

What Happens When Life Meets Death

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It's state law in Arizona and most states that you are supposed to pull over when you meet a funeral procession. Often police will escort the procession to ensure both safety and courtesy to those who mourn. Not even a red light can break up a properly flagged funeral procession. Once that lead car takes off, all the cars have a right to follow through every stop and intersection. Some states even allow the lead car in a funeral procession to go right through a red light without stopping. I've ridden along in the lead car of a procession, followed the police escorting one, and have had my own commute interrupted as I've paused to let other procession pass. I'm guessing most of you have experienced a similar experience at some point. Everyone knows that you don't interrupt a funeral procession. But this morning we read about Jesus doing just that. He's not leading the procession, but he brings it to a halt. What is his reason for stopping it? We read in Luke 7 this morning Jesus saying only a few short words and making a few small gestures. But these few words and few gestures are more than enough reason for stopping every funeral procession around the world. What is his reason? Well, what happens when life meets death?

Jesus has quite a large following at this point. He has been working in Galilee and people have been coming from near and far just to touch him, hear him, and see him. When he came to town, people heard about it! We read last week how even before he reached Capernaum the people there heard about his coming. Now leaving Capernaum Jesus approached a small town called Nain; a full day walk southwest of Capernaum. Luke mentions that a large crowd was going along with him. The healer of ills, hero of so many, is marching.

As his crowd approached the town another crowd emerged onto the scene. Take away all the modern aspects of a funeral procession and picture the scene: No long line of cars is found, but there is a long line of people paying their respects and mourning. No hearse, no police escort, not even a coffin. The body is wrapped and visible on a stretcher. It's being carried by hand to a destination outside the town. We see a funeral procession of the ancient world leaving the town. With it there is a sizable number of people from the town of Nain. Death is marching.

Somewhere at the head of this death procession was the mother of this dead man. And she knew what death was! Her husband had been carried out already in the same way. This same type of procession was once taken by her and her son as they grieved the loss of a husband and father. Of all people she knew what death meant! Now it was just her as she mourned the death of her only son. She was alone. Do you think it mattered to her that a large part of her town was joining her in this procession? A fine and kind gesture, but it didn't change her loneliness and grief. She was weeping. This procession revealed the loss of a child, the loss of an only child, the loss of an only child faced in loneliness.

What happens when life meets death? When we meet it we can only do what this woman was doing, deal with the dead body and let the tears flow. What more can we do? Don't you find it hard sometimes to know what to say when someone dies? "I'm sorry." But sorry doesn't help. "He was a good person." But that didn't stop him from dying. Saying "I know how you feel," only make the person think, "No, you don't." We might offer, "If there is anything I can do, just let me know." But you can't do what they really want and need, stop the pain, fix the broken heart. Our expressions of comfort can't remove the pain and tears. That woman was surrounded by a town of people that wanted to help her as best they could. But she was still left with a broken heart. We are no match for death, we can't handle it.

Nor can we stop it. What happens when we meet death? Nothing. Just the flow of emotions, the pain, tears, the usual procession. And then life goes on until another death -just as it did for this woman with her husband, then her son. Really each and every person on this earth is by nature already as good as dead. It's only a matter of time before you are part of a procession that ends with a little copper or stone marker that has two dates on it and a name between. We can't deal with death, we can't fix the brokenness it leaves behind, and we can't stop it.

And with such broken hearts and helplessness, where do we turn when facing death? Those who have suffered great loss can begin to wonder "doesn't God care at all?" Along with that thought comes, "How will I handle this?" The truth is that we can't by nature turn to our God for help in death. By nature, we can only see him as an angry God, a God we blame for death. You see by nature we turn against our creator when facing death. Anger, frustration, as if it is his fault. And grieving without having Jesus leaves one with no real consolation, only the feeling that God is not concerned. One is left separate, distant from God. And this is our situation without Jesus!

This is because we have a worse problem than death. Death is only the symptom of a greater problem. Our hearts are born to rebel against God. And when our hearts meet the author of life in this way, only one side will win. The terrible effects of sin, the terrible wage of our hearts waging war against our God results in our hearts being broken as we mourn the death of loved ones. Crying is all we have left to face death's procession! It's the body's way of surviving the train wreck that death is to us! Why? Because we can't deal with death, we can't stop it and we can't handle it. By nature we don't even want to accept that we are the reason for it! And it boggles the mind to think that there is someone who can really help deal with death.

With a few short words and a few small gestures, the Lord of life shows what he does to death's march. He not only offers the consolation, 'don't cry' but acts and gives a reason for us to really be comforted.

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." Luke mentions Jesus by his Divine title here. It was the author of life that saw this march of death in front of him. God notices. Not only did he notice her, but his heart broke for her. We might begin to think that with all the people in the world the God won't pay attention very much to our own sufferings; that he has somehow forgotten us in this large world. But we see Jesus looking beyond the crowd around him to one who grieves. The Lord does care about us and our sufferings. He is concerned about us when we grieve. Jesus' heart went out to this widow. You could literally read this that "his heart broke." God shares in our grief. He feels our loss and pain. We know that we never have to feel abandoned and alone in our grief. Our God does care! See what happens when Life meets death? His heart goes out. It pains God to see our grief.

What's the first thing he does in response? He gives us his comforting Word. "Don't cry" he tells her. That might seem ridiculous at a funeral coming from anybody else. But not from Jesus. So it is with us. He tells us, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." And as unreal as that may sound when facing great loss and death, it is true! And it comforts us in our sorrows. With the very Word of God we have the response of the author of life to comfort us in all our grief. He speaks to us through that Word. In it we see that death causes him tears to, our pain causes him pain, and our suffering leads him to offer us Words of comfort. To all who would listen they hear him saying in his word "Don't cry." See what happens when Life meets death? His Word is given to comfort us.

It is interesting to note: every time this word, meaning "his heart went out to her" comes up in connection with Jesus it is followed by an action on his part. He always responds to the one he sees needing his compassion. That act was the feeding of the five thousand, healing the leprous, blind, and demon possessed. He demonstrates a heart of compassion! A heart that goes out to those who suffer, and in response a hand that reaches out to help! Though we may not by nature turn to him for help, Jesus turns to us to give the help. See what happens when Life meets death? His hand reaches out.

Our own gestures, words, and actions have not power over death. We might say "don't cry" to those who mourn, but it's an out-of-place comment. Yet the few short words of Jesus and the few small gestures show that he backs up his words of comfort with action. *Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it 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.*

Jesus is the one companion who can help us deal with our tears. He who tells the widow "don't cry" tells you that you have reason to be comforted. He reached out his hands to remove the reason for our tears –the real reason, not just the outward effects, but the sin which stood against us. He dealt with the cause of death to give us eternal life. He didn't just say "blessed are those of my disciples who mourn, for they will be comforted." But he reached out his hand to help and win that comfort for all the world. He came reach out his hands out to save on the cross to take that brokenness and lasting punishment after death which all who rebel against God deserve. He came to take the punishment of the worlds sin. He has removed it forever. No one who dies in Christ has died for punishment of sin. "Don't cry" those who die with faith in Christ don't die for sin. Jesus did. And we know he backs his Words as he lives! Jesus could stand before Mary Magdalene that Easter morning and say, "Why are you crying?" in all sincerity. He shows that he has the power over death. He who said get up to this dead young man will speak with a loud voice and wake all the dead –never to face death again. He who said "don't cry" to this widow will say the same to us as he himself wipes every tear from our eyes.

God does care and does respond to death. For a time we grieve, but not as the world grieves, which has no hope. We know our tears will end. Death has lost, Life has overcome through Jesus our Lord! His heart goes out and he tells us comforting words "Don't cry." He backs up his Words by his own death and resurrection and the life to come! His hand reached out, literally, to save us from tears and death. And as a result broken hearts are healed!

They 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. News of this miracle spread. News of what happens when the author of Life meets death spreads. News of what Jesus has done to remove our sin and sorrows spreads. It started with Jesus looking outside those who were gathered around him. Jesus is looking outside of the people who have gathered to one who is suffering. We need to be aware of the loss and suffering that also occurs beyond those who gather at church for worship. He cares for those suffering who are not at this moment gathered right around him. Jesus went with purpose to Nain to meet this crowd and this woman.

"Don't cry" The next time Jesus says this in Luke's gospel will be for Jairus' daughter to the crowds that mocked him when he said it. And some will mock you when you say Jesus is the real healing for a broken heart. But his words bring awe in place of tears. He backs up his words of comfort. God has come to help us! Jesus does care for the grieving and gives us real consolation. Now through us he desires news to spread that he alone brings an end to death and all tears.

"God has come to help his people." They really nailed it with that statement. Life had come. See what happens when Life meets death? 1) His heart goes out 2) His hand reaches out 3) Our hearts are healed.