

Food for Thought—The Widow of Nain

image: vicinity of Nain in a 19th century photo Félix Bonfils, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



The story of the widow of Nain (also spelled Nein) is recorded in Luke chapter seven. Luke is the only gospel writer who includes this story, and this is in keeping with the pattern of Luke's writing. He consistently shows interest in, and compassion for, the poor and powerless, including women. Luke joins Mark in including the story of the widow's mites and joins Mark and Matthew in recording Jesus's anger with

those who "devour widows' houses." Furthermore, it is only Luke who gives us the spoken and sung words of Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna surrounding the incarnation and nativity. And Luke's is the only gospel to include this story—the story of the widow of Nain.

One thing to ponder in this story is simply the image of the bereft mother. Having lost her husband at some point in the past and now her only son, her grief is great. Her future probably holds lasting loneliness and likely poverty. In addition to these burdens, the widow of Nain--at the moment Jesus meets her—also has another wound: symbolic guilt. In the first century, according to Jewish custom, the widow was to walk at the front of the funeral procession because rabbinic writers had said that "woman, who brought death into the world, ought to lead the way in the funeral procession."

Another thing to ponder is that Jesus appears to have come to Nain specifically (and perhaps only) for this woman. Nain was a relatively unimportant agricultural village in the vicinity of Mount Tabor, and the only thing we are told about Jesus's time there was the miracle he performed for this grieving woman (and her son).

The timing of events in the narrative also suggests that Jesus came just for this woman at this moment in her life. Luke tells us that Jesus arrives in Nain just as the funeral procession is heading out through the town gate. And the journey for him had not been an effortless one. Luke tells us that Jesus comes to Nain after

healing the Centurion's servant in Capernaum. The journey from Capernaum to Nain would've been about 25 miles, which is a lot of ground to cover—a long march. Furthermore, the journey represented a rise in elevation of about 1,300 feet, which means Jesus would've been walking uphill on this journey. It was not an easy trip. And, not only does he make this trip, but he also times it in such a way that he had been in Capernaum at the right time to heal the Centurion's servant and yet still arrived in Nain in time to meet the widow at the hour of her need.

Luke tells us in verse 13 that when Jesus saw the widow, he “had compassion on her.” More than once I've heard Bible teachers say that the miracles of Jesus occurred *only* to serve as proof of his divinity or to provide a sign that he was the Messiah. I think they say this in an attempt to address the mystery about why miracles sometimes occur and sometimes do not. And it is true that the miracles did point at who Jesus was (Luke 7:20-23), but that cannot be the whole story, for passages in Mathew, Mark, and Luke, including this one, specifically mention Jesus's compassion as a factor in a number of his miracles.

Another thing to notice in this story is the detail Luke gives us when he says that “many of his disciples” and “much people” accompanied Jesus from Capernaum to Nain. Did this large group walking with Jesus wonder what he had on his mind on this non-leisurely journey? I imagine they did. And I am guessing that they felt that staying with him and being with him--for whatever he had in mind--was worth the rigorous journey. Whatever he was going to do next—whether it was teaching or action--they wanted to be there. Are we willing to take on exhausting journeys in order to stay close to the Lord and his work?

Luke includes the detail that as soon as Jesus brought the widow's son back to life, the young man began talking, What did he say? We aren't told. But I bet that there was MUCH talking in every corner of Nain that night! I am also guessing that some of them that evening remembered and talked about the fact that their region had been blessed in a similar way 800 years before when, in the days of Elisha, the Shunammite woman's son was brought back to life (by the 1st century, Shunem no longer existed, but its site was only a few miles from Nain).

Finally, it is instructive to look at the response of the people of Nain. When Jesus performs the life-giving miracle, they don't start arguing about touching the ceremonially unclean bier and whether it was proper for Jesus to do that or about what day of the week it was or anything else. Instead, they were amazed and gave glory to God saying, "God has visited His people!" They are full of excitement and joy. Their reaction is reminiscent of the grateful joy of the shepherds at Jesus's birth. This is the way it should be.

--Sally

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