



## God Has Visited His People

Luke 7:1-17

Grace Waco | 2.4.24

If we remember back to the initial purpose of the gospel of Luke, we remember that he is writing to a Greek friend, presumably of some social importance, named Theophilus, that he might have *certainty* concerning what he has been taught about the faith. This is important because for the last few weeks we have looked at what Jesus *taught*—called here in Luke the “Sermon on the Plain”. It would make sense, then, that Luke would move from teaching to certainty. Which I believe is exactly what his aim is in chapter 7.

Not to get too ahead of ourselves, but next week Dave will help us look at the last picture of John the Baptist in the gospel of Luke, and what we will find is that he has doubts about if Jesus is really the Messiah—the anointed one of God that all of Israel was looking for to deliver them. Now if John the Baptist, who identified Jesus in the womb and whose whole life and ministry was to prepare the way for Jesus, had these questions about Jesus’ authenticity, then it means everyone else did too. And it means that it is normal for you to have those questions as well. Now that we’ve heard Jesus’ teaching, how can we be certain about him? That is what this next section is all about.

Now you might look at these two miracles and ask: “what do they have to do with certainty?” Jesus isn’t making any claims about himself here. In fact, when you look at the two miracles, they seem like they couldn’t be even more different. In one, there is a important Roman, in the other, a forgotten Jew. In one, a relatively small need, in the other, a crushing need. In one, the recipient of the miracle has a great faith, in the other, faith isn’t even mentioned. In one, Jesus gets incredibly close, in the other, he doesn’t even bother to come to the scene but just speaks from a distance.

The miracle with the centurion is in Mark, but in a totally different place in the narrative. The raising of the widow’s son isn’t in any other gospel account.

All that to say is that it seems, as we have seen in other parts of Luke where he puts specific events out of order or in different places, that he intends to link these two different stories together. And I think the best hint is what the people say of Jesus in **verse 16**: “A great prophet has risen among us!” and more importantly, “God has visited his people!” See, both of these stories bear striking resemblance to the most well known miracle stories of two important Old



Testament prophets. The first story is a kind of callback to the healing of Namaan the Syrian by Elisha, and the other an echo of the raising of the widow's son by Elijah.

**Luke, writing for our certainty, inserts these two stories of Jesus to prove to us that Jesus really is the one we are looking for, the final prophet, the true visitation from God.**

Which allows us to ask from this text: when God shows us, when he visits, what is it like? When your mother or your grandmother rolls into town, you know what she is cooking for dinner or what kind of dessert she will be bringing. When the president comes to town, you know he brings AirForce1 and the secret service. Certain people bring a certain presence with them. In Revelation 3, Jesus gives a picture to John in a dream of what it is like to receive him: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." But how do we know it is Jesus knocking? It is quite normal to have doubts about Jesus—about what he is like, about if you are doing the whole Christian thing right, about whether the gospel is really good news—so how can we be *certain*?

Let's examine that question in two categories this morning. When God visits, it is 1) Superlatively Powerful; 2) Surprisingly Personal.

## The Visit of God is **Superlatively Powerful**

Right off the bat, this attribute of a visit from God is not shocking at all to you. You expect the creator of all things to be *powerful* after all. But what really stands out in both these stories is not just that God is powerful, but that his power just rolls out of him with relative ease. No one else can hold a candle to it—it's superlative—almost silly in a way. Let me show you what I mean.

Already in the first story Jesus has a great reputation. There is a centurion—a Roman general of 100 men—who obviously was wealthy and of high reputation. The reason we know he is wealthy is because he has household servants, and he sponsors the building of the Jewish Synagogue. And he is in high reputation, at least by the Jews, since the elders of the Jews, their civil leaders, come to Jesus and present his case for him. Normally Jews would despise Romans, but this one they honor enough to, **verse 4**, "plead earnestly" with Jesus. The centurion's servant is near death, very sick, but again normally this would be something sad, but it happens. He can get another servant. Why come to Jesus? It's because, and the ESV I think gets this translation just slightly off here, the servant isn't just "valuable" to him (**verse 2**) as a commodity, but the servant is "dear" to him, or "treasured" by him.

This centurion loves this servant, and the elders of the Jews apparently think enough of him to come to Jesus so that he would heal the faithful one that is dear to him. Just think for a second about the times in your Christian community where prayer requests are shared and your fellow church member says something like: "please pray for my cousin's boyfriend's aunt, who is sick". Now, everyone is worth prayer, but the reality is that request is much more urgent to you to bring to God if your fellow church member says: "please pray for my dearest childhood friend, who is



very sick”. The proximity is important. The Jews believe this is urgent because they value what the centurion values. He is someone who *loves their nation*. Their pleading is met with affirmation by Jesus, who follows them to the centurion’s house.

Which is quite surprising in itself, but what is more unique is how the centurion’s view of himself is different from theirs. In **verse 6**, we find him expressing this great humility. He knows what it is like to command men, to be important and busy, and he considers himself unworthy for Jesus to visit his house. Instead of meeting Jesus, he sends friends to intercept Jesus on his way. This could be because he is a gentile, but more likely it is simply because he knows the value of Jesus’ time and position. He honors Jesus by humbling himself before him.

But he goes beyond honor into the category of faith with what he says in **verse 7**: “say the word, and let my servant be healed”. Apparently, this display of faith is so great that Jesus “ marvels ” at it in **verse 9**, going so far as to say that it is greater than any faith found in Israel.

What is so great about this man’s faith? If you remember back when we preached in Hebrews 11, which is all about what faith is, pastor Dave did a wonderful job teaching us that faith is a solid, action-oriented belief that what we cannot see is even more real than what we can see. And this man was that—he acts out on his faith. But he acts on something that goes beyond what he can see. Literally, he does not even lay eyes on Jesus. And yet he believes that Jesus can and in fact will heal his servant from a distance, with just a word.

When God created the universe what he used were his *words*: “Let there be light, and there was light”. At the beating heart of knowing God is the understanding that he is *infinite*, that there was nothing before him and there is nothing without him. What this man has faith in is that the very words of God have a power that transcends any obstacle, any space, any time, any limitation, any darkness. And so, implicitly, he is saying that Jesus is that Word, that his words have the power to create and recreate across time and space.

The shocking thing about this man’s faith is that he is a gentile. Roman faith in their gods is not like Jewish faith. Jewish faith is imbued with that unique, ancient monotheism that sets God apart from all other God’s. It’s all over the Old Testament and Hebrew Bible. It was a capital offense to draw an image or picture of God. But Roman gods, while very powerful, are much more man-like. They traipse around earth in their stories, having babies, tricking and being tricked. They have limits, they are not infinite. This is a very western understanding of deity—more personal, but less powerful, less transcendent, less holy and unapproachable. It takes great faith, then, for this man to recognize Jesus as possessing infinite power.

Of course, that is only confirmed by the second story. Although it is entirely different, we should not miss the significance. There is a man who is really, actually, dead, and is brought back to life. The thing we all fear the most is reversed in an instant.

There are only 6 accounts of resuscitation like this in the Bible. One we have already



mentioned—where Elijah raises the widow’s son, so similar to this. But Elisha also does it in 2 Kings 4. And then we find Jesus call this man from the dead, as well as Jairus’ daughter later in Luke, his own friend Lazarus, and finally Peter does something similar in Acts 9 for a dead woman named Tabitha. But this is incredibly rare—as it should be. And the power Jesus has is so calm, so collected—Elijah and Elisha stretch themselves out over the dead bodies, and Peter too moves the body to where he can pray over it. But Jesus simply speaks.

What does all this mean for us? Very practically, it means that we should expect that when God visits, he will do things far greater than we expect. It means that we cannot limit or box up his power. It means that we can be *certain* that God has visited us when we are met with an expression of his superlative power. This power is greater than gaps of race or class—as both the powerful Roman centurion and the lowly Jewish widow receive it. It is greater than any distance—available to those who feel close to Jesus and to those who feel far. And it is the power that defeats our greatest enemy, death itself.

So if you find yourself in a space of spiritual dryness, drabness, even doubt, it is worth asking—am I limiting God? Can I accept him on his terms? Am I making him in my image, how I expect him to be? To dismiss God as powerless just because he doesn’t use his power like you want is like being mad at the sun for only shining half the day. Your scope is too small. To truly know Jesus is to believe that he is unlimited, that he can go to any depths to save, even the darkest, deepest depths of your own heart.

## The Visit of God is **Surprisingly Personal**

We mentioned earlier how it is normal of Western religions to see the divine as more personal and less transcendent. But it’s also true that Eastern religions tend to see the divine as more transcendent and less personal. Traditional Judaism would have fallen into this category. Which is why to really know the true God, the triune God, is to know him in the person of Jesus. And make no mistake—Jesus is a real person. This is one of Luke’s great points in writing—that Theophiis wouldn’t just know facts *about* Jesus, but that in this eye-witness, historical account, he could begin to see what Jesus was really like, to get to know *him*. Let’s dig into this second story and try to put ourselves there so we can see what Jesus is really like. Allow me to set the scene.

Jewish funeral rites, both ancient and modern, require a body to be buried within 24 hours. First-century Jewish funerals, like modern American ones, move the bodies of the dead to the place of burial in processions. But Jewish processions are loud and emotional, accompanied by mourning women and flute players. Even a poor Jewish family is expected to have one mourning woman and two flute players. (Amos 5:16 and Jeremiah 9:17 mention those “skilled in mourning.”) As the procession begins, the body is placed



face-up, with hands folded, in an open wicker basket. There are no flowers because flowers would later be introduced by Christians to symbolize the resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is coming into town, and they are coming out of the gate in a large procession. The whole city of Nain would have been expected to be there, likely up to 500 people. But Jesus' crowd is bigger ("great" vs "considerable"). The same language is used when he feeds the 5000 and the 4000.

So I want you to imagine the chaos for a moment. Just as we often stop for funeral processions, the crowds would also have parted. People are everywhere. It's loud. It's in Jesus' way. He has been on a long journey from Capernaum—funerals happen in the evening, so he is tired. But notice what the text says: it's so surprising, **verse 13**. Now you may glance over this, but please don't.

If I pick out one of you in one row to look at, can you tell who it is? Yes, it's pretty easy. Now, today it looks like there are about 300 of us, smaller than the people in this event by a large margin; can you still tell who I'm looking at? If I'm looking at one person in a crowd of 300, how am I likely looking at that person? Fairly intently. At least it's more than a glance. What does that tell you about how Jesus is looking? Jesus looked at her. This is a secondary account—Luke was not there. Yet apparently the way Jesus looked at this woman was so intent, so noticeable, so specific, that it was an important detail to remember about this story. There is such a personal focus on this woman. Why? Because she had not just lost her only son (notice, "only begotten"), but her livelihood. She was destined for a life of destitution. He sees her personal situation with striking detail.

Luke says that he looked, and the translation "had compassion" is literally "his inward parts were moved", which means he *felt* compassion. How does Luke know that, as a second-hand witness? Not because Jesus says it, but because of how Jesus looked toward that woman, and acted toward her as he approached her.

How would you normally stop a large procession of people? He doesn't need to shout or wave his arms—Notice again his power and authority as he calmly approaches, and the crowd parts and makes way for him, as he is laser focused on the widow. He speaks to her words that you normally would never speak at a funeral to a grieving woman: "do not weep". She has every right to cry, and Jesus has no right to interrupt her crying, unless in his compassion he uses his infinite, unrestrained power to make her sadness go away. And so he does. He touches the bier, which is ritually unclean, and all is still, **verse 14**. The mourners stop, everyone waits. What will Jesus do? All he sees is the widow and her pain, every ounce of his attention and power are towards her personal problem.

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<sup>1</sup> This and much of the following material will be following the incredibly helpful "Person of Jesus" Study by Paul Miller. It can be purchased at [seejesus.net](http://seejesus.net).



He speaks to the dead man, which would be either comedy or tragedy if Jesus wasn't supremely at peace in his confident power over death,<sup>2</sup> and the dead man speaks back. Immediately you can imagine the pandemonium. When Jesus raises Jairus' daughter, it is in a locked room. When he raises Lazarus, it is close family and friends. Here, there are thousands of witnesses. Some of the earliest church fathers write about how those who were raised to life by Jesus witnessed the fact even after Jesus' own resurrection and ascension.<sup>3</sup> So **Verse 16**, "fear seized them all". And **Verse 17**, "this report spread throughout all of Judea."

But where is Jesus, as the crowds awe at his unmatched power? Where is Jesus as they witness a miracle of such magnitude that he immediately draws comparisons to the greatest prophets of Jewish history? He is not boasting about his feat, riding the wave of popular opinion. No—his focus is still on the widow, as we find in **verse 15**: "Jesus gave him to his mother". The raising of this only son is not to prove himself or gain an even greater audience, although those things happen. Rather, Jesus' superlative power is to meet the personal need of those he picks out of the crowd and his heart is drawn to in love.

Paul Miller says it succinctly this way: "Jesus did not come just with power to fix a broken world. He came with a heart to feel our pain and bear our burdens." Or, in other words, **you are more important than the miracle.**<sup>4</sup>

One of my favorite artists of all time is Rembrandt. I've shared some of his pictures before. In my estimation, Rembrandt is the greatest master of faces. The way that he uses light and shadow in faces gives them a kind of mysterious depth. Many of Rembrandt's scenes and portraits are of important events or people, many of them Biblical. But he also captures normal moments. Of one his most famous paintings is called "The Night Watch". It portrays a military company as they march out from town. Funny enough, that is not the original name. It's actually: "Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq", and the scene only *appears* to be at night. This effect is due to Rembrandt's focus of putting the light on faces rather than backgrounds. He wants the drama of every face to shine, even the ones in the background, even the unseen and unimportant ones. Every Rembrandt face has this quality, as Frederick Beuchner said, of being: "so remarkably seen that it forces you to see it remarkably." This is what a visit from Jesus is like: he sees people so remarkably that it forces you to see even the most unseen.

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<sup>2</sup> Darrell Bock, *Luke*

<sup>3</sup> Eusebious quotes Quadratus, one of the first apologists, on this theme. See Geldenhyus, *Luke*

<sup>4</sup> Again, would just like to note that this comes directly from Paul Miller, "Person of Jesus Study".





Next week we will see the question to John's question as to whether Jesus is one we are looking for is a perfect blend of the power of God and the personal love of God: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." Jesus has power for untold miracles, and his miracles are personally for the least of these, the blind, the poor, the deaf, the unseen.

How do we know that God has visited us? How do we know the gospel is true? How can we trust it again this morning? Because we are witnesses: God's superlative power is never used for abstract means and purposes. The gospel is that God used his great power not to prove himself to us, but because he had compassion on us. Truly God, full of power, truly man, full of compassion. He sent his only son to weep and die so that we would be welcomed to a future free of death and weeping. And Jesus rose not so that he might save himself, but so that in him we also might rise. As Tim Keller has pointed out, the resurrection in this passage is really just a resuscitation, since this man had to die again. It's just a picture of the real one. But with faith like the centurion, in the unlimited power of God, we know that Jesus' resurrection was final, and so is ours when we die in him.

In baptism today we witness the confirmation of that resurrection: we witness superlative power to make a spiritually dead person into a spiritually alive person. And we witness it on a surprisingly personal level—that *each one* of our brothers being baptized has been buried and raised with Christ. Each one belongs to him, each one, no matter their age or background, is seen and loved and welcomed by God. Or we might say it this way—what the crowds spoke truly even though they did not know the full extent of it: God has visited his people.

