

## Living Hope

Luke 7:11-17

September 21, 2025

Three times in back-to-back Psalms the following question is posed by a soul in pain.

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

Three times this worshiper expresses their feelings of despair aloud in prayer.

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

Three times the author of Psalms 42 and 43 gives voice to a spirit of hopelessness within.

“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?”

And three times this troubled soul responds with a word of exhortation:

“Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Psa. 42:5, 11; 43:5, NIV).

Like the composer of Psalms 42 and 43, throughout our lives, we too will experience seasons of hope and seasons of despair. Often, it is our circumstances that lead us to these feelings of despair. We might define *despair* as “the feeling that there is no hope and that you can do nothing to improve a difficult or worrying situation.”<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever been in a situation like this where you felt you were completely out of options? Can you think of a time in your life when your circumstances led you into what felt like a lose-lose scenario? It is easy to lose hope in these situations. Hopelessness often breeds despair.

I’m reminded of a passage in the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians where he reflected on his own feelings of hopelessness and despair.

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death” (2 Cor. 1:8-9a, NIV).

Finding themselves at the center of a citywide riot in the province of Asia, Paul and his persecuted companions had endured such suffering that they “despaired of life itself.” Their extremely difficult situation led them to a place where they felt they “had received the sentence of death.”

Again, hopelessness can breed despair. However, my aim this morning is not to keep our focus on despair, but to redirect our attention to something better: hope. I’ve got good news for us. There is hope for our downcast and despairing souls. Turn with me, please to Luke 7:11-17.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/despair>

Last Sunday, we resumed our sermon series in the Gospel of Luke after a brief pause this summer. You'll notice in verse 11 of chapter 7 that our passage follows chronologically soon after the events we looked at last week in verses 1-10. Luke intended that we, his readers, should consider these two accounts together.

Even though we're breaking up Luke's Gospel into smaller pieces, this is a good reminder that these passages were not intended to be considered in isolation from one another. What we will look at today builds on what we saw last Sunday. And future sermons will build on what we are looking at today.

As the school year kicks in and the rhythm of the fall gets reestablished, let me encourage you to prioritize the ministry of the word on Sunday mornings. Your commitments, your responsibilities, and your calendar will compete with your discipleship for your attention. Your own discipleship pathway begins with gathering regularly with your church family for congregational worship and the ministry of the word.

In verse 11, Luke takes us from the city of Capernaum on a journey twenty miles to the southwest, to a small town called Nain. As Luke records at the end of chapter 4, Jesus was sent to "proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to...other towns" (Luke 4:43) beyond his base of operations in Capernaum. And by this time in his ministry, Jesus was often accompanied not only by his twelve disciples, but also a "large crowd" of other followers.

On this occasion, as Jesus and his entourage approached the town of Nain, they were met by another "large crowd," a group of mourners leaving the city on their way to a funeral. Perhaps you can recall a time when you've driven past a hearse followed by a long line of cars heading to the cemetery. It can be a sobering moment when you encounter death in this way.

In verse 12, Luke continues to narrate the scene from Jesus' perspective.

"As [Jesus] approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her" (v. 12).

As they approached the city of Nain, **Jesus encountered a hopeless situation**. The text tells us that the young man who had died was an only son. The fact that a mother was preparing to bury her child was tragic enough. The fact that he was her *only* son made her suffering worse.

The grieving mother accompanied those who were carrying her son's body to the burial site outside the city walls. In Jesus' day, funerals took place shortly after a person died, often the same day. In the first century, there were no morgues or funeral homes that could allow for burial to take place at a later time. This meant that the sting of death was a fresh wound.

When we look closely at this text, we realize that this was not the first time death had come to this woman's family. Luke also tells us in verse 12 that she was a widow. We're not told how

long this woman had been without her spouse, but the implication was that with no husband and no son to care for her, this widowed, grieving mother was now in a very hopeless situation.

Scripture frequently exhorts God's people to care for widows, orphans, and other vulnerable people not simply out of kindness, but out of necessity. This woman had no life insurance policy to lean on. She may have had other family, but likely she had no source of income and owned no property. Her options were not just limited, they may have been non-existent. That's what I mean when I say Jesus and his followers encountered a *hopeless* situation.

I doubt you need to think long to recall a time when you felt hopeless. In a room this size, chances are some here are navigating a hopeless situation right now. By hopeless, I don't just mean difficult. I mean, from your perspective, you can see no path forward, no good option, no solution that will turn your situation around. In the words of Psalm 42 and 43, you too might describe your soul as downcast. And perhaps, hopelessness has led you to despair.

Here's the good news: there is hope for our downcast and despairing souls. Look with me at what happens next in verses 13-14. **Jesus entered into a hopeless situation with compassion.**

Luke tells us in verse 13 that "When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her." The ESV reads "he had compassion on her." Please don't mistake Jesus' heartfelt compassion for this woman with pity. He didn't just feel bad about her situation. The word Luke uses to describe Jesus' heart for this grieving mother describes someone who is deeply moved with love and affection for another person. When Jesus saw this woman walking alongside her son's open coffin, his heart went out to her.

Notice how Luke refers to Jesus in verse 13. He refers to Jesus as "the Lord." This isn't the first time Jesus is called Lord, but it's the first time in Luke's Gospel that Jesus is called "*the* Lord." Consider the significance of the title "the Lord" here. In the Old Testament, God's people were instructed to profess,

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4, NIV).

On Mount Sinai, God declared to Moses about himself,

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exo. 34:6, NIV).

By placing that little word "*the*" in front of the title "Lord," we are to understand that Christ *the* Lord, the one who holds the entire universe in his hands, took notice of this woman and her hopeless situation, and entered into it with compassion. The transcendent author of creation draws near to a small-town woman in her darkest hour.

Do you think it was a coincidence that Jesus chose this particular day to travel from Capernaum to Nain with his disciples? Do you think the Lord was surprised to encounter a funeral on his way into town that day? Let this sink in for a moment. The sovereign Lord who is before all

things, and in whom all things hold together, this Jesus sees us in our hopelessness and despair. But he doesn't just see our hopeless situation, he enters into it.

Check out what happens next. As this widow prepares to bury her only son, Jesus turns his attention to her and says to her in verse 13, "Don't cry." I've been to many funerals over the years. Never once have I said to a grieving family member, "Don't cry." Would you? Of course not! That would be considered rude and extremely insensitive. Why then was Jesus bold enough to tell this woman not to cry? Doesn't Scripture tell us that when the Lord attended the funeral of his dear friend Lazarus that even "Jesus wept" (John 11:35)?

Before the mourners even have time to respond to Jesus' words, he commits another taboo. Verse 14 tells us,

"Then [Jesus] he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still."

Imagine for a moment gathering at a graveside and as the pall bearers carry the casket to the burial site, a stranger reaches out and stops the procession. Not only does Jesus interrupt this funeral, by touching the bed on which the corpse lay, Jesus would have been deemed ceremonially unclean.

No longer was Jesus an outside observer of this hopeless situation, the Lord had now fully entered into this woman's moment of despair to minister with compassion. God incarnate came face to face with human brokenness.

We tend to reserve the theological term *incarnation* for the Christmas season. When we speak of Christ's incarnation, we tend to think of Jesus, our Emmanuel, taking on human flesh and entering our world as the infant son of the virgin Mary. That's absolutely correct. But incarnation doesn't just refer to Jesus' birth. Jesus' incarnation means that the Son of God fully entered into our hopeless situation. Here's how the author of the book of Hebrews puts it.

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:14-18, NIV).

Folks, our Lord Jesus doesn't merely see us when our souls are downcast in despair and our circumstances feel hopeless. The incarnate Son of God has entered into our hopeless situation, and he has entered into our despair with compassion.

Jesus halts the funeral procession, and as he speaks again, his next words are not directed to the grieving mother or the crowd of onlookers, but to the dead man himself. Look with me again at verse 14.

“Then [Jesus] went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.”

As we’ve worked our way through Luke’s Gospel, we’ve seen numerous instances of Jesus’ miraculous ability to heal. Jesus has rescued individuals from demonic oppression. He has cured a man with leprosy, reversed paralysis, and as we saw last Sunday, healed a centurion’s servant of a terminal illness. But this miracle outside the city of Nain eclipsed them all. Luke tells us that the formerly dead man “sat up and began to talk” (v. 15).

I don’t know about you, but would love to know what this man said. Luke doesn’t tell us. That’s because the central figure in this story isn’t the dead son, it’s his mother.

When the Lord raises this young man from the dead and returns him to his mother, Jesus shows us that he alone can remove our despair, and he alone can restore our hope. Folks, I am convinced that this is the reason this story is in our Bibles. Jesus shows us that he alone can remove our despair, and he alone can restore our hope. The point of this passage is not that Jesus is compassionate and we should be too (though he is, and we should). The point of this passage is not that Jesus can do miracles (though he does, and he can). The point of this passage is that **Jesus alone can remove our despair, and he alone can restore our hope.**

But let’s be careful not to misunderstand *how* Jesus removes our despair and restores our hope. While it’s true that Jesus returned this once-dead young man to his mother, we must not think that the gift of her son was the source of her hope. Receiving her son back likely brought this mother joy. Having her son again may have supplied her with peace and a level of security. But to place her hope in her son would be foolish. Why? Because inevitably, both the mother and the son would experience death. Such hope would eventually run out.

What then did Jesus offer this woman that could permanently remove her despair and irrevocably restore her hope? Himself. Jesus alone can remove our despair and restore our hope, because he alone can offer us something that can never be taken away: himself.

There is not one thing in this world that cannot be taken away. Some of you have lost a spouse. Some of you have grieved the loss of a child, whether by death, or simply through fractured relationships. Many households have been impacted by divorce, infidelity, or broken marriages. In time, some of us will unexpectedly lose a job. If the economy fluctuates, some of us might lose our savings, our investments, or even our house. Many of us have experienced the breakdown of our bodies and the loss of health. There may come a time when the freedoms we take for granted are taken away from us. We may lose our reputation because of our own sinful choices or the sinful actions of another person. The storm this summer showed all of us that a single event can impact a community for generations. And if any of these things—even the good

things—are the object of our hope, we will eventually experience hopelessness and despair not if, but when they are taken away from us.

We live in a world that is searching for hope but is often stuck in despair. Fear, suffering, and loss are contributing to a shared sense of hopelessness. Friends, we are fools to look for hope in things that will inevitably be taken away.

Jesus alone can remove our despair and restore our hope, because he alone can offer us something that can never be taken away: himself.

Let's wrap up by looking together at how this story ends. Look with me at verses 16 and 17. Luke tells us that all who witnessed Jesus' miracle—the disciples, the crowd that came from Capernaum, and the crowd attending the funeral—

“were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country” (vv. 16-17).

What we see here is that **hope restored should lead God's people to respond in worship**. Luke tells us that those who were there that day were “filled with awe and praised God.” I doubt this meant that those gathered together in the city of Nain that day had a fully formed Christology. At best, many recognized God's hand at work through Jesus, but they only saw him as a great prophet, similar to Elijah or Elisha in the Old Testament.

But Luke assumes that the readers of his Gospel have read chapters 1-6 before coming to this account in chapter 7. We have a more accurate picture of who the Lord Jesus is.

If it's true that Jesus alone can remove our despair and restore our hope, then hope restored should lead us to respond in worship.

I didn't pick our closing song, but I'm grateful to our musicians for how we're closing our service today. In both of our services this morning, our closing song points us to the hope we have in Christ. If you walked into church this morning with feelings of hopelessness or despair in your heart, I pray that by opening God's word together, that by looking to Jesus hope has been restored.

The psalmist writes:

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God” (Psa. 43:5, NIV).

Let's pray.