

Jesus Visits the Town of Nain

The village of Nain is featured in the New Testament one time only, associated with a brief, but important visit that Jesus made there, along with His disciples. Jesus had just spent some time teaching and healing in the city of Capernaum. It is gospel writer Luke who tells the story, linking together Jesus' visits to these two towns (Luke 7:1-17). Capernaum, a rather large and prosperous fishing town, was located on the northwest edge of the Sea of Galilee, while small and somewhat insignificant Nain was located some 35 miles southwest of Capernaum (by foot travel) in the Jezreel Valley. Though Luke does not name other towns along Jesus' route of travel on this journey from Capernaum to Nain, overall studies of Jesus' travels, along with knowledge of the standard routes of travel in the Galilee region of His time, indicate that Jesus would most likely have passed through His hometown of Nazareth on His way to Nain. Nain is located only five miles south of Nazareth.

The writers of the four gospels omitted many of the events of Jesus' life and ministry; that is, they were purposefully selective. In fact, at the conclusion of his gospel, the apostle John commented: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (21:25).

Jesus in Nain

We might ask why Luke moved directly from telling the event of Jesus' miraculous healing of the Roman centurion's servant in the bustling fishing center of Capernaum (Luke 7:1-10) to

Jesus' raising to life the dead son of a widow in small, sleepy, out-of-the-way Nain (vv. 11-15). Perhaps it was to show that Jesus ministered not only to the larger important centers of society, but also to the smaller villages, where it might have seemed nothing much happened.

Luke mentioned a "large crowd" tagging along with Jesus and His disciples as He approached the town of Nain. At what point would these hangers-on have joined Jesus and His disciples? Did they travel with them all the way from Capernaum? Perhaps news of Jesus' teachings and healings in Capernaum and other places preceded Him, and the crowd gathered in from the area roundabout Nain. Nearby the present few ruins of the ancient town of Nain, there are some ancient tombs in the rocky area that Jesus, His disciples, and the group of hangers-on would have passed as on their way into town. As they "approached the town gate," they met another "large crowd" of people--a funeral procession--coming out from Nain, accompanying "a widow" whose "only son" had just died and "was being carried out" to the cemetery that Jesus would have just passed (7:11-12).

Luke mentions that Jesus "touched the bier" on which the corpse was being carried. Both the bier and corpse would have been considered ceremonially unclean. Therefore, to touch it would render one "unclean for seven days" (Num. 19:11). As "his heart went out to her," Jesus' compassion for this widow, who most likely had depended on her son for support--Luke notes that this "dead person" was "the only son of his mother" (emphasis added)--superseded His concern for ceremonial cleanness (Luke 7:13). We can assume that this young man had died only that very day, as both preparation for and the burial itself were carried out the same day in the first century (with no means of preservation, a dead body would decompose quickly, with

significant stench). However, since the body had to be washed, anointed, and wrapped, those closest to the dead person--family members and close friends--would have risked a seven-day ceremonial uncleanness. By also accepting that risk, Jesus was signaling to the family and crowd that He was more than just a visiting preacher, evangelist, or prophet; He was there as a family member too, a brother to the deceased and a son to the dead man's mother.

In and Around Nain

Following this event in Nain, Luke introduces a change of travel venue for Jesus and His disciples in 8:1, where he mentions, "Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another." As Luke arranged his account of Jesus' activities, therefore, he appears to suggest that the events recorded in the rest of chapter 7 not only took place in or near Nain, but were influenced by the significant event that took place at Nain, the raising of the widow's son to life.

According to Luke's account, it is a report of this event at Nain that prompted John the Baptist (whom Herod Antipas had imprisoned) to enquire of Jesus whether or not He was "the one who is to come," that is, the expected Messiah (7:18-19). In His response to John, Jesus partially cites Isaiah's messianic prophecy in Isaiah 35:5, that is, the healing of "the blind," "the lame," and "the deaf," to which Jesus adds the cleansing of "those who have leprosy" and the raising of "the dead" (Luke 7:22). Why would Jesus' raising of the widow's son from the dead indicate that Jesus might be the one to fulfill the promise of Isaiah's prophecy, as proof to John the Baptist? Perhaps because all these maladies were in some sense in the same category as death; they were just as incurable as death!

Among other activities of Jesus, seemingly still at Nain, Luke tells of a Pharisee named Simon, who “invited Jesus to have dinner with him” (vv. 36, 40). (A Pharisee was a Jewish religious leader who, for instance, believed in a future resurrection and afterlife.) Simon surely would have wanted to avoid becoming ceremonially unclean by associating with a contaminated Jesus, so the invitation to dinner must have been delayed for at least seven days.

However, Luke’s purpose for including this event in his narrative was not to tell us about Simon the Pharisee; rather, his focus was on the unexpected event that occurred during the dinner party. Somehow, an unnamed “woman in that town who lived a sinful life” found her way into the house, bringing a costly “alabaster jar of perfume.” The woman let her tears fall on Jesus’ feet as He reclined at table and dried them with her hair. She then poured her perfume on His feet. Scholars suggest that this woman may have been a prostitute, with perfume something she used in plying her trade. To offer it to Jesus and have Him accept it shocked the Pharisee and his other distinguished guests (vv. 37-39).

Here, again, Jesus set protocol and custom aside to reach out to one untouchable, a woman considered unredeemable, just as lepers were unhealable, and the dead incapable of living again. Turning to this sinful--but repentant--woman, Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (v. 50).

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Think about it . . .

Have you experienced a death and burial event in another culture where the burial must take place the day of burial because of the inability to preserve the body?

Have you experienced a death event in another culture where mourners (often hired professional) come to ritually mourn throughout the day and night before funeral and burial?

What is your reaction/response to a person of known “disrepute” when that person suddenly appears in your church service?