

Death on the Run

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[0 : 00] We read together in Luke's Gospel chapter 7, Luke's Gospel chapter 7 and these first 17 verses where we find the story kind of moving forward from Jesus preaching to Jesus acting and being engaged in some significant interaction with people.

And there's two characters really apart from Jesus in this chapter but one very clear and very evident theme that runs through the passage and it's a theme that Jesus returns to again and again and again and faces up to and deals with not only in Scripture but in our own lives and in the challenge of our own lives.

So I'd like to look at the two characters to begin with briefly and then find out what it is that is the common theme in these two characters in the passage here in God's Word because we have a centurion and a widow, very different characters from very different situations, different cultures and different stages in their lives.

We have the centurion first in verses 1 to 10. That's a fantastic passage and a great encouragement and a challenge to us. We've got this man whose name we aren't given but nonetheless that we are told even in these short verses quite a lot about we recognise or we begin to unravel quite a lot about this character.

He's a very respected character both in the community and generally by his life. And interestingly in the Bible, in the New Testament centurions nearly always are regarded favourably.

[1 : 47] They were upright and worthy characters in the main and the Bible is generally very positive about them. He was someone who was well known and liked in the Jewish community in which he lived although he was very probably a Roman and was a man of respect and authority.

He had probably between anything between 10 and 500 men over him as a centurion. It wasn't strictly that he would necessarily just have 100 men although he may well have done but he had risen ranks.

Probably an army major in our own tradition would be similar to the position of a centurion. He was wealthy whether that was inherited wealth or whether it was the wealth that he get as a centurion that we're not told but he was wealthy enough anyway to sponsor the building of the synagogue in that community in Capernaum.

And as a result of that he was well liked but also he obviously had a great deal of sympathy for the Jewish faith and the religion that they espoused.

Indeed to himself as the story unfolds he is revealed as a man of faith. Tremendously humble although he was in this position of authority and leadership but not so much an authority that he couldn't make clear his need at this point when his servant is so seriously ill.

[3 : 27] So we have the centurion and then following on from that we have the widow again whose name is not given to us and we're not told much about her.

All we know that is that she is at the funeral of her only remaining child.

She's lost her husband and it's a sad picture. There was a bleak future in store for her without very unlikely that she would be able to get work and support herself and there was no structure of support for her and her family, the immediate family obviously had passed away and wouldn't be able to help her.

A future of destitution would very likely be her fate. Although there's a crowd from the town at the funeral and it maybe speaks of her being well known and well liked in the community.

So we have two characters don't we, a centurion and a widow. But what is the common theme? It's very clear that you don't need rocket science to know the theme that is clearly here but it is the unwelcome intrusion of death into their lives and into their circumstances.

[4 : 55] Centurion himself is his servant, somebody he loved and who he highly valued. Another mark of his character that he had disrespect and this relationship with those who were his servants. But there was this unwelcome intrusion of near death, the servant was going to die and of course for the widow it was the fact that she had faced death. She had lost her son having previously lost her husband.

The unwelcome intrusion of death. That is very much the theme that we have here. And there's a relentlessness about that truth isn't it throughout this passage.

That it breaks into the experience and into the lives of every single human being. Whoever they are, whatever time of life they're in, it is no respecter of persons.

So we have two very contrasting people here. But nonetheless who are faced with the relentless reality of death in their experience. We have a powerful man, a Centurion, who would do all in his power to help people and to be a pillar of the community.

[6 : 09] But he could do nothing here. Nothing in the face of his servants impending death. He was powerless. There was nothing he could do. And then there's a mother.

Who would do anything if they could as a mother to keep their child alive? Who would be more apt to give themselves if they could in order to keep their child alive?

But this mother was powerless both in the death of her husband and in the death of her child. Just as the Centurion was powerless, death is no respecter of persons.

And it remains for us today a supremely unpopular subject to talk about. But nonetheless the basic reality of the life that we live today is that death will be our experience.

And that death intrudes. It intrudes into our life and it breaks into our life and it hurts our lives. And it ends our relationships.

[7 : 12] And it's an unwelcome guest into our lives. Whether it is directly ourselves or those around us that we love, that's spoken of in this passage here.

And it's a sobering reality. It's relentless power and it's relentless reality. And it's Jesus who brings up this particular situation through His Word for us to be reminded of.

And it changes everything, doesn't it? Death is this relentlessness about it. And it changes everything. Either it's impending nearness, as it was the case with the Centurion servant, or the reality of the funeral for this poor and bereaved widow.

It is, isn't it? In the light of... It's very significant really that this comes immediately after the sermon in the Mount and the wise and foolish builders because it is life's great storm, isn't it?

It's life's great storm that we face, it's the great opposition that comes our way. That nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing stays the same in the light of it.

[8 : 24] Whether it has broken into our family, broken into our friendships, or broken into our reality at one level or another. It is what changes our perspective on everything.

It changes our achievements, it changes our friendships. And it changes our own life experience. It will always do that. Any of you, any of us who have been touched by, affected by death in any way, we know that it changes life and it changes our perspective.

And there's a relentlessness about it that this passage makes clear. And so Jesus clearly through His Word is wanting us to think about that reality.

And I'll go on to explain a little bit more why. And it's something that we truly should be thinking about in our lives. No, no, I don't, I'm not encouraging us to be morbid, but realistic and spiritual.

Maybe can I challenge the young people, especially, that it is something that while it may be far from our thoughts, in many ways just naturally it is, that nonetheless Jesus here is wanting and is challenging us to consider it.

[9 : 46] What does for us lie ahead? And how will we cope with life when it changes so drastically, when we lose people that we love, people that we lean on, people that we trust, people that we depend on when they are taken from it?

Are we prepared for these days? We prepare our lives for everything else, for so many things. But do we prepare for this inevitability for us?

Christ wants us. And this passage makes clear that Christ wants us to think about death in relation to Him. Because He is also at the core of this passage.

And for Christ, death is at the very core of our need and of His salvation. You know?

And that's why it takes on such relevance. As Jesus Christ is living for this three years on earth, He faces constantly the reality of death and dying, and is moving inexorably towards the cross Himself,

and to the death on that cross, and all it represented.

[11 : 05] And these healing miracles for us are Jesus' reminders to us of what He was coming to achieve, victory and power over the grave.

He reminds us that all that death symbolizes, all this separation, that it speaks primarily of that spiritual separation between ourselves and God through our sins, and the judgment of God, which is what He goes to meet on the cross, and deal with, and enable us to have from death the sting removed.

And so many of these passages you see, maybe physical healing and saturating and all these kind of things, what's it got to do with me and why doesn't Jesus heal physically today?

I'm not going to go into that side of things, except to remind ourselves that death was what Jesus came to deal with. In all its forms and all the way, it reveals itself, and through disease and sickness, and He speaks powerfully, and clearly about its relentlessness, and about the reality of it changing things.

And are we ready when that storm faces us? Are we ready to deal with what it means? Because that brings us to Christ Himself in this passage, and the tremendous power and the message that He brings us through this passage, because clearly He speaks of His irresistible power over death in this passage.

[12 : 44] Most clearly, then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found this servant well, dying, impending death.

The servant is healed. In verse 14, went up and touched the coffin, he said, young man I say to you, get up. Very powerful, irresistible force that Jesus expends here, as He deals with the reality of death.

And I think we can't but help having tamed these passages, you know. We've tamed them because we've grown up with them, and yes, Jesus doing another healing power, doing another healing miracle, another raising of the dead.

But Christ speaks so powerfully through these words of His irresistible power. He simply speaks the word. There's no melodrama.

There's no tremendous effort. In fact, there's virtually no effort at all. He speaks the word, and He reveals His tremendous power over death and the grave and sin, and all that it represents.

[14 : 03] You know, there's great drama in these verses. We sometimes forget that. There's great drama as this centurion comes with such wisdom and such insight and such recognition of who Jesus is.

And you know how he says to him that, you know, you don't even need to come to my house. He recognized the culture of the Jews who didn't go into the house of Gentiles.

But I think there's something much deeper than that. He recognized that Jesus had authority. And as this outplays, and as Jesus commends this man faith, he doesn't even go to the house.

He doesn't even meet the centurion. He doesn't touch the servant. The servant doesn't know who Jesus is. Jesus simply walks on and the work has been done.

The servant has been healed. There's tremendous drama there. And no more so than when he, with the crowd following on from that miracle, come to a town called Nain.

[15 : 12] And by this time there was a crowd round Jesus with him. Probably quite a joyful crowd as they were celebrating if they had already heard the healing of the servant.

But as they were being taught by Jesus and walking along the road, and we have these two crowds that meet the edge of town, a dramatic. Jesus with his entourage as it were, and then this funeral procession.

Sad and solemn. Noisy, probably. Wailing over loss. And Jesus walks straight towards that funeral procession.

He sees what's happening and he goes to the woman and he says, Don't cry. And then he touches the coffin. Very visual, very dramatic, very powerful.

You know, what great sort of picture of what Jesus is coming to do, isn't it? As he works through, as we see that picture of ourselves, as he faces what happens here visually.

[16 : 24] It's just symbolic of what he's coming to do to face the power of death and the grave head on. Without fear, with awesome authority and power and truth and sense of victory.

And he overturns the relentlessness of death and the grave and all that it represents and all that it means. He does that here and of course he does that on the cross.

Irresistible power of Jesus over death. So while we've seen already that death changes everything for those who experience it and who are aware of it in their lives, so does Christ.

Because Christ is more powerful than the grave. So that for us as Christians, Christ changes everything for us also.

So that as we looked at discipleship explored on Thursday night, that great truth from Philippians, for me to live as Christ, to die as gain. Who can say that but the Christian?

[17 : 32] Who can say that there is a gain in dying? Because it is a defeated foe. It becomes a pathway to a closer walk with Jesus Christ.

It gives us a different perspective, a different hope, a different dynamic in our lives. So we walk in the spirit of Christ together as a people with this hope of future glory and relationship, closer relationship with Jesus.

That should be our reality as Christians. That just as death has changed everything, so Christ even more so for us has changed everything. Is that our perspective?

For me to live as Christ and to die as gain. But if you are not a Christian this morning, then you also remain powerless, absolutely powerless over death and the grave.

You know whatever else you feel or don't feel about your relationship with God or your sin or your need. That you don't feel particularly sinful, therefore you don't need a Savior.

[18 : 43] The reality is that you are mortal and that you will experience death among all those whom you love and the pain and the separation that comes from it.

And you will also face your own death. Are you willing to gamble that and not come to Christ? Are you willing to take the gamble that death is nothing but a natural end to life?

Are you willing to reject Christ's life? His emphasis so clearly made here. His claims, his knowledge of the future which drove him to make our redemption from death so crucial?

Will we ignore the gospel opportunities because we are not just convinced? Are we willing to do that? You know the crowds, I would love to do a study of the crowds in the New Testament.

Lots of different crowds, isn't it? And early on in his ministry, the people loved Jesus and crowded around him just as he did here. They loved what he was doing, they loved what he was teaching, they loved his rebelliousness, they loved his kind of uniqueness.

[19 : 58] But we are told there is a break. Things change as he heads towards Calvary and as he begins to teach the hard sayings, as he begins to expose their own hearts and their own needs, we are told that many walked away from him and followed him no longer.

The crowds dissipated and they came together again, but this time to say crucify him. They changed so quickly from being the adoring crowds, worshipping Jesus coming into Jerusalem to being the crucifying crowds.

Crowds are interesting. And do we have that same fickleness? Do you have that same fickleness when you enjoy hearing things about Jesus, but when he talks about your need and the reality of impending death and the judgment that comes from that, that we walk away and we don't want him to rule over us?

Amazing unbelief. We'll mention that just before we end. So we see his irresistible power over death. We also see in this passage his loving compassion, particularly in the story of the widow's son.

As he comes to her, these beautiful two words, that's all he says to her, don't cry. Don't cry.

[21 : 32] And later on the crowd say, this is one who's come to help his people. These are great words. Don't cry. What an insensitive thing to say to a widow at the funeral of her son, having lost her husband.

Don't cry. How crass could he be unless he had real reason to say, don't cry. Often we say, oh, don't cry.

Maybe often as a pastor, I've said, don't cry. And I've come away feeling very, it's a very empty thing to say. That it's been kind of hollow and that it has brought no comfort, but it's just been words. But Christ here can say, don't cry with the compassion that has a capital C, with the compassion of the truth behind the cry or behind the statement he makes.

He can genuinely say with authority to this woman, don't cry. Because he is the power and the love and the willingness to reveal, to relieve the pain and the suffering that she is going through.

[22 : 51] But Christ in saying that to her, says that to us, you know, very often maybe our gospel is harsh and it's judgmental or it's demanding.

And it is. The gospel is demanding in many ways. And it's oppressive. But here is a Christ who says to all of us at the point of our need.

Because all the authority that he can muster behind it and yet without any despair or any reaching beyond himself, he can say, don't cry.

That speaks of what he is offering in salvation because we are people who suffer. We are people who are afraid. We are people who doubt. We are people who make dreadful mistakes.

We are people who look at ourselves in the mirror and are appalled not by the physical sight, although maybe we are sometimes, but more by what we see of our heart there, appalled that Christ could ever have time for us.

[24 : 01] And he says, don't cry. Isn't it great that he says that to a mother? There's a motherliness about the way he says that, in a way that a mother would respond to her child.

Don't cry. Isn't it? It's not what a mother in this widow would appreciate and would understand that she is never again, as she thought, be able to say, don't cry to her son.

But the Savior is the one who will wipe away every tear. That's what he promises that Heaven's about in our struggles here, in our doubts, in our fears, in our inability.

He says, don't cry. And one day I will wipe away every tear, all the failure and all the faults and all the struggles and all the doubts and all the brokenness and the suffering that we face.

Don't cry. Don't cry in Istanbul. Don't cry when we're persecuted. Don't cry when we stand up for Jesus Christ and we are appalled and hated by all those around us.

[25 : 03] Jesus Christ is the one who is redeeming us, is loving compassion. And I close with looking at his fulsome commendation of the centurion.

Jesus heard this. He was amazed at him. You know, when the centurion speaks about having authority and Jesus has not been worthy to come under his house yet, he could still heal him from a distance.

He said, he was amazed and turning to the crowd following him, he said, I tell you, I have not found such great faith, even in Israel. Now that is Jesus Christ with a fulsome commendation of this centurion.

He's amazed. Jesus, Jesus, come at me, Jesus, the Son of God. He's amazed. He's amazed at the faith of this centurion. Now we're only told two times that Jesus is amazed.

He may have been amazed more often, but the Bible only records two occasions when Jesus is amazed and both times it's in relation to the faith or the lack of faith of people.

[26 : 11] We're told in Mark 6 verse 6 that he's amazed at the lack of faith of the people in Nazareth. And they can't get over it, can't understand it.

And here we're told he's amazed at the faith of this centurion. So in Jesus, in his human nature, with all the mystery of the thought of God being amazed, but in his human nature, he's amazed as he walks this earth by the blindness of people who can't see.

Now we're told in Mark, he's amazed at their unbelief. He just can't understand, can't see. Well he can't understand, but he's amazed that people can't believe.

And here he's amazed at the gift of faith that God has given this centurion that has so radically changed him and given him the ability to trust and to see.

It's changed the situation so much, hasn't it? And that amazes Jesus. So he's amazed at the faith of the, I've not found such great faith even in Israel.

[27 : 18] So again, maybe if we're taking death as a very powerful theme here, so faith is a very powerful theme as well.

Unbelief is very deep, and we live in a society where I think unbelief is very deep seated and very well protected and guarded. But let's remember that faith is greater and his gift is greater.

So that while we are often just amazed as well by how people can't believe and why they can't believe, let's not just be surprised by that.

But let's remember that it's even greater to see people believing and the gift of faith that can break that unbelief. Cry out to Christ.

I believe, help my unbelief. Faith is central, and so is Jesus' judgment. I have not found such great faith even in Israel.

[28 : 18] And he's pointing here surely towards, isn't he, his own direct power in making judgment. That he judges and he sees into people's hearts and he declares what is there.

And he recognizes the faith that is in this man. Jesus Centurion has seen himself as he ought to see himself and he has seen Jesus Christ for who Jesus Christ is. You know, it makes clear that he's got insight, he's got faith, he's got humility, he's got dependence, beautiful characteristics.

And I'm asking for us all today, is it Christ's judgment of us that matters to us? Because we too need humility and insight and understanding of who Christ is.

Pride is the great barrier to us, isn't it, to understanding ourselves and to accepting Jesus Christ. It's a great barrier. And this man was truly humbled by faith.

[29 : 22] I don't know if any of you watched the apprentice. I watched the apprentice this time. I'm an addict this time. Never really watched it before. There was a guy on it this week, reality TV rubbish, you know.

And they all have to appear before Alan Sugar and he hires or fires them according to their ability or at the moment he's firing one at a time till there's only one left.

And there was someone on it this week called Michael and he was the most arrogant guy I've seen on telly for a long time. And not only was he arrogant but he was proud of it. He said, I'm arrogant. And if anyone asks me I'll tell them I'm arrogant. And that's one of my characteristics. I'm an arrogant guy because I get far in business and I do well. And Alan Sugar wants me in his company because I'm arrogant.

And he made a complete pig's ear of the task he was given to do. He was humbled and exposed to the point of embarrassment by Alan Sugar when it came to the kind of judgment.

[30 : 26] He was slaughtered. He had no reason. His claims didn't back up his performance. And he was exposed on national television for being a fool.

But that's just television. Are you willing to do that with Jesus Christ? Are we willing to stand against Him and arrogantly claim our independence and our self-reliance and stand before Him and accept His judgment on us?

Who is it that matters to us? Alan Sugar? He's a nobody at that level. Sure, he's a great guy in his own right.

But whose opinion matters to us? Whose judgment do we care about our own, the people around us that we know will all be taken from us one by one in death or Christ who's defeated death and who offers to be our Savior, the judgment of Christ and the pursuit of great faith.

I have not found such great faith even in his own. Isn't that amazing? Great faith is God's gift.

[31 : 47] We accept His gift of faith. It's not by works, none of us can boast. It's a gift. And as Christians, we can ask His Holy Spirit to allow that faith in our hearts to grow.

It's one of the reasons we come to church and worship, to learn more about Jesus Christ and to love each other more in fellowship and to pray for one another and to grow in faith, pursuit of great faith.

What accolades are we looking for in our lives? Great name, great academics, great parents, great employees, great sport, great school, great influence in society.

What do we want? Do we want great faith? And this accolade from Jesus Christ, well done, good and faithful servant.

His gift, His free gift. What are we looking for from this salvation and from this relationship with Christ?

[32 : 55] These are great passages that speak about Christ's own priorities for us and Christ's love for us and Christ's offer to us and Christ's salvation.

May the Spirit apply that to each and all of our hearts today. Amen. Bow our heads briefly in prayer. Lord God, we ask and pray that You would bless Your Word to us. We thank You for the glorious picture of a sovereign who has come to defeat death in our lives by His grace, by His love, who offers us so much, so freely and with no strings attached.

Lord God, help us. Help us to understand and to know that and as Christians to seek more wisdom and more grace and more faith, more humility, more insight and more trust and bless our time together and our meal together and our prayer together in the afternoon.

Bless our joint service together this evening. May it be encouraging and uplifting and may it enthuse us in our faith. Bless the youth fellowship that we will meet too.

[34 : 24] We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.