

## THE WIDOW OF NAIN

*Luke 7:1-30*

As noted in the first lesson from Luke, our effort after covering the basic story of the Lord's life in Matthew is to center the lessons as far as possible in stories in the particular Gospel under consideration which do not appear in the other Gospels. This means that the facts of the Lord's life must be brought in by the way. In this lesson, for example, the teacher should tell briefly the story of the Lord's early years and of His baptism before taking up the chapter for the day. The latter part of the lesson ties in with the review and with the Old Testament.

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### Doctrinal Points

*The Lord is life itself.*

*All the prophets represent the Word.*

*Faith involves confidence.*

*True charity inevitably expresses itself in works.*

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### Notes for Parents

There are two very wonderful stories in our lesson for today. One is about a Roman soldier who heard of the Lord's miracles and, believing what he heard, knew that such power could come only from God and so it was not limited by any earthly conditions. We see evidences all about us of the Lord's power in the lives of other people. Are we as willing as the centurion was to acknowledge it and turn to the Lord ourselves, sure that He can help us?

And the other story is of a poor widow whose only son had died, and the Lord "had compassion on her" and with the one word, "Arise," brought her son back to life. Nothing that is recorded in the Bible is there by accident. It is the Lord who gives us this story. He gives it to us to show us that He has power over life and death,

and that we never really die. When He sees that it is best for us and for others to pass out of this world, our bodies die. But to each one of us He then says, “Arise,” and, like the widow’s son, we sit up and begin to speak. In the sight of the angels the thing which we call death is resurrection, for they then see us rising to active consciousness in their world. We should never fear death. It is always a blessing to the one who goes. We should look forward to it. And we will, if we believe and trust the Lord and try to live the kind of life which is taught in His Word. Shall we be like the people in our chapter whom John had baptized, or like the Pharisees and lawyers who rejected his counsel?

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### Primary

Follow the outline suggested, drawing as much as possible of the story of the Lord’s early life from the children’s own memory. Some of the older ones in the class should know most of it. With this class something can be done with the importance of the miracle itself, and with the latter part of the chapter.

Our lesson today is about a miracle. A miracle is a wonderful thing done by the Lord.

After the Lord was born in Bethlehem, He was taken down into Egypt for a while because Herod, the wicked king, wanted to kill Him. Then after Herod died, the Lord was brought back and grew up in Nazareth, where Mary and her husband Joseph lived. When He was twelve years old, He was brought to Jerusalem for His first Passover feast. After that He grew up in Nazareth, and no one knew anything more about Him until He was about thirty years old.

Who was sent to prepare the way of the Lord?

Who were John’s father and mother?

Who told his father what he was to be?

What sign did Gabriel give Zacharias?

John grew up and began to preach in the wilderness, and many of the good people went out to hear him and believed what he told them about the bad things they had been doing. So they knew that they must change their lives, and John baptized them in

the Jordan as a sign that they were going to try to do better. This was the way he prepared them to welcome the Lord.

Then one day the Lord came to the Jordan and asked John to baptize Him, because He came into the world to show us the things we ought to do and being baptized is one of those things. And after the Lord was baptized, the people saw a dove fly down and light upon Him, and they heard a voice from heaven which told them that He was the promised Lord.

He did not need to be baptized, but He was showing us what we ought to do. Then He began to go about preaching and teaching and working miracles of healing.

The miracles recorded in the Bible are wonderful things done by the Lord.

What miracles does our lesson today describe?

You see, the Lord is life itself.

He is the one who gives us our life from day to day.

He raised the widow's son to show us that no one ever really dies.

By this time John had been put in prison by a second Herod.

What did John's messengers ask the Lord?

What did He tell them?

What did He tell the people about John?

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### Junior

The review and introductory material are covered in the questions in the Junior notes. The teacher should see that the pupils know the answers to all these questions. Both miracles in the chapter should be taken up in this class, but the first one with the emphasis on the question of faith. In the discussion of the raising of the widow's son have the children look up and read the three other stories suggested and stress the Lord's control of life. Point out that it was from the Lord that power came to Elijah and Elisha. Use the last part of the reading for today to reinforce the review of John the Baptist.

Who was sent to fulfill the prophecy of Malachi about Elijah?

Who were John's parents?

By whom was Zacharias told what was to happen?

What sign was given him?

What do we call the first words he spoke after John's birth?

To whom else was the angel Gabriel sent?

What did he promise her?

What other familiar song of praise do we find in this chapter?

Now let us see how much you remember about the early life of the Lord.

Where was He born?

Where was He taken to save Him from Herod?

Where was He brought up?

Where did He appear in public when He was twelve years old?

How old was He when He began His public ministry?

Where did He find John?

What did He ask John to do for Him?

What sign was given from heaven at that time?

Where did the Lord spend forty days after He was baptized?

What happened to Him there?

After His temptations in the wilderness the Lord entered immediately upon His public ministry. He went about the country preaching, teaching, and healing. Today our lesson tells of two miracles. The word *miracle* means “a wonderful thing.” The miracles in the Bible are wonders done by the Lord Himself. If we study them, we find that there are two conditions necessary to the healing of any person: he must recognize that he needs help, and he must believe that the Lord can help him.

A centurion was a Roman soldier who commanded a hundred men. The people hated their Roman conquerors as a rule, but they liked the particular centurion mentioned in our lesson for today.

Why?

What did the centurion ask the Lord to do for him?

How did he show his faith in the Lord?

What did the Lord do for him?

How did He say he was better than the people of Israel?

The other miracle in our lesson is even more wonderful. The widow, grieving for the loss of her only son, longed for help. The Lord has power over life because He is life itself. All our life comes from Him. When we are sick, it is really only the Lord who knows whether or not we shall recover. Many people have recovered after the doctors have given them up, and many people have died whom the doctors expected to recover. We know that what seems to us to be death is only the laying off of the body which we have used

in this world, and that we always go right on living. We just go to sleep in this world and wake up in the spiritual world, where our souls have been all the time even though we were not conscious of it. In this miracle the Lord merely waked the widow's son again in the world. There are two similar miracles in the Old Testament and another in the New. Look up I Kings 17:8-24, II Kings 4:8-37, and Luke 8:41-42; 49-56. Both Elijah and Elisha, because they were faithful prophets, could use the Lord's power.

As we learn from Luke 3:19-20, John the Baptist had been cast into prison by Herod. While he was in prison, it must have seemed to John that he had failed, and he began to doubt his mission, and even whether it was really the Messiah whom he had seen and baptized. So he sent two of his disciples to the Lord.

What did they ask Him?

What did He answer?

What other miracles did He perform so they could give John a sure report?

Even the best of the people in those days, like John, judged everything according to the way it looked outwardly. So they needed to see miracles in order to confirm and strengthen their faith. But we can see with our reason that the Lord was the Messiah, God Himself come into the world. We do not need miracles to convince us, and this is a higher type of belief. For many people who saw the miracles did not believe in the Lord, as we see from the last two verses of our lesson.

What did the Lord tell the people about John?

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### Intermediate

In this class more should be done with the reason why the Lord performed miracles and with the correspondence of the miracles in our lesson, as well as with the meaning of the last part of the assignment.

To the messengers sent by John the Baptist the Lord cited His miracles as proof that He was the Messiah. The people of that day were a wholly materialistic and external people. Even those who longed for the coming of the Messiah had to have their faith con-

firmed by visible miracles. The Lord does not want us to require this external proof. We have a higher sight than that of the body. We know that the body is of secondary importance—only a tool for the soul. We need to keep it in as good condition as possible because of its usefulness, but it should never be of first concern to us. People who are always worrying about their health are not only unhappy but are seldom very useful.

The Lord had the power to perform physical miracles. He still has it and still performs them. It is the Lord's power which heals the body today, whenever He sees that continued life and health in this world will be good for us and for others. Both our life here and our continued life in the spiritual world after the death of the body are from the Lord alone. There is only one who is life.

But the miracles which the Lord performed when He was on earth had a twofold purpose. They did confirm the faith of those Jews and Gentiles who wished to believe in Him, and they also could be recorded in the Word to teach us the deeper lessons which we draw from their correspondence. So the centurion's servant is a picture of some useful faculty of ours which has suddenly failed us. If we have the real faith which the centurion had, we shall turn to the Lord for help, knowing that He has the power to restore us. All that is needed is the humble recognition of our own weakness and the conviction that "with God all things are possible."

The other miracle in our lesson was performed for a widow. We remember that in general men picture the understanding and women the affections. So a widow—and there are many widows mentioned in the Word—pictures some good desire which has lost the knowledge of truth which properly belongs with it. When this knowledge is lost, the ideas which spring from our desire have no life in them. People often say, "I wish I could believe in God and the Bible as I did when I was a little child." This merely means that they have allowed worldly thinking and living to kill the truths which were in their minds. In this state, only a realization of the Lord's presence and power in our lives can make the truths live

again. The Lord restored to life the son of the widow of Nain to teach us just this lesson. If we realize our own weakness and ignorance and look to Him for help, He will restore our spiritual powers also.

It is not by accident that the verses about John the Baptist follow the story of this miracle. Nothing in the Word is accidental. Naturally, no miracles of the Lord aroused greater wonder and comment than those in which He brought back to life people who had already died. The people knew from the books of Kings (I Kings 17:8-24 and II Kings 4:8-37) that Elijah and Elisha had each raised someone from the dead. But the time had come when they must be shown that the Lord was not a mere prophet but the Messiah Himself whom John had promised them. So the messengers came from John and received the assurance he asked for.

And then the Lord told the people that all John had said to them was true. The truth which the Lord gives us is not a reed shaken by the wind. Reeds, a simple growth on the water's edge, are pictures of the letter of the Word as it comes into our natural memory. They are shaken with the wind when we make the letter of the Word teach whatever we happen to want to believe instead of what the Lord means it to teach. And the Lord's truth is not always easy and pleasing to us in this world. Kings' courts, where soft clothing is worn, are found in heaven after we have overcome our evils. The letter of the Word is a prophet, speaking for the Lord. At first it comes to us like John the Baptist pointing out our evils, telling us to repent, and leading us to try to make our lives clean according to its truth. But when we have done this—this is what verse 28 means—and begin really to feel the Lord's spirit in our hearts, John the Baptist passes away, and we begin to grow in joy and peace from the Lord Himself.

*Basic Correspondences*

- a widow = a good desire which has lost the truth which belongs with it
- a reed = the outmost letter of the Word when we see no deeper into it

kings' courts = heaven

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### Senior

The lesson for the Seniors may well be centered on the meaning of the miracle of the widow's son and the power which trust in the Lord instead of in self brings into the life in small things and in great. Whatever the young people are going to do in the world, obedience to the Lord's truth as He has given it to us and trust in His power to accomplish should be their constant support.

The New Church teaches that the miracles recorded in the Word are fact. It does not try to explain them away, or imagine that they were made up later by the apostles in order to convince people. Believing that Jesus was actually Immanuel, God with us, who created and maintains every living thing, we have no difficulty in accepting His power to control natural as well as spiritual forces.

But the Lord never performed miracles in order to convince doubters, and His miracles did not convince the doubters who saw them any more than they convince doubters today. The doubters then attributed His power to the devil. He performed miracles to confirm and strengthen the faith of those who, in a wholly worldly and materialistic nation and age, still felt their need of Him and wished to accept Him, and also in order to teach in the Word, through the knowledge of correspondence later to be revealed, lessons of the healing and reviving power of His spirit in the soul.

Since the Incarnation the Lord's spirit working in the world has increased man's power of rational and spiritual sight, and in this latter age through the Second Coming the necessary knowledge has been given to implement the new power. So we should not ask for external miracles. The Lord said to Thomas, "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." (John 20:29) Spiritual reason creates a higher type of faith than physical sight. So, although we believe the miracles, and recognize them as evidence of the power exerted by the Lord when He was on earth, their chief interest for us is in their correspondence.



For example, the miracle of the healing of the centurion's servant pictures the Lord's power to revitalize even the activities of our everyday life in the world provided we wish, as did the centurion, to make that life serve our own spiritual development and that of the world. The good centurion is a picture of the well-ordered external life, ministering to the spiritual and looking to the Lord for correction and renewal. The complete submission of this external plane to the will of the Lord is the final test of faith.

The story of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain pictures the Lord's power to revitalize all our powers in times of doubt and discouragement, when we seem to have lost even the power to see what we ought to do. The widow of Nain stands for our good desire, bereft of its proper knowledge of truth, and so inevitably of its ability to produce an effective decision. In such a case we must put aside all thought of our own worldly wisdom and lift our problem into the clear light of the Lord's teaching of love to God and the neighbor.

Every one of us over and over again in our lives is in the position of the widow of Nain. We want, perhaps, to help someone with advice and comfort, but we do not know just how—the right words will not come. Or we want to decide some important question in the right way, but we don't know just what is right. Or we want to show a child or a friend just how some weakness is leading him astray, but we are not sure how to go about it. Or perhaps we want to give some friend an understanding of what our church teaches and stands for, but we find we are too ignorant. When we are in this state, we seem to ourselves to be good for nothing. We seem unable to produce anything that will live. This is pictured by the death of the widow's only son. When we are dwelling on our discouragement, we are like the mourning widow and her friends following the bier out of the city toward the tombs.

But the Lord is always standing at the gate. If we will "stand still" when He touches the bier and look to Him instead of thinking of ourselves, we shall always hear Him say, "Arise!" Do you remember how Joshua, after the first defeat at Ai, "rent his clothes,

and fell to his face upon the earth,” and how the Lord said to him, “Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?” and set him to work to find out and correct the sin in Israel? Think what Joshua accomplished after that!

The coming of the messengers from John the Baptist, who was now in prison, expresses the same sort of doubt and discouragement. The Lord answered by pointing to His works. If we study history and look about us in the world, we shall find ample evidence of the Lord’s power to save in spite of human weakness. The troubles of the world are man-made. But the Lord also shows us in our lesson that His truth is not something that can be twisted according to our desires—a reed shaken with the wind—nor yet always easy and pleasant this side of heaven. Like John the Baptist it tells us exactly what we must do if the Lord’s power is to make itself felt in our lives and through us in the world. Verse 28 tells us, however, that after we have received that life-giving power, all the hard part of the struggle is behind us.

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### Adult

Two parts of this lesson will lead to helpful discussion: the meaning for us of the raising of the widow’s son, and the Lord’s words concerning John the Baptist. Verses 29 and 30 help to point up His meaning.

We are all familiar with the Gospel story of the Lord’s life. Therefore, after following its basic outline in Matthew, we have tried in the other Gospels to pick out, for most of the lessons, stories which are told in only the one Gospel we are studying. It is interesting to look at the lists of the Lord’s miracles and parables as given in the reference section of a teacher’s Bible. The Gospel of Luke is preeminently noteworthy for its parables, giving us seventeen which are not found in any other Gospel, as well as ten of the more common ones. It is not known whether or not Luke came in direct contact with the Lord, as he is not mentioned in any Gospel narrative. He was one of the early Christians and a companion of Paul on some of his travels, and is generally believed to have been

for seven years at least in charge of the group at Philippi in Macedonia, the first Christian Church established in Europe. Paul calls Luke “the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14). His name indicates that he was not of Jewish descent. He is accepted as the writer of the book of Acts as well as of the third Gospel. His brief introduction to the first chapter of his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) indicates that his memory-knowledge of the Lord’s life and teaching was the result of eager application to all possible sources of information, but we know, of course, that his Gospel as recorded was set down under inspiration like the other three.

The first of the two miracles recorded in our chapter is also recorded in Matthew. From the point of view of healing, it is noteworthy as being a case in which the Lord healed at a distance with no physical contact with the person healed. This miracle is usually remembered, however, because of the Lord’s comparison of the faith of the centurion with that of the Jews. The second miracle, the raising of the dead son of the widow of Nain, is one of the seven miracles recorded only in Luke. Both were performed in Galilee. The centurion’s message was delivered to the Lord at Capernaum. Nain was a village not far from Nazareth. We remember that Galilee was called “Galilee of the Gentiles” and that it represents the outward life. The Roman conquerors also represent the life of the world, usually in its character of usurper of time and effort which should be devoted to higher things, but in the person of the centurion in its less common character of the friend and benefactor of the spiritual life. So the healing of the centurion’s servant represents the restoration of some useful external ability through inspiration from the Lord.

The story of the widow of Nain teaches a similar lesson. Throughout the Scriptures a widow pictures a good desire which is bereft of the truth needed to support and make it productive. A son pictures a derivative truth. People who want to be good but have no true knowledge of the Lord and His purposes are easily deprived of such simple truths as they may have. They are easy to deceive and mislead and become a prey to evils. All of us are in this state

so far as we are in ignorance of truth which we need in order to do good.

Swedenborg speaks of two kinds of resurrection: the natural, when a man's body is laid aside and he rises to life in the spiritual world, and the spiritual in which the life of the natural selfhood is put away and a new will is given from the Lord. "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." See the passage from AE 899<sup>11</sup> below.

In the spiritual sense the sequence in the Word is always interesting. We have in the story about John the Baptist which immediately follows an illustration of the sort of distress pictured by the condition of the widow of Nain. John at this time has been cast into prison by Herod. His active preaching was ended, although his disciples still resorted to him in the prison. John is pictured as discouraged at the seeming frustration of his life work, even to the point of allowing himself to wonder if he could have been mistaken. How often when our own efforts for the church and for others seem to come to nought, we allow ourselves to wonder if our work and sacrifice have been worthwhile! John in prison could not see the Lord at work. When we are shut up within the narrow circle of our own accomplishment, we cannot see the Lord at work. The Lord allowed John's messengers to see the miracles His presence was accomplishing, as He will always let us see them if we are willing to face the fact that it is He and not we from whom the good is to come. This is the lesson taught in verse 28.

John the Baptist, like all the prophets, represented the letter of the Word. The letter of the Word is not a reed shaken with the wind, something which may be twisted to suit our passing desires and imaginings. It is not a man clothed in soft raiment; as long as we are in this world it will present to us truths which go harshly against our preferences. It is a prophet: it speaks for the Lord. And when we see it so, it becomes more than a prophet: it becomes the medium through which the Lord enters our minds and hearts.

Of the statement made in verse 28 Swedenborg says in AC 9372<sup>6</sup>: "That in the internal sense, or such as it is in heaven, the Word is

in a degree above the Word in the external sense, or such as it is in the world, and such as John the Baptist taught, is signified by, ‘he that is less in the kingdom of the heavens is greater than he’; for as perceived in heaven the Word is of wisdom so great that it transcends all human apprehension.”

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### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Apocalypse Explained*, n. 899<sup>11</sup>: “‘Death’ signifies resurrection, and thus ‘the dead’ signify those who rise again into eternal life, because ‘death’ signifies hell, and thus evils and falsities; and these must die that man may receive spiritual life; for until these are dead and extinct man has no spiritual life, which is the life that is meant in the Word by ‘life,’ ‘eternal life,’ and ‘resurrection’; therefore ‘to die’ means here and elsewhere in the Word the extinction of the life that is man’s own, which regarded in itself consists solely of evils and falsities from them . . . Resurrection from the dead, both in the natural and in the spiritual sense, was represented and thus was signified by the dead whom the Lord raised.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What prophecy did John the Baptist fulfill? *Malachi’s regarding Elijah*
- J. Who were his father and mother? *Zacharias and Elisabeth*
- P. Who announced his coming? *the angel Gabriel*
- P. What sign did the angel give Zacharias? *that he be dumb till John’s birth*
- P. What other announcement did the same angel make? *that the Lord would be born*
- P. To whom was it made? *Mary*
- J. What two familiar selections do we find in the first chapter of Luke? *Benedictus, Magnificat*
- I. What was the message of John the Baptist? *Repent!*
- J. What did he do for the people who believed him? *baptized them*
- P. Why was the Lord baptized? *to show us what we ought to do*
- J. What is the first miracle described in our lesson for today? *healing centurion’s slave*
- P. What is the second? *raising the widow’s son*
- S. Why could the Lord bring the dead man back to life? *He has power over life*
- J. What did John want to ask the Lord? *“Are you he who is to come?”*

- J. What did the Lord tell John's messengers? *tell him what you have seen and heard*
- I. What did He tell the people John was? *a prophet*
- S. Who did He say was greater than John? *he who is least in the kingdom of God*