

Freedom from Death's Fear

A Topical Study of Luke 7:11-17

He was a professional thief. His name stirred fear in the hearts of even the most rugged frontiersman as sure as the desert wind stirred the tumbleweeds. From 1875 to 1898, he successfully held up 29 Wells Fargo stagecoaches. And the amazing thing is, he did so without firing a single shot. His weapons? Fear and intimidation. When a stagecoach driver looked down and saw a man riding alongside whose face was entirely covered with a black hood, he knew he was about to be held up by Black Bart—and that he was foolish to fight him. In newspapers and journals from San Francisco to New York City, he was known as one of the most notorious bandits of all time.

Black Bart reminds me of another who haunts all of humanity, one who Jesus called a thief and a robber, a liar and a murderer (John 8:44). His weapons, like Black Bart's consist of intimidation and fear—especially the fear of death . . .

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Hebrews 2:14-15

Although death is something we don't like to think about or talk about, it is something we deal with constantly. Oh, it might not be the fear of physical death which haunts us. It might be the death of a relationship, a marriage, a business. This spiritual Black Bart identified in Scripture as Satan, intimidates people constantly with the fear of death, and holds them in this bondage all of their lives. But Jesus came not only to meet death head-on, but to conquer it completely in order that we might be set free.

In our text, we see Jesus and death meeting face to face in an encounter which is not accidental, but oh, so intentional as Jesus goes 25 miles out of His way to the little town of Nain . . .

Two Crowds

In Nain, we see two groups of people—one going into the city rejoicing, the other leaving the city weeping. The group going into the city was rejoicing because they were traveling with Jesus. The group leaving the city was weeping, knowing nothing about Jesus.

I suggest every single one of us is in one of these two crowds right now. Either we are traveling with Jesus to the city, or we are traveling without Him to the cemetery. If we're traveling with Him, to what city are we headed? To the same one for which Abraham looked: the city which is solid and real, satisfying and eternal, the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). Abraham knew such a city would not be found in Mesopotamia or Babylon, New York, or Oregon. He knew the city for which he longed would only be found in eternity. And thus he could head towards it rejoicing.

Suppose you are an ice skater, and right before you're ready to take to the ice in the final phase of the competition, your coach tells you your preliminary scores are so far ahead of everyone else's that even if you get zero in the final phase, you'll win. This information would enable you to be as daring and creative as you would want because you'd have nothing to lose.

So too, life becomes joyful and daring to the one who is not living for this world. Because the pressure is off, because he realizes the gold medal of heaven is already his, he can be carefree and creative (John 14:2). Not so the crowd traveling to the cemetery. Regardless of how popular or powerful they are on earth, they are in bondage to the fear of the death which awaits them.

Two Sons

Not only were there two crowds, but two only sons. The son who had once lived was now dead. The Son Who was now living was destined to die.

In the days before social security or welfare, having lost her husband and now her only son, this widow would have no one to look out for her socially or financially. That is why God's only Son, the Son destined to die, was moved with compassion. Jesus uniquely knew His mission was death. In a very real sense, as the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, He was dead before He lived (Revelation 13:8). Slain in eternity past, He entered the time/space continuum wrapped in swaddling clothes, assuming the appearance of a mummy. And so it was that the Father's only Son, destined to die, encountered the woman's only son, destined to live.

Two Sufferers

In addition to two crowds and two sons, we see two sufferers.

Jesus exuded such abundance of life that people loved to be with Him—the reason He was called a winebibber and a glutton by His enemies (Luke 7:34). At the same time, He is and always will be the Man of Sorrows (Isaiah 53:3). He was not the Man of Sorrows because He was depressed about His own situation, but because He had such great compassion. That is, He carried the pain of others in His heart.

'Weep not,' Jesus said to the woman.

'Arise,' He said to the young man.

'Come up,' He will say to us as He calls us to meet Him in the air.

He who lives in this hope will be free from the fear of death which keeps people in bondage all of their days. Like birth, the process of death is painful. Nonetheless, who of us would say to the unborn baby, 'Don't come out. Stay in there. Your skull will be contracted. Your shoulders will be squeezed. Your body will be covered with fluid. Your best bet is to stay in the womb forever?' Not one of us would tell a baby this because not one of us remembers the pain we went through when we were born. Yes, the process was painful, but there was a whole new life awaiting us—including waves to surf, mountains to ski, people to meet, things to learn—a dimension infinitely greater than the dark confines of the womb.

So too, death was never meant to hurt. When, after He had lived 33 years, Jesus was transfigured on Mt. Hermon, He began to glow. So too, I believe God's intention was that after man had lived sinlessly on earth, he would be transfigured and ushered into heaven. But man sinned. Therefore, part of the repercussion of sin is that now, our moving into eternity, like being born, is painful. We watch someone dying and our heart breaks. But the people in heaven are not saying, 'Stay on earth' anymore than we would tell the unborn baby to stay in the womb. They're saying, 'Get out of there! Come up here! There's a new dimension up here more radical in comparison to earth than the difference between the world and the womb. In heaven, there is joy unspeakable and full of glory, for eyes have not seen nor ears heard the wonderful things God has prepared for those who love Him,' (I Corinthians 2:9).

Yes, moving into eternity can be painful because of sin. But just as we have forgotten the pain of our own birthing process, so too in heaven, the pain of our death will not even be a distant memory.

Even if the Lord never answers another of my prayers; even if I never sense another feeling of fellowship with Him; even if I never gain another insight from His Word, I'm going to heaven, and that alone is enough. We are a saved people, gang, freed from the fear of what is beyond.

After 13 years, Black Bart was finally apprehended. At his arrest, one of the US marshals pulled the black hood from his head to discover not the desperado from Death Valley as legend held him, but rather a squeaky-voiced, mild-mannered druggist from Decatur, Illinois. The reason Black Bart never fired a shot is because he never had a bullet. His only weapons were fear and intimidation.

So too, because Satan was defeated and death destroyed on the Cross of Calvary, we can join Paul in proclaiming, 'Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' (I Corinthians 15:55). We're free. So rejoice, precious people, and celebrate your salvation.