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Surprised by Joy

Introduction

Those who love, love to plan surprises! Boyfriends do it when planning when and how to pop the big question. Husbands do it to bless and encourage their wives, like our son-in-law Ben who, knowing that Heidi was in need of a lift, threw a surprise party for her on New Year's Eve, which happens to be her birthday. That's right! She was a surprise tax deduction the year she was born—and it blew her away.

But of course, the ones who do it most are moms and dads. We threw surprise parties for our girls when they were little and took them on surprise outings, the most memorable of which was the time we woke them up in the middle of the night and said, "Hurry, girls! We gotta get dressed!" "But why, Mom? Why, Dad? It isn't morning yet!"

"Because," we explained, "We're going to Disneyland!" You should have heard them squeal! And with that, we loaded up the car, headed for the airport, and off we flew to sunny California, where we spent one of the best weeks of our lives at Disneyland, the "Happiest Place on Earth."

Parents who love their children love to surprise them with things that will make them happy because we know that's how to build lasting memories and impress on their hearts how much we love them—all of which I share to say this: Our Father in Heaven is no different! Rarely does He notify us ahead of time what He plans to do for us next month or next year because He wants us to live by faith, not by sight. So He plans to bless us by doing this or that a year or two or three from now, but He doesn't tell us about it, so when it happens, it blows us away realizing how much He loves us.

C. S. Lewis, the great writer and defender of our faith, said this was the great turning point of his life. His mother died when he was just a boy, at which point his father sent him to live in boarding school, which didn't make for a happy childhood. So without any Christian influence in his life, he grew up an atheist. After all, how do you believe in God when your heart's sick and you can't sense His presence in your life?

But God never gave up on him. He kept knocking at the door of his heart until finally, through the influence of a few friends and professors he respected, Lewis quit fighting the Spirit of God and opened his heart to Christ, realizing for the first time that there is a Father in heaven "who loves me and is watching over me," filling him with a joy he never knew! Hence, the title of his autobiography, Surprised by Joy, which leads me to the question I want us to ponder together—

If someone wrote a book about your life, could they give it a similar title? Has God been good to you in ways you never expected? I think everyone who knows Jesus ought to be able to say “yes” to that question. But when life gets tough, it’s easy to forget how good He’s been to you. But that’s when we need to believe it the most. That’s the focus of our study this morning where we meet a woman who was the recipient of the cruelest blows life can deliver, and because of it, she temporarily lost her hope in God. But then Jesus stepped into her life and surprised her with a joy beyond anything she could imagine. In a moment, we’ll look at the details of the miracle He performed for her. But first I want to say a few words about where it happened.

Luke 7, verse 11 is where our study begins, if you’d like to open your Bibles there now. Luke writes, “Soon afterward (that is, soon after He healed the centurion’s servant we read about last week), Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.”

This is the only place in the Bible where the village of Nain is mentioned, so let me take a moment to give you a little background on the area. First of all, the word Nain means “green pastures,” which makes sense when you see where it was located at the southern end of the Valley of Jezreel, also known as the Plain of Esdraelon, just south of Mount Tabor which you see in the background and where tradition says the Transfiguration took place.

This is also the valley where Israel fought many of its greatest battles. For example, this is where Deborah and Barak fought Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army and where Gideon defeated Midian with 300 men! I should add that the Church at Nain which rests over the ruins today is just 5 miles from Nazareth, which you can see in the distance, and the town of Shunam where the prophet Elijah also raised a widow’s son from the dead is just 1 mile from Nain. But the most important event which pictures both the power and compassion of Jesus, is the one found in Luke chapter 7.

1. The Power of Jesus

So let’s read it together before we go on. Luke continues in verse 2: “As he 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.

When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.” 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.”

Jewish funerals began at sunset with a procession leading the mourners to the burial site which was always located outside the city walls. This widow may have been too poor to hire professional mourners to weep for her, but that wasn’t necessary, because she was so well-liked that the whole town came out to support her in her grief. Sometimes people ask me, “Which is the Christian way to lay our loved ones to rest—burial or cremation?” And I’m always careful to say, “The Bible doesn’t command us to do either, so you’re free to choose

the method you can afford, but Jewish tradition and what I've chosen for my own family, is burial out of respect for the sanctity of the human body."

The body was carefully wrapped in linen with the face exposed, and then laid on a wicker casket which was placed on a bier, the men sharing the honor as pall-bearers carrying the body all the way to the cemetery which in this case was a series of caves on a hilltop just outside of town. That's where the procession was headed, but it never got that far because that's when Jesus appeared with His disciples, like the cavalry riding to the rescue at just the last moment. This young man would have been dead 3 or 4 days at the time which means, as Martha later warned Jesus about her brother Lazarus, "Lord, by now the smell will be terrible, for it's been 4 days since he died!" But that didn't deter Him for a moment. "Jesus 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 (praise God for his healing), and Jesus gave him back to his mother."

This was an incredible miracle that astonished everyone who saw it! But you say, "Wasn't it cruel of Jesus to make her wait that long before he healed him? After all, Jesus could have said the word and made him well the moment he got sick!" You're right. He could have. In fact, Jesus could say the word this very moment and do away with all illness forever, so we'd never have to suffer again, which sounds like a great idea if what you care about most in life is your own personal happiness. But that isn't why God saved us. He didn't save us to be happy. As Lewis explained, "God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing." The reason God saved us is to know Him, the only source of genuine joy, and to do that—to know Him—some degree of hardship is helpful, so that we learn to walk by faith and make Him, not ourselves, the focus of our love and worship.

Many of you've heard me tell about Heidi's surgery, when she had cancer as a little girl, but I don't think I've ever told you about the financial crisis it put us in afterwards. We had medical insurance through CB Northwest, our church association, but it was a self-insurance company and there weren't enough funds to keep it solvent, so it went bankrupt at the time of Heidi's surgery. And I know that \$12,000 doesn't sound like as much today, as it did in 1981, but it was a huge amount to us and we had no idea how we were going to pay it off.

Collection notices were coming in from doctors and hospitals and all the labs she visited, but somehow by the grace of God and the help of the insurance commissioner, we were able to recover most of those funds and pay off all of our bills by the end of the year, which speaks louder to many people than the miracle itself because try as you might to deny the testimony of her doctors, the one thing you can never deny is what God did to our bottom line when all hope was gone.

That doesn't mean we no longer worry when the bills pile up, like the dental bills are doing right now! It simply means that we trust Him more today than we did before that trial. We still face trials and temptations but now there's a rock of faith underneath it assuring us that no matter how bad it gets, He is more than able to help us overcome it. Amen?

Are you learning to trust Him like that too? It was an amazing miracle Jesus performed that shocked and awed every-one who saw it. Luke says of the crowd: “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 all the surrounding country.”

Think about those statements a moment! First of all—why such awe on the part of the crowd! Two reasons for that, I believe. 1) This was the first miracle-working prophet to appear in Israel in 800 years!

Many people assume that miracles were common in the Bible, but that isn’t true. There were only 3 periods in Israel’s history when miracles were plentiful—when Moses and Joshua led the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, when Elijah and Elisha were battling the prophets of Baal and calling the people back to God, and here during the ministry of Jesus and His disciples.

So this was something they never expected! John the Baptist never performed a miracle, but Jesus was performing miracles the likes of which no one ever imagined. And the second reason they were awestruck is because this was the very first person Jesus raised from the dead, and it blew the crowd away!

And one more phrase to notice before we move on, and that’s their statement: “God has come to help his people.” Folks, that’s a profession of deity! Granted, the crowd didn’t fully understand who Jesus was at this point, but Luke notices a widening in their understanding. Literally, they say: “God has visited His people,” which is very similar to what John says in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

In fact, I don’t know if you caught it when I read verse 13, but this is also the first time that Luke calls Jesus Lord. He says, “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.” “Lord” is a translation of the Hebrew name, “Adonai,” which is never used of anyone but God alone. But from on, that’s the term that Luke will use to describe Jesus in recognition of His power and divinity. That’s the first thing this miracle reveals about Jesus, and the second thing it reveals about Him was His motive for performing it, and that was—

2. The Compassion of Jesus

Listen as I read verses 12 and 13 one more time, this time from the English Standard Version which is the most literal translation of the Bible we have. Luke writes: “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. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’” Several things to notice about Jesus’ compassion in this passage, the first of which is the word itself! Stoicism which was the most influential philosophy in the ancient world taught that God was incapable of feeling, because if someone can make you sad or glad,

then that means they have power over you. But no one is more powerful than God, so that must mean that He's incapable of any feeling at all! But that isn't what Luke teaches. Luke uses the strongest word in the Greek language to say that Jesus was filled with compassion when He saw this mother's grief! The word means to feel pain here in your abdomen at the sight of someone else's suffering. Michael Bruce writes, "In every pang that rends the heart, the Man of Sorrows feels a part!"

So what's Jesus' immediate impulse the moment He sees this grieving mother? He says to her, "**Do not weep**," which is usually the last thing a grieving person wants to hear from us. Instead, what a grieving person usually wants us to do is simply sit down and quietly grieve with them—like the little boy I read about (call him Billy) whose best friend at school lost his mother to cancer. So, of course, that was the first thing he told his mother about when he got home from school that day. And right away she asked him, "Did you say anything to comfort him?" "No," Billy said, "I didn't know what to say, so I just sat and cried with him." You'll remember that's what Jesus did when Mary and Martha's brother died. When He saw their tears, the Bible says, "Jesus wept." But there was no need for weeping in this case. This was a time for rejoicing, because Jesus knew exactly what He was going to do. He was going to raise her son from the dead!

Notice that this woman was also a **widow** which means she's already undergone one of the most painful losses a human being can suffer. She lost the love of her life! But by God's grace, she still has one living link to him—her son! The word is **neaniskos**, referring to a young man between the age of 24 and 40 who helped her work the farm, so she had a way to support herself and keep the property in their family. You see, widows in that culture didn't have a right to inherit property, which means without a son, the land would have reverted to her nearest relative and she would've been left destitute, dependent on the charity of family and friends for her survival.

But Luke adds, "He was **the only son** of his mother." Can you think of a more bittersweet way to put that—the only son of his mother? By the way, I wonder how Jesus knew that. How did Jesus know that this was the only son of his mother? Did someone in the crowd tell Him or maybe He knew it the same way He knows when we're going through grief and heartache? Psalm 34 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Did you know that about Him?

I didn't mention it earlier, but that word in verse 16, where the crowd says, "God has **visited** His people" is **episkeptomai** which was used several ways in that culture. It could mean "to consider, to look upon, to investigate, or (in our context) to visit someone who was sick or suffering." You know what that means? It means we have a God who visits the sick! Did you realize that the last time you were sick? Or what about the last time someone you know was sick and in the hospital? You who have Jesus in your heart, did you take time to carry Jesus with you to the hospital to encourage them? As Philip Yancey has written, "Our job, and I say this carefully, is to show that we care even when it seems God doesn't." By which he means the primary way by which God prefers to communicate His love is through us!

Let's recap for a moment, then. Here's a woman with a single child—a son—who's suddenly taken from her leaving her brokenhearted and all alone without any means of support—an absolutely desperate situation for a widow in that day! But don't cry for her because Jesus has a plan.

Luke says it was at that moment, at the apex of her grief, that Jesus "came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.' And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother." Can you think of a more beautiful way of saying it than that? "He gave him to his mother." Imagine how she must have felt, not only getting her son back, which was like getting a "start life all over again" card, but also about Jesus who loves us with a compassion greater than anyone else in life! I don't suppose there was anyone or anything she loved more at that moment than Jesus! What about you?

And that was His plan from the beginning, from the moment He entered the town and saw a funeral procession in motion. He planned to reunite this son to his mother and this mother to her son. And folks, I have to say it, that's His plan for you as well. I'm taking this out of the out of the context of illness now and reminding you who may be estranged from a son or daughter this morning, not to delay, but do whatever you can to be reconciled to that child because in Jesus' view of things, there's nothing more important in life than that!

Conclusion

Those of you who follow the news have probably followed the story of David Goldman, a New Jersey man who married a Brazilian woman and had a son with her. Then 5 years ago she told Goldman she was returning to Brazil for a vacation with their son but she never came back. She divorced Goldman and married a rich Brazilian lawyer instead. Goldman was then awarded custody of their son, but she refused to honor the court order saying she was keeping Sean with her in Brazil.

So Goldman has been fighting to get him back ever since. Then last year, his ex-wife unexpectedly died while giving birth to a daughter. So Goldman assumed at that point that he'd get his son back. But his ex-wife's family refused, insisting they were going to keep him. But Goldman didn't give up. He spent thousands of hours and thousands of dollars trying to bring his son home, and guess what?

Last week on Christmas Eve, he and Sean were finally reunited. Can you imagine that? 5 years without your only son! Imagine how he felt when he finally brought him home! In his own words, "I am so grateful for the many amazing and wonderful people who have put forth such an extraordinary effort to reunite our family with our beautiful Sean. Please know that my love and the love of the rest of Sean's family knows no boundaries, and we will go to the ends of the Earth to protect him and shower him with every ounce of love that we have."

Amen? Isn't that a great story? I think that's a story that the widow of Nain could identify with, don't you? In fact, I think both her and Goldman's stories are ones that touch the heart of God, because I'd remind you that He also knows what it's like to lose an Only Son for a time. Actually, He didn't lose Him. The Bible says He freely gave Him to us as a sacrifice for our sins, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Which means He loves us more than we can imagine, doesn't it? To give up your only son! Incredible and amazing, but true!

So let me ask you. If He loves you that much, and He does, then why doubt His power or compassion a moment longer? If you've never invited Him by faith to come into your life, then do it today. Or if you do know Him, but something has broken your heart or taken your joy away, take a moment to tell Him about in prayer right now. And then get back into fellowship with Him and make knowing Him the one great purpose of your life. Lewis was right! "God can't give you a happiness or peace apart from Himself, because there's no such thing." It's His presence that gives us fullness of joy and at His right hand we find pleasures forevermore. Do you believe that? Then bow your head and pray with me, please—`