

May 7, 2006



“God Can”

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 7:11-15a

Soon afterward [Jesus] went to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her. And then the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, *“Do not weep.”* And he came 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.

She had been down this road before, but this time, it was worse. This time, she was all alone now, this widow of Nain. And, the future looked bad for her!

Back then, back in ancient Israel, society and custom said that a woman alone couldn't make it on her own. The laws were set up so that a single woman was not supposed to own property. Custom declared that a single woman couldn't go out and get a job and make her own living. Back then, every woman had to work hard, but no woman was permitted to be independent. Their religion taught that every woman needed a man to take care of her: her father, who passed her on to her husband; and if her husband died, she became her son's responsibility. Every woman needed a man.

Back then, a woman lived in a harsh and prohibitive society. If she wanted to live a respectable, good life, she couldn't be on her own. She needed a man: a father, a husband, or a son. There were no government checks, no subsidized housing, no food stamps. No equal employment

opportunity, no affirmative action, no women's suffrage. No Hebrew equal rights amendment, no sexual discrimination charges, no equality under the law for the fairer sex.

This little scripture story doesn't tell us a whole lot about this particular woman; but it tells us just enough for us to know that from the moment Jesus saw her on the road outside the city gates, Jesus knew she was a woman who didn't have any hope for her future.

This is what the scripture tells us about her: she was a widow. This was at least the second time she had walked down this road to the graveyard. Some time before, we don't know how long before, she had walked down this road accompanying the dead body of her husband. This time, she was walking down that road beside the lifeless body of her only son.

In addition to the grief she must have felt over the death of her son, think what his death meant for her life. She was no longer the responsibility of her father, if her father were even still alive. She had no husband to take care of her. And now, her only son was dead. That made her a woman without a man. She was a woman alone.

How could she continue to live?

What would tomorrow hold for her?

Where would she go?

What would she do now that she was all alone?

When Jesus saw her, it didn't take him long to understand her particularly dire circumstances. He knew society's demands. He knew her desperate situation. He knew how quickly all her friends and the good citizens of the city of Nain would turn their backs on her and show her the door. Social custom demanded it: they would turn their backs on her because she had become (through no fault of her own) a woman without a man; and that was someone they just could not accept. That was the reality back then.

What do you think the reality is today? We would never turn away a widow. We would never exclude a mother who lost her son. We're not like that today.

But the trouble is: there are still groups of people custom and society call outcasts. There are still people it is acceptable to hold a prejudice against. There are still people who are deemed different from

most of us, and society says their differences make it permissible to shun them.

This scripture story speaks to us and how we treat all those different people, all those outcasts, all those people we shun and judge. We need to study and understand how Jesus treated this widow in her hour of need. Maybe one of the lessons we can learn from this scripture is how to be more open, more accepting, more welcoming to all those who are different.

This is how the story began: “As Jesus drew near to the gate of the city, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow...”

This is not the way a happy story begins. The circumstances couldn't have been sadder. There was nothing to be done for this lonely old woman and her dead son.

There was nothing she could do. She couldn't give birth to him a second time.

There was nothing the doctor could do. It was too late for any of his medicines to heal the son.

There was nothing the priest could do. He couldn't force the son's spirit back into his dead body.

There was nothing the pall bearers could do. They couldn't force breath back into his lifeless body.

There was not a thing anybody could do. It was too late. It was beyond their power. It was out of their hands.

You have probably been in a place like that, a place where you can't change the circumstances, a place where you can't make things right, a place where you've got no choice.

If you've ever been in that place, everything seems hopeless, everything looks bleak, everything's already been said and done. It's a place where there is no hope for tomorrow, no rescue, no second chance.

Maybe you've been to a place like that. It's a dead-end kind of place, a place you can't change, a place where there's no way out.

When you come to that kind of place, you know **you can't** do a thing about it. And it's when you're in that place that you need to remember: even when you can't, God still can.

God **can**, and because there is always the possibility that God **will**, every situation still holds within it the opportunity for something wonderful to happen.

The scripture story continues: when Jesus saw the widow, “he had compassion on her and said to her, ‘*Do not weep.*’ And he came and touched the bier... And he said, ‘*Young man, I say to you arise.*’ And the dead man sat up, and began to speak.”

Something like this only happened three times in all of the New Testament Gospels! Jesus performed his greatest miracle only three times. He only raised three people from the dead: it happened this time, in this scripture, the one we know as the widow’s son; it happened to the daughter of Jairus [Luke 8:41-42, 49-56] , and it happened to Lazarus [John 11:1-44]. Those three people were given the gift of a second chance at living this life.

And if that can happen to them, just think what possibilities that opens to your life and your problems as you live your life.

Just when you think you have reached the limit, just when you think there’s no hope, just when you think there’s not a thing that can be done - there’s still the possibility that God will step forward and do something more for you, in you, and with you.

Think about what all that meant for the widow of Nain.

- There she was, boxed-in by custom and tradition; limited by legally passed laws and unwritten social regulations. She was left all alone to fend for herself in an unfriendly and restricted environment with no hope for the future.
- There she was: walking in her son’s funeral procession one moment, and then, after the briefest encounter on the road with Jesus Christ - she found herself praising God for her son’s resurrection the next.

No one would ever have to tell her what God can do, for she knew.

It’s a lesson you need to learn, too.

When you can’t, God can!

That’s a fact you need to know, because it brings with it some marvelous news.

- It means you don’t have to do it all.
- It means all the responsibility isn’t on your shoulders.

- It means the happiness and well-being of the people you know doesn't depend on you, alone.

The world tells you differently. The world wants you to think that you can do it all on your own. In fact, according to the world, you should do it on your own. The world says:

- You've got to control your financial security by making the proper investments.
- You've got to guarantee your health through the right exercise and diet.
- You've got to enhance your appearance by 30 minutes in a tanning booth, by wearing the right cosmetics, and by having botox injected. It's up to you.
- You can get a better job by attending night classes at Bryant and Stratton.
- You can have a happier marriage by reading Dr. Phil's latest self-improvement book.
- You can have smarter children by signing them up at the Sylvan Learning Center.

That's what the world says, but the world isn't always right. Because, after you've done all that and more...

- after you've made the right investments and lost twenty pounds,

- after you've had a tummy tuck, a face lift, and a hair weave,
- after you've learned how to dress for success and perfumed your body with the latest after shave,

- after you've attended the seminars and read the self-help books,

- after you've done all of that -

- you still feel it.

You still know it.

You still realize it:

- there's so much you **still can't do**.

You can't control life.

You can't guarantee that life will be good for the people you love.

You can't make things turn out your way.

You look at all the perplexities of life, all the mysteries, all the social constraints, all the economic restrictions, all the things out there that are completely out of your control - and you know there's so very much you **just can't do!**

Well, you're not alone.

Take a look at a few of the people in the scriptures who were sure they couldn't do a thing.

Abraham was 99 years old and his wife was 90, when God said they were going to have a baby. Abraham laughed at God, and said, "We can't do that. We're too old." [Genesis 17:16-17]

It had been years since Abraham and Sarah had given up on their dream of having a son. They were tired. The light had gone out of their eyes. At their age, they were much more conscious of their limitations and looking for conclusions than they were of the possibilities for new beginnings. "It can't be done," they said. "We can't have a baby now."

And God said, "I know **you** can't, but **I** can." It wasn't too long after that and Isaac was born.

And I'm telling you, there's a part of you who's like Abraham, too. No matter what the task set before you, you always claim to be the wrong age to do it. You're too young, or you're too old. You, too, say "it can't be done."

Jeremiah rejected the Lord's call and said, "I can't be your prophet. I'm too young. The people won't listen to me. I can't speak for you." [Jeremiah 1:6] God replied, "I know **you** can't, but **I** can." And sure enough, when Jeremiah spoke to the people, he became recognized as one of the greatest of the Old Testaments prophets.

Isaiah wanted to evade his calling. "But God," Isaiah said, "I can't be your prophet because I've done too many bad things. I've sinned too much. I can't speak for you." [Isaiah 6:5]

God said, "I know **you** can't, but **I** can." And God wiped away Isaiah's sin and guilt, and freed Isaiah to be the greatest of the prophets.

Jesus said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." [Luke 18:27]

There are going to be times when your resources are diminished,
when your strength is all spent,
when you just can't go on.

There are going to be times when you're all out of ideas,
 when you're all out of money,
 when you've run out of time.

There are going to be times when you don't have a thing to say,
 when you've got nothing to contribute,
 when you've got nothing left to give.

There are going to be times when the odds are stacked against you,
 when your defenses are down,
 when you're vulnerable from every side.

There are going to be mornings when you open your eyes,
 and there's no way around it,
 and there's no hope left on the horizon.

Those days are going to come, when you know you can't win,
 you can't escape,
 you can't solve the problem.
 You know **you** can't.

Those are the days that are tailor made for faith - when you come to the end of the line and you know you're all out of steam - that's when you really need God. Because when **you can't**, you need to remember that **God can!**

God can, if you let him.

How can God do it? How can he make the darkest moments, bright? How can he turn the hopeless situation, promising? How can he transform the desperate day, delightful? How can God do it?

He does it all through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden...*" [Matthew 11:28] God can change your life when you come to Jesus Christ.

It's one of the things Isaiah prophesied about 500 years before Jesus lived. In Chapter 53, Verse 6, Isaiah wrote, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way..."

We all have done wrong. We all have sinned. We all have messed up so much that there's no way we can get back to God on our own. We can't do it. It can't be done!

Imagine, if you will, this hand represents you and me.¹ (Hand open, palm up) When God made us, we were pure. When God first looked down on us, all he saw was our purity. There was nothing at all that stood between us and God. But then we sinned. Then, we made mistakes. Then, we lied. We did wrong. We hurt other people. We strayed from God.

Let this book represent all those things we have done wrong in life. (Place book upon open palm) They become a barrier between us and God. Now, when God looks down at us, all he sees are our sins.

Isaiah continued: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Let this hand represent Jesus Christ. (Other hand, open, palm up) There was never anything that stood between him and God, never a barrier, never a sin. And what this verse says is that the Lord God in heaven has laid upon him - on Jesus Christ - the iniquity, the sin, of us all. (Transfer book from first hand to second hand)

That’s why Jesus, on the Cross, cried out, “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” [Matthew 27:46] Because at that moment, for the first time in his life, Jesus was God-forsaken. There was a barrier between him and God. He was cut off from God - not because of anything he did, but because of our sin.

And then the Apostle Paul, writing after having experienced the Risen Christ in his life, added something to this.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul wrote, “For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [in Jesus Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.

What this verse adds is that God made Jesus - who was righteous and pure - God made Jesus take on our sin --- so that his righteousness, Jesus’ righteousness, could be transferred to us.

The greatest miracle we will ever know happens here. So that now, because of Jesus, when God looks down at us, he sees righteousness.

You can’t do that for yourself. Only God can do that for you.

And if God can do that for you, think what else he can do for you. Imagine the hopeless situations he can turn into joy for you, the sorrow he

¹ Borrowed from Alpha Program.

can turn into laughter, the darkness he can turn into light. He can even turn death into life.

This old world has come a long way since Jesus saw that widow of Nain. But the joyous discovery she experienced in her soul, when Jesus called her son back to life - when her boy sat up and started talking -

- that same joyous discovery,
- that same moment of miracle,
- that same moment of hope when all was lost,
- that same gift of a new life,
 which she witnessed that day,
 is here for you, too!

It comes to you, when you admit that there are things you just can't do, when you know that you just can't cope, when you realize you can't make up for your sins. It comes when you know you can't - and you allow God to do it for you.

So accept the gift that God brings to you, and **then** see what you and Jesus, together with the Holy Spirit, can still do.