



## Desperation & Deliverance

Luke 7:1-17

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It is fun to be here. David and Kate are such dear friends to our family. It's hard to believe how fast life goes. I started working at Grace 15 years ago with David, and we were there for seven wonderful years. But our partnership was such a blessing. Then I was at College Church and was sent out to plant another church. I'm convinced it takes more than one church to plant another church. Your generosity supported Jon Trott, and I'm so thankful for how well he pastors me; I feel your tangible love toward our church through him. Six years ago this month is when Hope Fellowship was planted, and by God's grace it's growing in depth and health, and we are thankful for what the Lord is doing there.

I'm privileged to open God's Word together with you today. We'll be looking at Luke 7:1-17. I'll talk first about Luke 7 as a whole chapter before we focus on these verses. But first let me read the passage which is speaking of Jesus:

*After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup> Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him. <sup>3</sup> When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant. <sup>4</sup> And when they came to Jesus, they pleaded with him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, <sup>5</sup> for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue." <sup>6</sup> And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. <sup>7</sup> Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. <sup>8</sup> For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." <sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." <sup>10</sup> And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.*

*<sup>11</sup> Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. <sup>12</sup> As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. <sup>13</sup> And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup> Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." <sup>15</sup> And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. <sup>16</sup> Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" <sup>17</sup> And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.*

Let's pray together.

Father, again we thank You for the privilege to come before You and sit under the teaching of Your Word. Thank You for Your Word that is clear and authoritative. Thank You that it convicts us and gives us hope, pointing us to Jesus. I pray that Jesus would be magnified by the power of the Spirit in our time together. May Your Word do its work through the Spirit's power so we would be changed and our eyes would be fixed on Jesus. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, in Whose name we pray. Amen.

When we were in college, a time that is increasingly more distant in the rear view mirror, there was a song we sang a lot in our campus ministry. It was written by Amy Grant and sung by Ashley Cleveland and Gary Chapman. The lyrics went like this:

Where do I go when I need a shelter?  
Where do I go when I need a friend?  
Where do I go when I need some helping?  
Where do I go? Back on my knees again.

I know that song dates me terribly. It was from an early '90s album called "Songs From the Loft," which contained worship songs from a group that met in a barn in Nashville. If you Google that song, and if you have any nostalgia in you, you'll be alarmed at the '90s sound. You might not know that the '90s had a sound, but if you hear that, you'll think, "Yeah, that's not how music sounds anymore." And probably for very good reason. I haven't thought of that song for years, but as I was reading Luke 7, the chorus kept going through my head. "Where do I go? Where do I go? Where do I go?"

I think you could summarize this whole chapter with one word: desperation. The people we encounter in Luke 7 are all desperate for something. We don't know their names, but we know what they're longing for here. A Roman centurion has a dear servant near death. A grieving widow, now left alone, is desperate for hope. Even John the Baptist sends unnamed messengers because he desperately wants to know if Jesus is the One they're waiting for or if they should be looking for another. And at the end of the chapter is the well-known story of the sinful woman who comes sobbing to wipe Jesus' feet with her tears and hair.

At Hope Fellowship, we've been going through Luke since Christmas, and we've followed Jesus from His home town to Capernaum, teaching, healing and casting out demons in that area of Israel. One thing I've noticed is that Luke keeps the reader from feeling the stories of the people Jesus healed. Remember from chapter one that Luke tells Theophilus he's writing "*an orderly account.*" Therefore he's been very methodical so far as he goes through the stories. Like an investigative reporter, he's done a good job letting us know the facts.

But here in chapter seven it seems he's shifted more to human interest stories. We don't just learn about what these people need, but we are more able to feel their desperation for Jesus. Each account ends with us not only being aware of their need and the miracles that follow, but we also have our eyes locked on Jesus. As we read through the book of Luke, we can ask the question: Who is this Jesus? Who is this One Who has come?

Before we look at these verses individually, one more note about Luke 7: it begins and ends with faith from unlikely people. In the beginning, Jesus is commending the faith of the Gentile centurion. At the end, Jesus also commends the faith of the sinful woman. She is described that way and Jesus agrees that "her sins are many." But as she comes before Him to worship Him, He commends her faith.

As we focus on the first 17 verses and the two stories they contain, my aim is for us to meet Jesus and know Him more truly through the eyes of these two desperate, unlikely people. We will see that no need is too great for Him. Here in this chapter we will come to the intersection of desperation and hope. First, we'll consider the Gentile centurion, and then we'll talk about the grieving widow.

### **The Gentile Centurion**

Returning to Luke 7:1-2, we read, "*After he had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. Now a centurion had a servant who was sick and at the point of death, who was highly valued by him.*" As Jesus is ministering in Capernaum we're introduced to someone simply by his title. A centurion is a Roman military officer who

commands about a hundred men. Typically the centurions were wealthy men because of the rewards they received for their military conquests over the years. But this commander has a problem: one of his servants is sick and at the point of death. This was a highly valued servant. The word Luke uses is one used to describe a dear child. This servant is important to this important man.

Verse three: *“When the centurion heard about Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.”* At this point we don’t know why he didn’t go himself, but we assume it’s because he’s a Gentile and Jesus is a Jew. When elders find Jesus, they plead with Him earnestly. This is strong language, a repeated intercession. They tell Jesus, *“He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built us our synagogue.”*

It’s shocking that Jewish leaders would go to bat for an unclean Gentile. But this man loved the nation of Israel and had built a synagogue out of his wealth. Incidentally, the foundation of that building still stands today in Capernaum. Normally Jews were not treated well by Romans, especially by the occupying forces who were in the towns to keep peace. Every Roman soldier in their town was further proof to the Jews that they weren’t being ruled by their own king, but rather by an empire.

Still, one of these officers was different. Sometime about Israel prompted him to pay for a new synagogue. When the elders learned that the dear servant of this centurion was sick, they decided to repay him by responding to his request. Remember, these Jewish leaders already knew Jesus. In Luke 4:31 we read how Jesus was teaching in that synagogue: *“...they were astonished at his teaching, for his word possessed authority.”* They probably also knew about His healings.

Luke 7:6 says, *“And Jesus went with them.”* But notice, the elders and Jesus don’t actually get to the centurion’s home. *“When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends...”* We might be tempted to wonder why the centurion first sends elders and then friends, but does not come himself to greet Jesus. But look at the reason he gives: *“Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you.”*

If you remember, the very reason the elders gave Jesus for why He should come with them is that the centurion was “worthy” for this. But here this Gentile Roman soldier says the opposite: “I’m not worthy to have You come under my roof.” He recognizes Jesus’ authority and his own unworthiness. *“For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes; and to my servant, ‘Do this,’*

*and he does it.*” In other words, “Jesus, I’m a soldier. I get it. I understand how this works. When I give an order, because of my authority, they’d better obey it.” The point he’s clearly making is that he understands the authority of Jesus over sickness. “You can just say the word and my servant will be healed. You don’t need to come under my roof or even go any further.” This is really significant.

Broadly speaking, this is a Gentile who recognizes the power of Jesus’ word. If you’ve gone through Luke to this point, you read about people who are astonished at Jesus’ power, teaching and authority. But this is the first time we see someone trusting that Jesus can do something sight unseen by merely speaking a word. Others had been astonished when Jesus speaks and someone is healed—but this man expects it because of Jesus’ authority. Basic military training is primarily learning about how to follow orders without question. This non-Jewish centurion believed Jesus had authority that was similar to but even greater than his own. He knew if Jesus just spoke the word, his servant would be healed.

I think this helps us understand why Jesus commends him in verse nine: *“When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, said, ‘I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.’”* Rather than speaking to the men whom the centurion had sent, Jesus turns to the crowd and says, “Not even in Israel have I seen this faith. This is a Roman soldier, folks.” In the book of Luke, people have been marveled by what Jesus has done, but this is the first time we see Jesus speak a positive word about someone else. He’s not marveling at someone’s unbelief, but rather he’s marveling at a Gentile’s faith. In this way, Jesus elevates the miracle of faith over the miracle of healing. It’s a big deal to be healed, but He’s saying it’s an ever bigger deal to have this kind of faith. “No one in Israel has noticed this about Me, but this man has gotten to the heart of why I’m here.”

Verse ten: *“And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the servant well.”* The centurion believed Jesus could heal by His very word. But did you notice that Jesus doesn’t even say a word; at least nothing is recorded. He doesn’t say, “He’s healed,” or “Be healed.” The men just return to the house to find the servant already healed. Jesus has so much authority that He can do—sight unseen and without even speaking a word—something we can never do for ourselves. He is truly God. We step back in amazement at Who He is.

What I think this should do is help us see the nature of faith as it applies to us today. We don’t see Jesus physically, yet we trust His ability to do what it unseen. Hebrews 11:1: *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* We believe Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father and that He has all authority (Hebrews 12:1-2; Ephesians 1:15-23). We believe He has laid down His life for us (1 John 3:16). Even though we

don't see Him, we love Him by faith (1 Peter 1:8). It is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). We see these things, figuratively speaking, in His Word.

The call today for us as Christians is to believe His Word when it tells us that Jesus has the authority to heal the sickness of sin in us. He also cares enough about us to direct our eyes toward Him. Saving faith is believing that Jesus' death and resurrection is what actually does the healing from the curse of sin. He didn't just speak the words "It is finished" on the cross, He laid down His life in death but then had authority to take it up again.

So like the centurion, we remember that faith in Christ saves—not because of how strong our faith is, but because of how strong the Object of our faith is. So often we say, "I just need more faith." But in reality what we need is to better understand the strength of the Object of our faith. I think this is what Paul is asking in Colossians 1:9: *"We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."* He is not praying that we will become smarter. He's praying that we will understand Who Jesus is and how the gospel connects to our lives.

Jen and I went bungee jumping once—and I emphasize once. But when you're standing at the top of a bungee-jumping platform, it doesn't matter how much faith you have. What really matters is how strong that harness is. Our bungee jumping experience took place in Florida 22 years ago, before we were married. We would drive by a big sign that said, "\$5 Bungee Jumping." I think I was 20 at the time, and as a good 20-year-old who likes to talk smack, I would say, "It's only \$5. I think I'll go bungee jumping." I was just talking.

Then one day Jen's mom took me up on it. "I'm paying—let's go." Jen said, "I'm going!" And since she said she was going, I had to as well. It was alarming. I think the most alarming thing frankly about bungee jumping is the fact that it doesn't end when you get to the bottom. It just keeps going. But when I was standing on that platform, it didn't matter how strong my faith was—that I just believed everything was going to be okay. What mattered was how strong the object of my faith was.

Here's what I think we should notice: faith is reliance on the authority and ability of Jesus. It doesn't depend on our worthiness or on how faithful we are or the amount of faith we have. Rather, it depends on Christ's ability and the presence of faith.

This Gentile knew enough to believe Jesus that he sent word, believing Jesus could just speak and his servant would be healed. What this means for us today is we can come to Jesus by faith. We don't have to make ourselves worthy so He'll do something for us. You might be thinking, "All this sounds really good. I'm actually very attracted to Jesus." Maybe you've been

investigating Christianity. But you also know what's going on in your life and you're thinking you need to clean some things up before I come to Him. "He can't take me the way I am now." But what that is essentially saying is, "I can do something to make myself worthy before God." Rather His call is this: "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you'll be saved. Trust in Jesus alone." It's not your worthiness that saves you. It's faith and the Object of that faith: Jesus and His ability. He was able to lay down His life and take it up again. So the question isn't simply, "Are you desperate?" The question is, "Are you willing to come to Jesus in your desperation? Do you believe Jesus is willing and able to save you?"

## **The Grieving Widow**

Not only do we see Jesus' interaction with this Gentile soldier, we also see Him encounter the grieving widow. Look again at Luke 7, beginning with verse 11:

*Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.*

Luke's account of this event is the only one in the four Gospels. As Jesus comes near the gates of a small town called Nain, he comes upon a funeral procession. So there are actually two intersecting crowds of people: those who are following Jesus, and the people who are attending the funeral of the widow's son. The crowds who are with Jesus are in a party mood. They have seen miracles. People are being saved. He's even talking to Gentiles. But they are now encountering a bier bearing a dead man and the grieving people who know it's too late for any kind of miracle.

Notice what the passage tells us. This man was the only son of his mother, and she also has no husband. Perhaps she no longer had any family at all, and if so, she was probably walking alone at the front of the procession. As the two crowds approached each other, verse 13 tells us very simply, "*When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.*" Don't you love it when we see truth about how our Savior feels toward someone? He walked up to this woman and said "*Do not weep.*"

When you and I are at a funeral, we put our arms around the person who's grieving and say, "Don't cry. They're in a better place." That's our effort to comfort with mere words. But if Jesus' words, "Do not weep," are not about to be followed up with some action, it's almost spiritual malpractice. He's speaking in anticipation of something. Before she can even respond, probably before she can even stop weeping—maybe even before she recognizes Who this is in

front of her, the Jesus she may have heard about—He reaches out, touches the bier and the bearers stand still. Think of it. It was like walking up to the pallbearers as they carry out a casket.

Then Jesus speaks again: *“Young man, I say to you, arise.”* And the dead man sits up and begins to speak. This isn’t some sort of weird medical thing where a dead body sits up. This man actually speaks. Then Jesus gives him back to his mother. I love what Phil Ryken, the president of Wheaton College, writes about this:

This would have just been another forgotten tragedy if it were not for one great fact. When the widow went out to bury her son, she met Jesus on the way. A dramatic confrontation was taking place at the front of that funeral procession, a collision between life and death. An unstoppable force was meeting a seemingly immovable object.

Death is the seemingly immovable object. It’s a certainty. All of us are moving toward the day of our death—every day a bit closer. But this death was not such an immovable object on that day. Jesus spoke and the dead received new life. Then *“Jesus gave him to his mother.”*

But look at the response in verse 16:

*Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has visited his people!” And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.*

After Jesus raises the young man from the dead, the people respond in four different ways. Fear seizes them all, they glorify God, they call Jesus a great prophet, and they say, *“God has visited his people.”*

The fear of God means to have reverent awe before Him. The sheer impossibility of this miracle would have caused people to step back from Jesus rather than stepping toward Him. They had just seen Someone reach through the curtain of death to the other side and call someone back from the dead. This is no run-of-the-mill, garden-variety miracle. This wasn’t simply a healing. It wasn’t something they could explain away. This was the dead receiving life. So they feared: “Who is this?”

Then it says they glorified God, because they recognized that only God could bring someone back from the dead. But to call Jesus a great Prophet is not the full description of Who He is. He is God Himself. It is God Who has visited them, His people. Jesus is far greater than any of the Old Testament prophets.

Even more, I think it's interesting how Luke places these two stories together—the story of the centurion and the story of the widow. In keeping his goal of presenting an “orderly account,” I think Luke is wishing to draw the reader's attention to the connection between Jesus and Elijah and Elisha. You may remember the Old Testament story of how Elijah raised a widow's son from the dead in 1 Kings 17. And then Elisha healed a Gentile military officer, a Syrian named Naaman, in 2 Kings 5. That happened without the officer even coming to Elisha, just as Jesus has done for the centurion.

God is visiting His people and He's speaking, but He's not just doing it like He did through the Old Testament prophets. The Word has now become flesh. Jesus has come that we might have salvation. And Jesus goes beyond just healing people—He's headed toward the cross, which is the last place in Scripture where we meet a centurion and a grieving mother, probably a widow. This centurion stands at the foot of the cross, and seeing that Jesus had breathed His last, *“He praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’”* (Luke 23:47). He understood truth about Who this Man was—that He was hanging there having been wrongly convicted. Jesus' mother Mary stood grieving as her Son hung on the cross. Surely when she *“treasured all these things in her heart”* (Luke 2:51), she didn't envision what that last day would be.

So as this centurion and grieving mother stood at the foot of the cross, we again have an intersection between desperation and deliverance, between desperation and amazing hope. The centurion couldn't know that this One, like a Lamb led to slaughter, would rise from the dead and prove He truly was innocent—He truly was God. Mary couldn't see that His death would deliver her and all those who have faith in her Son. But later she finds the tomb empty, and then she knows that the Son has done what He promised at the beginning, that He had saved His people from their sins.

Luke 7 is full of stories of desperate people. Hope Fellowship, where I have the privilege of pastoring, is full of desperate people. I'm a desperate person in need of Jesus. New Covenant Bible Church is full of stories of desperate people who need Jesus. Each one of us here has scars, proving how much we desperately need Jesus. But in our desperation, the call for us today is this: don't hide. Don't turn to the right or the left, looking for some other kind of salve for your desperate need. Look for Jesus. He excels at bringing hope to the desperate. The answer to the question, “Where do I go?” is, “Back to Jesus.” He brings hope to the desperate.

Let's pray.

Father, thank You that You don't leave us in our desperation, that You don't leave us in a state where we are groveling or needing to show our own worthiness by our works or by our efforts—even by our prayers. Rather, You draw near to us and You show us compassion. You

loved us while we were still Your enemies. Thank You, Jesus. Thank You for Your compassion.  
Thank You that You died for us.

Father, I pray for any one here who is so overwhelmed with desperation that they feel they are spiraling downward and there's no way this Jesus can save them. I pray that You would lift their heads and open their eyes so that they would see a wonderful Savior to Whom they can run. Father, thank You for Jesus. Thank You that You meet us in our desperation. May You get the glory as we run to Your Son. In His name. Amen.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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