

THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF YOUR HOPE

Today's Text: Lk 7: 11-16

Extracts:

Now it happened, the day after, that [Jesus] went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, *a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow.* And a large crowd from the city was with her. When the Lord saw her, *He had compassion on her* and said to her, "Do not weep." Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And *He said, "Young man, I say to you, 'arise.'"* So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother [Lk. 7: 11-15]

Ariel Ticona is a miner in a gold and copper mine in Northern Chile.¹ On Thursday, 5 August 2010, he and 32 other miners were trapped 7 km (4.5 miles) underground when the main access tunnel to their mine collapsed. He and his wife, Segovia Elizabeth, were expecting their third child (they already had two boys) and he had promised to be by her side during delivery. Just when Segovia had thought that all hopes of her husband's survival were dashed, news came that rescuers had heard hammering noises when a new probe into the mine came back with a note tied to it, saying, "All 33 of us are fine in the shelter." On Tuesday, 14 September 2010, Segovia gave birth to a baby-girl. On being informed underground of his wife's safe delivery, Ticona asked that the baby-girl be named Esperanza, Spanish for Hope! Segovia's hope has been resurrected. She will have her husband back and Esperanza will soon see her father.

How about you? What is it that is giving you sleepless nights these days? Have you lost hope on matters pressing you down right now? Don't give up! In this week's study, a widow's only son died. That was pathetic but was that all the story? The study will demonstrate to you why you must never give up hope.

¹ Story based on the following sources: James White, "Hope for 33 men trapped underground in Chile as miner's wife gives birth to baby girl named Esperanza," <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1311881/Hope-trapped-Chilean-miners-mans-wife-gives-birth-baby-Esperanza.html#> ; 15th Sep. 2010; Patrick Oppmann, "Baby brings miners hope and rebirth," <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/09/18/chile.mine.baby/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>

1. Background: Jesus resurrects a widow's dead hope

The Bible text on which this week's study is based deals with the story of the encounter between Jesus and a widow whose only son had died. Let us pay attention to the following aspects of the event:

a) *A widow's hope died*

We are told, "A dead man was being carried out, *the only son of his mother; and she was a widow*. And a large crowd from the city was with her" [Lk. 7: 12]. That is a pathetic story. It was already bad enough that the woman's husband had died. As a widow, she could have been consoled by the fact that her son, her only child, would take care of her in her husband's absence. That could have been enough hope for her to live on. Then, it got worse. Her only son also died. That is the death of her hope also.

Many of us are in that position right now. I remember quite vividly the sad story of a teacher who had been posted to a mission-run school in my hometown in the Mid-West Region of Nigeria just before the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). She was Igbo by birth from the then Eastern Region of Nigeria. She fell in love with a local boy, a teacher in a nearby public primary school and they planned to get married. However, civil war was imminent, following the secession of the East as Biafra from Nigeria, and she had to return home for her safety. Throughout the three-year duration of the war, they kept in touch with each other through the help of international relief agencies operating on both sides of the war. Based on that hope, she did everything to stay alive because she knew that her future husband was waiting for her. As soon as the war ended in January 1970, she rushed back to my hometown to rejoin him. Instead of a happy reunion, she was shown his grave! He had died a few months earlier in a car crash. How would you console that kind of person?

There are many pressures on you right now. The time is too short. The space is too tight. You never have enough of anything. What you get is not what you want. You have a depressing feeling that refuses to go away, even when you try to mask it from family and friends. You lie awake all night. You are getting lean even without any dieting or exercise. The answer is obvious. Your hope has died.

b) *She was going to bury her dead hope*

The widow's dead son "was being carried out" [v. 12] to be buried. Thereafter, she would be left with a huge void. The "large crowd" would not remain with her after the burial. Sooner than later, they would have to get on with their lives and leave her to herself. What a lonely situation!

We can empathize with that widow. When you lose hope, you can be in a crowd and still be alone? Your mind is elsewhere. Your fear intensifies. How will it all end? That is the mood that Jeremiah captured in the Book of Lamentations that records the agony of the children of Israel after they had been captured and sent into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah begins by saying [**Lam. 1: 1-2**]:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people? How like a widow is she, who was great among the nations! ...She weeps bitterly in the night, her tears are on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her.

After Naomi had lost both her husband and two sons in a foreign country, Moab, she returned home to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. When people saw them, they asked, “Is this Naomi?” She replied, “Do not call me Naomi [meaning pleasant]; call me Mara [meaning bitter]” [**Ruth 1: 1-20**]. Do you need to ask about the state of her hope?

c) *But Jesus happened to pass by and raised her hope back to life!*

We are told that “it happened” that Jesus “went into a city called Nain” at the very moment that the widow’s son was being carried out to be buried [**Lk. 7: 11-12**]. Jesus had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” He touched the open coffin and said to the dead, “Young man, I say to you, ‘arise.’” He that had died sat up and began to speak! Jesus presented him to his mother [**vv. 13-15**].

Was that a mere coincidence or divine providence at work? The widow did not ask for it and she might never have met Jesus in all her life before that moment. At the point that her hope was about to be buried, Jesus showed up and resurrected it! That suggests that in the depth of your despair, that is the time to be wide-eyed because Jesus may happen to pass by! Blind Bartimaeus was begging on a lonely road in Jericho “when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth” that was passing by- hence the loud noise. He cried out to Jesus and received his sight back [**Mk 10: 47- 52**]. The Psalmist says, “Though I walk through the valley of *the shadow of death*, I will fear no evil” [**Ps. 23: 4**]. The valley of death represents the lowest point of despair. But how can you see its shadow unless light is beamed on it? Jesus is the Light of the world [**Jn 8: 12**]. When the Lord of light passes by and beams His light on your valley of despair, then you can see all the danger points therein and how to avoid them.

d) *God had visited His people*

As soon as the onlookers saw what had happened, fear came upon all of them, and “they glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has risen among us,’ and ‘God has visited His people’” [Lk. 7: 16]. They were afraid because they knew that neither medical science nor sorcery could explain what they had just seen. The dead man was said to be in an open coffin, suggesting that he had died not quite long earlier. Physicians would have needed gadgets to resuscitate somebody with cardiac arrest and magicians would have used incantations or abracadabra! Jesus spoke with authority and they heard Him clearly. So, they had no choice but to give glory to God, even though they did not know Him.

The widow’s hope had been dashed. Now, thanks to Jesus, her hope had been restored! What lessons can we learn from that story for our own circumstances?

2. Lessons for today’s believers

The following principles can guide us to successfully deal with challenges to our hope:

a) *A closed door may actually be a swinging door!*

We are too much in a hurry to draw conclusions concerning our situation. For example, a newly married couple may have their first open disagreement and they immediately conclude that their marriage will not work! A hard working employee is passed over for promotion and she concludes that there is no future for her in that organization. The fact is that until one door closes, another one cannot open. Does the open quarrel not suggest the need for the young couple to respect each other more? Is it not possible that you missed that promotion because your potentials suggest a different career being carved out for you? So, a door that is slammed on your face may not be a closed door at all. It may simply be a door that swings shut automatically!

Take the example of Daniel who was one of the three governors that King Darius had set over the 120 satraps of his whole kingdom. The other two governors conspired against him and got the king to sign a decree that whoever prayed to another god or man except to the king himself for a period of thirty days should be thrown into the lion’s den. When Daniel heard that the king had signed the proclamation, he went to his apartment, opened the upper room window in the direction of Jerusalem and prayed. He was arrested and thrown into the lion’s den [Dan. 6: 1-18]. By all definitions, that should be his end. His door of remaining alive had been shut. But not so fast! God shut the mouths of the lions and nothing happened to him “because he believed in his God” [vv. 19-23]. The following day, instead of Daniel’s death, the king fed the conspirators and their families to the hungry lions and

made a new decree that “in every dominion of [his] kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel” [vv. 24-26]. The closed door became Daniel’s entrance to spread the word of God to the then known world.

b) *Jesus still passes by*

Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever [Heb. 13: 8]. He may now be on the right side of His Father in heaven [Acts 7: 56] but He is with us always, even to the end of the age [Matt. 28: 20]. You do not choose Him; He chooses you [Jn. 15: 16]. If you doubt that, ask Saul called Paul. He was an enemy of Christ with a mandate from the Jewish leaders to go to Damascus to arrest believers. On the way, Jesus “arrested” him and turned him into His apostle to the Gentiles [Acts 9: 1-15]. All that Zaccheus, a rich tax collector, wanted was to have a glimpse of Jesus as He passed through Jericho. In view of his short stature, Zaccheus ran ahead and climbed up a tree. When Jesus got to the spot, “He looked up and saw him.” He told Zaccheus to come down because He was going to stay in his house that night [Lk. 19: 1-5]!

So, Jesus still passes by. He may not present Himself the way you are expecting Him. He can come by way of a kind stranger who gives you very useful assistance at your point of despair. He could give your physician an unusual insight into your medical condition leading to a dramatic cure. He could have inspired the scholarship award for your son or daughter to study in a prestigious university at a point that you were unemployed or could barely feed your family. Jesus still passes by!

c) *But you can also invite Him!*

Sometimes, Jesus may want you to know that you can also invite Him. He does that so as to build your faith. He told His disciples, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me” [Jn. 14: 1]. He added, “If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” [v. 14]. After all, how many people may know that He is around them unless they call on Him? How would Jesus have stopped for blind Bartimaeus if the beggar had not called Him? Jesus has said, “Ask, and you will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For *everyone* who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks, it will be opened” [Matt. 7: 7-8].

When the Shunammite woman’s son died, she put him on the bed of the prophet (Elisha) and went looking for him. She did not weep. When her husband asked where she was going, riding furiously on a donkey (‘driven’ by a servant), she

simply replied, “All is well.” When the prophet sighted her and sent his servant, Gehazi, ahead to ask whether it was well with herself, husband and son, she responded, “All is well.” It was only after getting to Elisha and catching him by the foot that she poured out “her soul [that was] in deep distress.” The prophet went with her, prayed over the dead son and he came back alive. She fell at the prophet’s feet and glorified God [2 Kgs. 4: 19-37]. That is a good example for those whose hope is challenged.

3. Conclusion: Hope is the heart of faith!

Faith has been defined as the “substance of things *hoped* for [and] the evidence of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1]. Through faith, you will have peace with God by Christ Jesus. With such strength, you are then able to *glory in tribulation* that in turn *produces perseverance*. Perseverance produces *character* and character in turn produces *hope*. That is why “hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out in [your heart] by the Holy Spirit” given to you [Rom. 5: 1-5].

In that dreaded moment of despair, remember that you are not alone. Fear is not an option because it will cripple you physically and spiritually. Be anxious for nothing but in everything, by prayer and supplication coupled with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will through Jesus guard your heart and mind [Phil. 4; 6-7]. So, when you call on God in the day of trouble, He will deliver you and you will glorify Him [Ps. 50: 15].

Hope is the heart of faith. When you hope in Christ, you will have the faith to hold on. Jesus will *never* let your hope die!