

The Compassion of Christ

(Third Sermon in a Series on the Character of Christ)

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*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion
on her, and said unto her, Weep not.*

—LUKE 7:13

Dear congregation, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin said that Christ is love covered with flesh. How true that is! Jesus Christ is God, God is love, and so Christ is love covered in flesh. This love of Christ expresses itself in many different ways. We saw that when we looked at the care Jesus has for His disciples—how He often brings them into difficult circumstances to show them who He is and just how much He cares for them. Here we are looking at a similar yet distinct character of Jesus, and that is His compassion. Benjamin Warfield says of this emotion of Jesus that compassion is the emotion which is most frequently attributed to Him. How would you describe the man, Christ Jesus? What would you say about Him? What do you see most often? What is it that others, who know Him well, would say of Him? There is this phrase that keeps appearing in one form or another: He was moved with compassion.

What is compassion? Compassion is an intense feeling of pity or sorrow for the miserable, with a strong desire to help them. That is what we see most frequently in Christ. That phrase that is translated, “He was moved with compassion,” is a very good way to translate that phrase because compassion has the idea of something that is in your very inner being—we might say something that begins in your gut. It is a very internal thing; it is at the very core of your being. We still use these expressions today. We

might say, if we are disappointed about something, “I am gutted; I am sick to my stomach; I am heartbroken.” Another Puritan, Richard Sibbes, writes, “When Christ saw the people in misery, His bowels yearned within Him. The works of grace and mercy in Christ come from His bowels first.” Whatever Christ did, He did it out of love and grace and mercy. He did it inwardly from His very bowels.

This is the most frequent emotion we find in Christ in the gospels, time and again. We see Him with this intense feeling of pity and sorrow for the miserable with the desire to help. There are many examples of this—there are many different kinds of misery that He found—but this is consistent each time: He is moved with compassion. Do you see the multitude that are faint and hungry? Matthew 15 tells us that Jesus said, “I have compassion on the multitude” (v. 32). Do you see crowds in spiritual danger because of their spiritual ignorance of God? Jesus was moved with compassion for them because they were as sheep not having a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things. Do you see a crowd of sick people? Jesus was moved with compassion toward them, and He healed their sick. Do you see a leper coming to Jesus asking if He was willing to make him whole? Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him and said, “I will; be thou clean” (Matt. 8:3). This, friends, is the character of Jesus. He is moved with compassion. When He saw misery, He was moved with compassion. He did not turn away; He did not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear. When the miserable came to Him, He went to them. He did not send them away. How true it is of Him: in Him compassion flows (see Psalm 145:8). As many waves of misery would reach Him, there were waves of compassion that were meeting them—no matter the circumstance or the person.

Today, we want to focus on His compassion on the widow of Nain. Luke is the only writer who records this account. We want to see three things:

1. The misery that drew the Savior's compassion
2. The compassion that the misery drew out
3. The effect this miracle had on those around Him

This is the day after Jesus heals the centurion's servant. The centurion had sent someone to tell Jesus that He did not need to come to his house, because the centurion understands the master/servant relationship. The master gives the command, and the command is followed. Jesus is the great Master—He speaks the word wherever He is, and it will be done. Jesus tells him He has not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. Now Jesus and His disciples come to a little town called Nain, about 25 miles away. It is likely the end of the day, and they are looking forward to having a meal and relaxing for the evening. No doubt it has been a long day. There are many people with Jesus—many disciples. There may be some excitement here. But how different the mood is of the crowd that they meet coming out of Nain. It could not be more different, could it? Jesus and His disciples meet the most intense grief, the most miserable of conditions. Look at the middle of verse 12: "Behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow."

Death is always sad, is it not? How many funerals this world has seen! How many tears have been shed—how many mothers' tears for only sons? But there is something particularly sad about this funeral. Only those who know the grief and pain of losing a son or a daughter can begin to tell something of this agony and sorrow. For this woman, this is not the first time she has been on this path. She has been on this path to bury her husband some time before, but now she is here again and there is a multiplication of sorrow as she now brings her only son to the grave. The Jews would bury on the same day the person died, so, in all likelihood, the son has died this day. It is very raw. We do not know how he died, but what we do know is that no one could stop it. The poor mother could not stop it; the physicians, if they tried, could not stop it; and certainly now, no one can reverse it. It is one of the painfully hard things we feel with death. We feel so helpless; it is

so irreversible. It feels so final. Psalm 49 tells us in Psalter 136, “Dust to dust, the mortal dies, both the foolish and the wise; None forever can remain, each must leave his hoarded gain.” This widow is all alone now. The tradition was that the family would go ahead of the bier, which was a stretcher, not a coffin, and the dead man wrapped in it, and she would go ahead. As Jesus and the disciples see her, she is alone. She does not have family with her. There is no one to support or care for her. It is about the saddest picture imaginable. What inconsolable grief, what inconsolable tears.

Dear friends, when we look at this picture, we must do what Jesus did, and that is to look behind this scene. We need to look behind the misery that is here and see a picture of the human condition because of sin. This is what we have to do with all of Christ’s miracles. They are not isolated accounts; they are all painting this picture of who Christ is and why He is here. Christ is God manifest in the flesh; He is here doing what only God in the flesh can do. What is He doing? He is coming, not just to take away the misery of our condition, but He is coming to deal with the cause of that misery—the root of the problem, the source of the problem. That is why He is here and that is what He is doing and that is why we need to see what is behind this misery. What is causing it? Why is there misery? Even today, we ask why are there doctors? Why do we have so many occupations that we call emergency services? Why do we have hospitals? Why is there a virus? Why is there suffering? Why do we have funeral homes and funeral directors? Why do we have death? Why are we so helpless? With all our knowledge and technology, we cannot do anything about it. We can contain it to a degree, we can limit it, we can prolong life a little; but we are so helpless in the face of death. Why? We need to see that, because this is exactly what Christ has come to deal with. He has come to deal with sin. Romans 5:12 tells us, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” In death, you can put all the misery of this life. This is what Christ sees at Nain.

We grieve, and rightly so, when death comes, but the question is, do we mourn and grieve over sin? We mourn and grieve over the loss of physical life, but how concerned are we with the loss of spiritual life, whether in ourselves or in others in our families or friends? That is the real problem. The helplessness of this woman, at the natural level, to bring her son to life is a picture of ours at the spiritual level. It shows us how desperately we need the Lord Jesus Christ, but it also shows how wonderful, glorious, perfect, and suitable Christ is for your condition and mine.

No doubt, people here would have looked at this and they would have said, like they did in Bethany some time later, that He was too late. If only He had been here yesterday, or maybe even this morning, then maybe this young man would not have died. Yesterday there was mercy for someone else's son, for the centurion's servant, but He is too late here. They would soon realize that His mercies are new every morning. They would soon realize that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. They would realize His compassion never runs dry. Spurgeon asks, "Did he save your friend yesterday? His fullness is the same if you seek Him, His love and grace will flow to you today. He blesses this day, and He blesses the day after. Never is our divine Lord compelled to pause until He has recruited His resources. Virtue goes out from Him forever." Here is the misery that drew out the Savior's compassion.

Second, let us see the compassion that the misery drew out. In verse 13 we are told, "And when the Lord saw her." There is something hopeful, even in that. He saw her. He is aware of her. She has come into His sight. It is the first thing that compassion does—it notices; it sees. Notice that it uses the word *Lord*. It is speaking of the power and authority of Christ. We know He has authority and power over sickness; we saw that with the centurion's servant. In the days before, we see He has power over the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the devil-possessed. We know He has authority over the sea. But the question here, for the first time, is, Does He have authority over death? Is He Lord over death? The Lord saw her, and then it says that He had compassion on her. The Lord

saw her pain and misery, and He had that gut-wrenching emotion, that intense feeling of pity and sorrow, and that desire to help her. Benjamin Warfield says, "His heart begins to throb with pity." I do not doubt that there were tears in His own eyes when He felt this great agitation and trouble, and what is beautiful here, too, is the way in which it tells us that He is the one who sees her before she knows who He is. Before she sees Him, He sees her. Before His words and actions go to her, His heart goes to her. You notice that this is so unlike the other miracles, because she does not ask for help. She has not noticed Him; she is absorbed in her grief. No one is asking Him on her behalf, either. The emphasis is entirely on the fact that He saw her, and He had compassion on her. This is not an example of faith or courage. This is an example of the free, sovereign lovingkindness and mercy of God. This is the Son of God in our nature saying, "I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." And I do not doubt that this dear lady would say later, "I love Him, because He first loved me."

It goes on to say that He saw her, He had compassion on her, and He said, "Weep not." In any other circumstance, you would say that is an incredibly insensitive thing to say. Doesn't the Bible say that there is a time to weep? Doesn't it tell us that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting? Surely, if ever there is an appropriate time to weep, it is a widow at the funeral of her only son! And here is the Man of Sorrows, who is acquainted with grief, the one who will weep at Lazarus's grave, telling this widow not to weep! What is Christ doing? He is doing what He alone can do. He knows what He is doing. He is taking away the cause of her misery. He is taking away the cause of her weeping. He is destroying the works of the devil. This is a beautiful illustration of the gospel. The gospel does not just make us feel happy and blessed and take the bad life away and give the good life. Oh, to have the gospel in reality is indeed the most blessed life, but the gospel goes far deeper than this. The gospel deals with sin. The gospel deals with what causes the misery and removes that as well.

Verse 14 goes on and says, “And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still.” You would say there is something completely unacceptable here. You do not touch a bier or a grave. It makes you ceremonially unclean—except you are the man who is holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. But there is something here we cannot miss as He touches this bier. Why is He doing this? He is confronting death. He is telling death and the grave that their days are numbered. He is coming for them. He will not run away or repent. He has put a mark on them. He will utterly destroy their power. He will redeem His people from the grave. Until now, death has reigned. From Adam, to Moses, and down to our own day, death reigns. But here was someone different, and hell and the grave and Satan and death shuddered when Christ, with His finger, touched the bier. He says they will meet again. It will be another city gate then. It will be another only Son then. As you look at the cross of Calvary, what you will see there, superbly and sublimely and superlatively, is that He was moved with compassion. That is what Calvary tells us. Every coffin of a loved one in Christ is marked. You can see it by faith. The fingerprint of Christ is on it. Christ has touched this bier. He claims this dust as His.

In verse 14 we read, “And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.” Again, this is utterly unheard of—a man speaking to the dead. “Arise!” The same kind of word, children, that your parents say to you, and the same kind of word that this mother would have, no doubt, said many times to her own son. Arise, it is time to get up. Here, Christ is saying, Young man, it is time to get up. Arise. Verse 15 says, “And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.” It was a sign of life. He sat up and began to speak. I wonder what he said. Did he say, “What manner of man is this, that even the dead obey His voice?” There is a picture of the resurrection here. Dead bodies will rise to meet the Lord in the air. He will tell His people to arise, it is time to get up, it is the morning of the resurrection, it is the morning of a day that will never end. And His

people will sit up and will speak and they will say, “What manner of man is this?”

We read on in verse 15, “And he delivered him to his mother.” What tenderness; the Lord is full of kind compassion. Compassion had given Him this intense pain for her misery and this intense desire to help, but in Christ, the desire to help always moves to the act of helping. That is why we read, “And he delivered him to his mother.” One old writer says, “It is a picture of the happy reunion we will have in heaven—the reunion of every believer in Christ. On the great day when Jesus brings us to Himself, He will also give us back to one another.” Who are you waiting to meet in glory? I think there is a prayer here for fathers and mothers who are distressed about their children in every way—physically, too, but certainly spiritually. Spurgeon writes, “Oh, is there not refreshment here for you, mothers, who are weeping for your boys? You who have ungodly sons or unconverted daughters, the Lord sees your tears. You weep alone sometimes, and when you are sitting and enjoying the Word and think, oh that my Absalom were renewed, oh that Ishmael might live before Thee. Jesus knows about it. He was always tender to His own mother, and He will be so to you. And you that are mourning over those who have lately been taken from you, Jesus pities you. Jesus wept. He sympathizes with your tears, and He will dry them and give you consolation. He was moved with compassion.”

Last, we want to see the effect this miracle had on those around Him. Verse 16 tells us, “And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people.” The first effect, very obviously, is worship. It is the same as when Jesus was in the boat with His disciples in the storm. Fear came upon them when Jesus performed the miracle. It is the same here. Fear came on them all—an awareness of God. That is what the fear of God is. They glorified God, they recognized that God had worked here, and they said that a great prophet is risen among them. They are close; it is not simply *a* great prophet; it is *the* great prophet. No doubt,

their minds are going back to the last prophets we read about performing a miracle like this—Elijah and Elisha. There are similarities, but there is glorious contrast that shows how much greater and glorious Christ is. There is a greater than Elijah and Elisha here. Elijah falls on his knees and he cries out to the Lord several times, and he gets down hand to hand and mouth to mouth and stretches himself upon the boy. It is expressing great difficulty in what he is doing, and great dependence on the Lord to perform a life-giving miracle. It was the same with Elisha—he stretches himself upon the boy. Again, there was difficulty—Gehazi could not do the miracle, and Elisha has this process, and it is all saying how difficult and how dependent they are on God. But here is a Prophet who simply puts His finger on the bier and with the breath of His mouth says, “Arise.” And immediately, the dead hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear, live. And then there is worship. He is *the* great Prophet.

There is also the effect of witness. Verse 17 tells us, “And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.” How could you keep this to yourself? How could you have seen and felt something of the deep sorrow of that poor woman in Nain, and seen Christ go and put His finger on the bier, and told her to weep not, and told the young man to arise, and keep silent about it? They could not. The report goes throughout all Judea and all the region round about. It was spread far and wide. But, my dear friend, don’t we have something even better to proclaim than what was seen here? Don’t we gather on the first day of the week every Lord’s Day, the day where we remember another only Son who was dead, and by an act of His own power, is alive again and is alive forever more, and has the keys of death and the grave? Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered death. Death has been destroyed. There is an empty grave, so every Lord’s Day, we can say the Lord is visiting His people. Isn’t that why you are here this morning—to visit with the Lord? Isn’t this why others should come, too? Are you miserable? Are you in distress? Are you without God and hope? You are just

the people that should come, because Christ is coming to visit today, and He is so compassionate and kind and tender and loving and able to save to the uttermost. He is coming again to visit His people today with the everlasting gospel. This is the effect it had on others, but I want to close by asking what effect it has on you.

Does the picture here in Nain have this effect, that we see that whatever misery we have in our lives, the real problem is sin? We are spiritually lost by nature. Have we come to the place where we say we deserve to go to the place where no tear will be wiped away—a place full of sorrow and distress and not an ounce of compassion? But does it also make us recognize that we need a miracle of divine grace? Surely that is what this picture shows us. No mere human power can help us. We need God to intervene. Are you here today and you are spiritually miserable? Maybe you are here, and you say, I have tried to do what is right. I have tried to please God, but I have failed, and I am miserable with this whole thing. You find yourself, like this woman, in a way, helpless and miserable. You have tried to believe, you have tried to exercise faith, you have tried to repent, but you cannot do it and you feel helpless and miserable.

What you need to see here, and find in this Christ, is a Savior who is compassionate with the miserable, who does not call you to simply try harder. That is not the gospel. He calls you to trust and believe and receive Him. Faith is not our best effort. Faith is not simply a good and honest attempt. Faith is a giving up on all our attempts and a falling in helplessness into the arms of Christ's compassion and mercy. Has this been an effect, that you see Christ is able to give life to your soul, that is why He is here, full of compassion and tender mercy? Behind the mercy you see in the gospel, behind the power to save—yes, the power to raise the dead to life—is a heart that is brimful and overflowing with compassion. Have you seen that in Christ? Have you come to see that He has not come to destroy men's lives but to save them? There is only one miracle, as far as I am aware, that is a miracle of judgment—the miracle of the fig tree. All the others are telling you that He delights

in mercy, He is compassionate, He is able, He is full of pity for your spiritual woe. Oh, go to Him then! Are you here today and you feel miserable and depressed and anxious and worried? Christ, my dear friend, can deal with every human misery. You are not more miserable than He is compassionate. Remember the scripture He reads in the synagogue when He opens the scroll and reads Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified” (vv. 1–3). That is the Savior. That is why He is here.

Is the effect worship of Him? That will include sweet mourning. As Zechariah says, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son” (Zech. 12:10). They look at Calvary, at the only Son bleeding, suffering, and dying there. He is full of compassion there—moved with compassion on the cross. You will weep tears of sorrow for sin, but surely tears of love for such a compassionate Savior. He will bring His people to the place where the inhabitant will not say, I am sick, where there is no more misery, and then God’s people will see Christ—love covered in flesh—and He Himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes. “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.”

Amen.