for those who scoffed, the possibility of supernatural change was not even a consideration. To the scoffers, Jesus didn't seem to know what He was talking about. In their opinion, He didn't know as much about the situation as they did. They were firm in their unbelief.

How do things work in the spiritual realm? To those who have a degree of faith, more will be given; to those who do not place any faith in Jesus, even what little they think they have and know is taken away. Jesus did not want those who were scoffers to witness the miracle or to even be given an explanation of what had happened. Sooner or later, the girl would appear in public, but those who were close to the situation, who had laughed at Jesus, went away frustrated and irritated because the parents never talked about what had happened. Those who are closed to belief not only fail to receive God's blessings, they are not even able to recognize blessings which happen around them.

When we face fearful situations, believing in Jesus is not always easy. We will have difficulties and setbacks in life which will challenge our faith. Confidence in the person of Jesus will help us to overcome negative circumstances, and enable us to experience the unanticipated blessings of God.

Some Thoughts for Reflection

- 1) Has God worked any miracles in your life?
- 2) Are you filled with awe and do you praise God for what He did?
- 3) Are you growing in your faith? OR have you hindered God's work in your life because of skepticism?