

In Times of Discouragement, Remember *the Widow of Nain*

Especially when we feel forgotten or overlooked, we must remember: Jesus came to the widow's aid precisely in her time of need, and He will come to us as well.

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Sometimes in the ups and downs of life, we can feel like God is not very active in our day-to-day lives. Our patterns seem rather tedious and monotonous. Not much changes, and it is sometimes hard to point to one area where God has directly intervened in our circumstances. Whenever I am hit with these feelings of insignificance in my own life, I often think of a woman in the New Testament who may have felt this way. She is not named in the scriptures but is simply known by the name of her village and by her marital status.

The woman is the widow of Nain, and only the evangelist Luke records her amazing story. For me she represents the essence of the Savior's personalized ministry and how He reached out to the discouraged, common people of His society. This account soundly settles the issue about whether God knows us and cares about us.

A brief synopsis of the miracle from Luke chapter 7 depicts Jesus intercepting a burial procession and miraculously bringing a dead young man back to life. But there is much more to understand about the setting. As with all miracles, but especially so with this one, the context is vital to understanding this incident. Having taught at the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center, I will share with you some personal insights about this miracle.

Nain was a small farming village at Jesus's time, nestled up against Mount Moreh, which defined the east side of the Jezreel Valley. The town itself was off the beaten path. Access to it was limited to a single road. During Jesus's time, this settlement would have been small and relatively poor, and it has remained that way ever since. At times in its history, this town has encircled as few as 34 homes and just 189 people.¹ Today it is home to about 1,500 inhabitants.

Luke begins his account by noting that Jesus was in Capernaum the day before and had healed the Centurion's servant (see Luke 7:1–10). Then we learn that "*the day after*" (verse 11; emphasis added), the Savior went into a city called Nain, accompanied by a large group of disciples. This sequence is very important. Capernaum is situated on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, 600 feet (183 m) below sea level. Nain is about 30 miles (48 km) southwest of Capernaum at 700 feet (213 m) above sea level, thus requiring an arduous, uphill climb to Nain. In order to walk from Capernaum to Nain, it would have taken at least one or two days. Recently, it took a group of youthful BYU Jerusalem Center students 10 hours to walk this route on paved roads. This means that Jesus probably had to arise very early or possibly even walk during the night in order to intercept the burial procession "*the day after*."²

As Christ approached the city after a very taxing journey, a young man probably in his 20s³ was being carried out on a burial slab. Luke tells us that this young man was a widow's only son, and some scholars interpret the Greek text to imply that she had no other offspring.⁴ A large group of villagers accompanied her in this most unfortunate family tragedy.

Obviously, having a son die would be a tragedy for anyone, but consider the implications

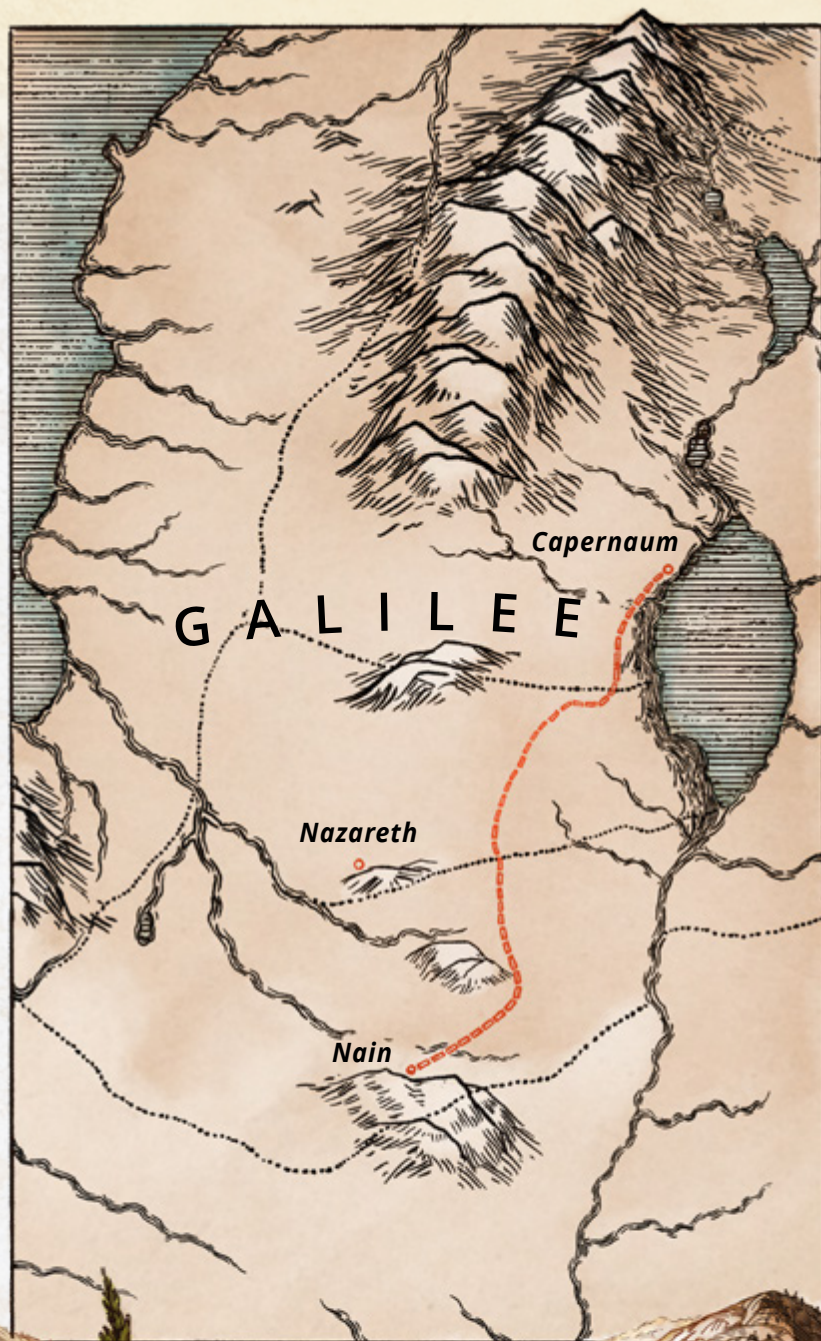


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for this widow. Just what would it have meant socially, spiritually, and financially to be a widow without an inheritor in ancient Israel? In Old Testament culture, it was believed that when a husband died before old age, it was a sign of God’s judgment for sin. Thus, some believed that God was meting out punishment upon this surviving widow. In the book of Ruth, when Naomi was widowed at an early age, she bemoaned, “After all, the Lord is against me, and the Almighty has broken me” (Ruth 1:21, International Standard Version).⁵

Not only was there spiritual and emotional pain, but this widow of Nain was also facing financial ruin—even staring starvation in the face.⁶ Upon marriage, a woman was assigned to her husband’s family for financial protection. If he died, then her care was delegated to her birthright son. Now that this widow’s birthright and only son was dead, she was at the end of her rope financially. If her son was in his 20s, she was probably a middle-aged woman, living in a small, secluded farm town, and now found herself spiritually, socially, and financially destitute.

Precisely at the narrow window of time when the villagers were carrying this woman’s son out to be buried, Jesus met the procession and “had compassion on her” (Luke 7:13). Actually, this





might be Luke’s greatest understatement. Jesus somehow sensed the utterly desperate situation of this widow. Perhaps she had spent the night sprawled on her dirt floor, begging Heavenly Father to know why. Perhaps she had even openly questioned why He was requiring her to live any longer on this earth. Or perhaps she was terrified of the pending loneliness that she would face. We do not know. But we do know that the Savior chose to leave Capernaum, which could have required Him to walk through the night in order to intercept the burial procession right before they put the body in the ground.

Yes, when He saw her tear-stained face as she walked behind the procession, Jesus felt great compassion for this woman—but it appears that His compassion came from feelings He experienced long before He just “happened” to intercept that burial entourage. He arrived there precisely in her moment of need.

Jesus then told the widow to “weep not” (verse 13). Unafraid of ritual uncleanness, He “touched the bier,” and the

procession “stood still.” He then commanded, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.

“And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And [Jesus] delivered him to his mother” (verses 14–15). Naturally, the crowd of villagers and Jesus’s followers were awestruck as their shared grief turned to pure joy. They all “glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us” (verse 16). But this miracle was also about rescuing one desperate soul. Jesus was aware that something was very wrong for this woman—someone who was looked down on in their culture. Her situation cried out for His immediate attention, even if He had to travel far to be there precisely at the right moment. He knew her desperate situation, and He came quickly. President Thomas S. Monson (1927–2018) spoke undeniable truth when he said, “One day, when we look back at the seeming coincidences of our lives, we will realize that perhaps they weren’t so coincidental after all.”⁷

Now, as uplifting as this incident is, it must become much more than a cool Bible story to us. It verifies unmistakably that

Jesus knew about this poor, forgotten, and destitute widow. Especially when we feel forgotten or overlooked or insignificant, we must remember: Jesus came to the widow in her time of desperate need, and He will come to us as well. Additionally, a second lesson we could gain from our Savior's example is the importance of reaching out to bless others around you. Many within your circle will be discouraged from time to time. If you can tell them about "Sister Nain" and how the Lord knew precisely her discouragement and great personal crisis, it could change night to day. Remember President Spencer W. Kimball's (1895–1985) poignant observation: "God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs."⁸

Of all Jesus's miracles during His time on earth, for me, few are as tender and compassionate as His ministering to the widow of Nain. It reminds us that we matter to Him and that He will never forget us. We cannot forget that. ■

NOTES

1. See E. Mills, *Census of Palestine 1931: Population of Villages, Towns, and Administrative Areas* (1932), 75.
2. See S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (2015), 364.
3. See Brown, *The Testimony of Luke*, 365.
4. See Brown, *The Testimony of Luke*, 365.
5. In Isaiah 54:4, the Lord tells the widow Israel that she will "no longer remember the disgrace of [her] abandonment" (New English Translation).
6. See Brown, *The Testimony of Luke*, 365.
7. Thomas S. Monson, in Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life," *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 7; *Liahona*, May 2001, 38.
8. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Spencer W. Kimball* (2006), 82.



To watch the Bible video "Widow of Nain," visit lds.org/go/041917.