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**BY**

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SERMON IX.

THE COMPASSION OF CHRIST FOR THE WIDOW OF NAIN.

St. Luke vii. 13.

*When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her,*

*and said unto her, Weep not.*

The sacred historians seldom tell us what Christ felt. Their business lay with his wonderful actions and gracious words, rather than with his feelings. Whenever therefore they mention any particular effect produced on his mind by passing cir­cumstances, we may be sure that there is something remarkable in that effect; something which is worthy of our close attention, and was intended to arrest it.

He had now a funeral before him. “Behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.” Our Lord could not behold with indifference such a scene as this. In a mind like his, it must have excited many and strong emotions. One only is mentioned. It is compassion. Concerning this, we find these four particulars recorded—its nature, its object, the cause which drew it forth, and one of the effects which it produced.

I. Consider *its nature.* The original word implies that it was deep and tender; not that slight movement of pity with which we are affected, when we hear of the sorrows of a neighbour; but the lively and strong feeling which agitates our hearts, when we look on the sufferings of a friend or a child. It is more than a feeling for the wretched; it is a feeling with them.

We often ascribe such compassion as this to God, and we are warranted to do so. The scripture has done so before us. “His soul,” we are told “was grieved for the misery of Israel.” “In all their afflictions,” says Isaiah, “he was afflicted, and the Angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity, he redeemed them.” But we dare not give to this language its full meaning. The great God cannot be affected as we are; he can know nothing of human passions and human infirmities. And yet we are taught that the Lord Jesus Christ has known and experienced them all. His soul has been “exceeding sorrowful;” he has been “moved with compassion;” he has “wept.”

Here then we come to the first cheering truth which this history confirms—*the real and complete manhood of the Lord Jesus Christ.* Few of us think enough of this. We are told that he “was made man,” and we believe the amazing fact; but then we generally confine our view of his manhood to the mere form he took on him, to the body in which he suffered and died. But the scripture goes much farther. It speaks of him as man within as well as without; as possessing a human soul as well as a human frame; as being as truly and experimentally ac­quainted with human feelings, sin only excepted, as any one of ourselves.

It tells us too why this human soul and these human feelings were given him. It was for a most wonderful and gracious purpose—that he might carry them up with him to his lofty throne, and feel, like a brother, in heaven, for those whom he has left in tribulation on earth. This is St. Paul’s account of the matter; “It behoved him to be made in all things like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest.” “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.”

We lose nothing then by the high exaltation of the Son of man. Our misery can reach him at the right hand of his Father, just as quickly as this widow’s reached him when he was by her side at Nain; it can move his heart as deeply. It cannot indeed disquiet his soul, as the sight of misery disquieted him in the days of his flesh; he no longer weeps and is troubled; but it affects him as much. Nay, it possibly affects him more. His human soul is now “made perfect;” its powers are enlarged. Its compassion may consequently be increased. Nothing assuredly is gone from it but its pain and weakness. It is a father’s pity, without its imperfection; it is a mother’s love, softened and heightened by the love of heaven.

II. Pass now from the nature of this compassion, to *its object.* This was not the dead man who was carried out, though he was cut off in the strength of manhood; it was his surviving mother.

1. Learn here then that *the objects of our Lord's compassion are the living.* They whom he pities are not to be found in heaven or in hell. We must look for them only in our own world. And where shall we go in order to find them here? To our churchyards? To our vaults and graves? No; to our churches, our houses, our homes.

2. Learn also that *our grief for the dead must not stand in the way of our compassion for the living.*

We weep for the dead. Let nature speak, and we should all say that we do well to weep for them, especially when death comes suddenly upon them in the days of their youth. O what a strange and melancholy change have they experienced! Instead of the cheerful light of day, the unbroken darkness of the grave for ever covers them. They are alone, solitary there; their only companion is the worm. All their earthly hopes have died, and their expectations perished. But the dead need no pity. Every tear which nature makes us shed for them, is lost.

If they died the enemies of God, we are called to a harder work than mourning and weeping. Now is the time when all the corruptions of our fallen nature will try their strength. Satan will “come in upon us like a flood.” No hour perhaps is so much his hour as this; never is the power of darkness more fearful. Left to themselves, every movement of our souls will be an accusation against the King of heaven; every thought, rebellion. We shall be as blasphemous as though we ourselves were lost, and almost as wretched. In such a perilous situation, we have neither time nor strength for useless sorrow. Our own hearts require our care. Our business is not to mourn, but to “humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God,” to tremble and be still.

If they whom we have lost, are safe with Christ, have we not more reason to envy than to pity them? Put the question to yourselves—Which is more the object of grief, a ransomed sin­ner caught up into heaven out of this troublesome world, or you who are left behind amidst its sorrows?

You say perhaps, with the agitated David, “Would to God I had died for them!” But pause for a moment. Ask yourselves another question—Were it in your power, would you take them from the blessedness of Jehovah’s house, and give them in ex­change for it the pangs which their loss has occasioned you? the forlornness, the desolation, which is now overspreading your heart? The thought is a cruel one. Hear then the language of the prophet; “Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him.” And what would be the language of your buried friend, could he speak to you from his glorious rest? “Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves.” “If ye loved me, ye would re­joice.”

Your feelings are roused, brethren. Waste them not in the indulgence of a compassion, which is not needed. Give them a new direction. Let your surviving friends, let a suffering world, let millions of thoughtless and dying men, let your own poor soul, have more of your love and pity. You cannot add to the joys of heaven, but you may lessen the woes of earth. It is your duty to lessen them; and that grief for the dead is neither Christian nor right, which hinders you, for any long time, from helping the living.

We have seen then the nature of our Lord’s compassion—it is a lively pity, a deep and tender sympathy. We have seen also its objects—they are the men who are now alive on the earth. And here a question arises—How may we obtain for ourselves this divine compassion? How may we get within its reach? The text answers this question.

III. Consider *the cause* which drew forth the Saviour’s pity.

This widow was not the personal friend, nor yet a follower of our Lord; at least, she is not described as such. Neither did she ask him for his sympathy. It was simply the sight of her misery, which obtained it for her; “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” It might be that his thoughts were carried forward to a future and yet more distressing burial. The hour of his own departure was not far distant. In the anguish he now witnessed, he saw perhaps an image of that sword which would soon pierce through the soul of another parent. He thought of his own beloved mother weeping over his own mangled frame, and his soul was moved.

Be this as it may, we may safely come to this conclusion—*The sympathy of Christ is as free as his grace.* It takes its rise out of the very same love that nailed him to the cross. It may be obtained on terms as gracious, as the mercy which saves the soul. It wants nothing to place sinners within its reach, but misery. The objects of it are all the wretched.

I do not say that the Lord Jesus Christ felt for this widow, as he would have felt, under similar circumstances, for one of those faithful women who followed him in his wanderings; or as he actually did feel for the afflicted Martha and Mary “whom he loved;” or as he might have felt for this widow herself, had she supplicated his pity. He loves them that are his, as he loves none other; he “manifests himself unto them as he does not unto the world;” and as for the prayer of the sorrowful, it calls into exercise his tenderest mercy. But let us not limit the grace which knows no bounds. Are you suffering? It matters not whence that suffering proceeds, you are already one of those whom Christ compassionates. There is not a sinner on the earth, who has not a measure of his compassion; no, nor a pang in any heart with which he is not touched. Turn to the grave of Lazarus. What drew forth those groans and tears which came from the Saviour there? Not the loss of his friend simply. Four days before, he knew that he was gone, and spake of his death with unbroken calmness. He wept because he could not look on misery without emotion, because the suffer­ings even of his bitterest enemies found their way to his heart. “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled.”

IV. We come now to look on this tender and free compassion in *its effects.*

Of these, only one is recorded in the text. It manifested it­self in words. These however were only two. Jesus said unto her, “Weep not.” Yet even these two short words seem at first unmeaning and useless. Our Lord could not intend to forbid a widowed mother to weep at the funeral of an only son, nor could one simple sentence be expected to heal the grief from which her tears proceeded. What then was the design of this address?

1. We shall not greatly err, if we consider it as intended to show us, first, *the earnest desire of the Saviour’s heart for the consolation of the afflicted;* his readiness to comfort them.

In another minute, this widow’s grief would come to an end. Our Lord knew this. He himself was about to turn it into joy. Yet he cannot, even for a few brief seconds, leave her to weep unnoticed. The words of comfort drop, as it were involuntarily, from his lips. He said unto her, “Weep not.” There is something very touching in this circumstance.

We know, brethren, that there is a glorious rest prepared for the people of God; we know too that they will soon enter into it. Now it might have been supposed that this was enough; that he who has prepared such a rest for them, and them for such a rest, might well leave them, for a few short years, to bear, with their fellow-sinners, their full share of the griefs which are so soon to end. But no; they are sorrowful, and they must be comforted. Heaven when they die, is not enough; they shall have heavenly consolations while they live; and Christ himself will impart them.

Before he entered the world, this was his command to his prophet, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people. Speak ye com­fortably to Jerusalem.” When he appeared amongst us, he came “as the consolation of Israel.” Hear him opening his own commission at Nazareth; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted.” And look at him when his great tribulation was coming on. He shrunk from the prospect, but yet it could not keep his thoughts from the griefs of others. He knew that though they would all forsake him, his loss would make his dear disciples sad, and he spent his last hours in preparing them for their approaching sorrow. “These things,” said he, “have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.” And when he left the earth, what was his last request to the friends who sur­rounded him? He tells them to “go into all the world,” and carry comfort, “the gospel,” glad tidings of great joy, “to every creature.” If we follow him into heaven, he appears as a Com­forter still. Not satisfied with filling the wide kingdom of the redeemed with joy, he speaks peace to them who are mourning here. The very Spirit whom he sends forth to lead them to himself, is appointed to make their hearts burn with joy in their way to him. And this is not all. Even when sorrow and crying shall be done away, when all his people are brought to heaven, and not a grief can be found among them all, what is his lan­guage? It seems as though he could not bear the thought of ceasing from the work he loves. He speaks of himself as still employed in it. He “shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

2. This saying of Christ may show us also *his knowledge of the human heart.*

Deep grief will not bear many words. Reasoning is thrown away upon it. Offered in such a form, comfort is worse than useless; it wearies and oppresses. The fact is, that a severe sufferer cannot reason. He is alive to feeling only; and it is by feeling that we must reach his heart. Reason with him, and though your words be wise as an angel’s, they will do him no good. He will only say with another harassed mourner, “I have heard many such things. Miserable comforters are ye all.” But show the man compassion, and he understands your kind­ness. Feel for him and with him; he thanks you, and is com­forted.

Look at the friends of Job. They acted at first with a wisdom and tenderness, that make us love them. As soon as “they heard of all the evil that was come upon him, they came to mourn with him and to comfort him.” And how did they pro­ceed? “They lifted up their voice and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads to­wards heaven. So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights; and none spake a word unto him, for they saw that his grief was very great.”

It was precisely in the spirit of these men, that our Lord acted towards this bereaved mother. “He had compassion on her.” He said just enough to show the feeling, and then was silent.

It was the same at Bethany. Martha meets the Saviour as he was drawing near to her afflicted home. She was in sorrow. She loved her brother, and she mourned for him; but she had not Mary’s depth of feeling; her grief was calm. She addresses her Lord like one who could listen to consolation, and who wished for it. He accordingly speaks to her; he reasons with and consoles her. But how different is his conduct towards the gentle Mary! She hears from Martha, that he was come, at whose blessed feet she had often sat; and with all the speed which love could give her, she rises up and runs to him. One sentence is all that her bursting heart would allow to come from her; the next moment she is on the ground at his feet. Mark his conduct. He probably loved this woman more than he loved Martha: she loved him more; she was more like him: but not a word of consolation does he offer her. He shows his love in another manner. He “groaned in the spirit;” he “wept.” And then, as though he could bear no more, as though he were impatient to end her anguish, he abruptly asks, “Where have ye laid him?” and calls the departed Lazarus from his tomb. If this, brethren, be not human feeling, and tender and refined human feeling, where shall we find it?

The Lord Jesus Christ knows the heart. He knows all its workings, and feelings, and windings. He knows it altogether. No peculiarity of disposition or of situation can hide one of its thoughts from him. We cannot thus enter into each other’s hearts. We are not all formed alike; we do not feel alike; we are not all affected in the same manner and degree by the same circumstances. We therefore perplex one another. Our fellow­man seems strange to us, and we strange to him. But Christ can understand us all. He can fathom every heart to the very bottom of its sorrows. And why? Because he knows by ex­perience what is in man. There was laid on him the misery, as well as the iniquity, of us all. He is acquainted with our griefs because “he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;” all our griefs and all our sorrows. Hear the apostle’s statement of this truth; “We have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted,” or troubled, “like as we are.”

The subject we have thus considered, may be applied to many practical uses.

It shows us *the importance of a frequent remembrance of the Redeemer's manhood.* We are all born to trouble. However diversified our lots may be, every one of us will find in the end that sorrow is his birth­right. Now sorrow, when it is heavy and long continued, weakens the mind. It can be effectually relieved by God only, but its tendency is to render us less disposed to lift up our hearts to God, less ready to call into exercise those principles which have been in ordinary troubles our support and solace. The great God seems so high above us, so distant from us, that we despair of reaching him. We say indeed, with Job, “O that I knew where I might find him! that I might come even to his seat!” but then we too often add, with desponding Zion, “The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me.” And yet at this very time perhaps, we can talk of our griefs to a fellow-sufferer, and feel them lessened as we tell him of them.

Here then we discover the means by which we may hold communion with the God of heaven. Set him before you as the Son of man. Look on him as he appeared in mortal flesh, “a man of sorrows;” a man of deep experience in all the woes that can rack the heart; a man of the liveliest, tenderest, most intense compassion. Place him, as it were, by your side. Regard him as your “companion in tribulation.” Like Enoch, walk with him. Like John, lean on his bosom. He is not ashamed to call his people brethren; O let them not be afraid to use him as a Brother and a Friend!

This scripture directs us also *where to go for compassion.* You are ready, brethren, to turn for it to earthly friends. Your hearts often ache for the sympathy of some fellow-worm. Which of you has not said in his trouble, “Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends, for the hand of God hath touched me!” And what is their pity when you obtain it? You feel that it seldom reaches your case, that it never goes so far as your sorrows go. There is something in your grief, which you cannot make even your tenderest friend comprehend; some­thing which you must bear alone.

These disappointments bid you look higher. They tell you that the earth cannot afford a wounded spirit the sympathy it craves. There is but One in all the universe, who can show or feel it. He feels it already; he is prepared to show it, ready to meet you as a Friend. He has endured much, that he might be qualified to have compassion on you. O that you could be prevailed on to make trial of his love! Hear his own gracious invitation; “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” If you are heavy laden, no matter what the burden may be which weighs you down, this call is addressed to you. It may be true that you are not his followers, that you have never sought the cleansing of his blood, nor accepted his great salvation; it may be true that you have lived in ignorance of him all your days; but are you weary? are you burdened? are you oppressed? Then come to the Lord Jesus Christ for relief. This widow was a stranger to him, yet “he had compassion on her;” why should he refuse to pity you? If you have rejected him as a Saviour, do not reject him as a Friend. It would indeed be awful to be the objects of his mercy for a few short years, and then to endure his wrath for ever. But if you will not stretch forth your hand for his richest blessings, go to him for his least. Any thing that brings you to his feet brings you near the source of every mercy. None ever offered to him a single petition, but he received more than he sought. For six thousand years he has been wont to give more than either we desire or deserve. You may ask him only for the healing of a broken heart; he may give you salvation for a lost soul. The consolation you receive may be the beginning of an eternity of joy.

They who make light of Christ, may see here *how gracious a Being they despise.* And all of us most assuredly make light of him, who refuse to avail ourselves of his love towards us. That respect cannot be sincere, which allows us to seek our happiness anywhere rather than in him, which sets no value on any of his mercies, which rejects him in every character that he assumes, treating with equal neglect his offers for eternity and for time.

It is not from infinite greatness only, that you are turning away, brethren. It is from infinite kindness, and compassion, and grace; from tenderness which exceeds that of the mother who bare you; which you may search for elsewhere, through earth and heaven, and will never find.

Need I say that there is folly in your conduct? O that there were nothing worse! There is guilt in it, the deadliest guilt that can lie on the soul. And there is danger too. Insulted greatness is fearful, but despised love is tremendous. It is the sting of that worm which never dies, it is the fierceness of that flame which is never quenched. No wrath so dreadful as “the wrath of the Lamb;” none more certain. It is coming on. Ere long it will triumph over the patience which now seems bound­less, and rise above the compassion which nothing else can ex­haust. “Behold, he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him.” Shall I say, “Lift up your heads with joy, for your redemption draweth nigh?” Let me rather say, “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?” “He that despised Moses’ law died without mercy; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?”