

HOW CAN WE CANCEL OUR APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Ever since I was a child I have been intrigued with physical death. It all began when I was living in Bristol, Pennsylvania, as a small boy. Many evenings I would take my dog Snoopy and walk the four blocks to the local railroad station to await my father's arrival from the city of Philadelphia where he worked. Once he arrived we would walk home together. When the sun set early during the winter months, we took a short cut through the local cemetery. It was here that my father told me stories of ghosts and goblins. I remember one cold winter night when a full harvest moon shone down on us we took our short cut and my Dad stopped in the middle of the graveyard and said, "Son, can you hear the ghosts over there, pointing to a new grave site?" I said, "No, Dad, I can't hear them. What are they saying?" He answered, "They are saying 'One for you and one for me,' as they divide up the bones of the new body!"

Since those early days I have been intrigued with death. I have visited most of the major graveyards around the world, from the tombs of the Pharaohs to the tombs of the patriarchs. I have been to most of our military cemeteries in Washington D.C., Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Belgium. I have visited the graveyards of Paris, where the bodies of great poets and writers still lie; the catacombs of Rome where the early Christians were laid to rest; Westminster Abbey in London, where the great kings and queens are buried; and the graveyard in the highlands of Scotland, where the remains of the Ritchie's and MacRitchie's are buried.

In all of my travels to the various cemeteries around the world I have been sobered by two realities. First, all the graves which I visited once held or still hold the bodies of the have great and small. And second, I have seen first hand what the scriptures say about death: ". . . it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Man should be most concerned, however, with the judgment the scriptures call "the second death." For the Christian, "Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power. . . ." (Rev. 20:6). For the non-believer ". . . if any one name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire [the second death]" (Rev. 20:15). To the believer, I Peter 1:3 says, "Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead." Psalm 23 says, "It is a valley we walk through with our Lord without fear or dread."

For those people around us who have no relationship with Jesus Christ, their struggle is with their own impending physical death. While they hope that living out a set of rules of their own making will be acceptable to some god or goddess in eternity, they are unaware of the second death, an eternal separation from their Creator when they will be placed into a lake of fire. In Revelation 21:6-8, John says, "And He [Jesus] said to me, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

In general, we see death from the perspective of our spirit departing this life and going to some kind of judgment. We rarely think beyond that to the second death, however. The scriptures clearly state that there is a second death for those who have not established a relationship with Jesus Christ. It is to be feared more than physical death. The wonderful message of Christmas is that the baby Jesus grew up and became the Savior who offered his life so that we never have to fear the judgment of the second death.

In Luke 7:1-17 Dr. Luke will give us some hope about the question, "How can we cancel our appointment with death?"

I. Place our faith in Jesus Christ, Luke 7:1-10

When He had completed all His discourse in the hearing of the people He went to Capernaum. And a certain centurion's slave, who was highly regarded by him, was sick and about to die. And when he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders asking Him to come and save the life of his slave. And when they had come to Jesus, they earnestly entreated Him, saying, "He is worthy for You to grant this to him; for he loves our nation, and it was he who built us our synagogue." Now Jesus started on His way with them; and when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself further, for I am not worthy for You to come under my roof; for this reason I did not even consider myself worthy to come to You, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and to another, 'Come!' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."

Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

When our Lord finishes teaching his new apostles on the secret principles of his spiritual kingdom, he goes down the mountain to his home town of Capernaum. Luke continues to thread stories of salvation like pearls on the string of redemption. His theme is found in Jesus' words, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32-32). Thus, all the stories relate the message of hope and eternal life.

In this passage, Luke writes about two pearls concerning the subject of physical death. First, he tells of a centurion's slave on the edge of physical death, and follows with the story of a young man who has died and is being taken to the graveyard to be buried. When both men come into contact with Jesus they are saved from death and given back their physical life. Keep in mind that the meaning of each story on a physical level is only a shadow of the spiritual reality.

Located on the north shore of the sea of Galilee, Capernaum was an important Roman port where Herod Antipas built a Roman garrison. Several Roman centurions, who were each responsible for 100 soldiers, were authorized to keep the peace of Rome in their occupied territory. These centurions had a number of Roman slaves to carry out household tasks as well as administrative business within the garrison and the city. Among the many centurions in the garrison, a certain centurion among the Roman occupation forces had a favorite slave who was paralyzed at his home, suffering great pain unto death (Matthew 8). On behalf of his slave, the centurion comes to Jesus through the Jewish elders, asking him to come save the life of his slave. Here is a man of power, authority, influence and wealth who realizes that he cannot save his slave from death. He is surrounded by Roman and Greek deities, and many mystery religions, yet when it comes to the subject of life and death he is willing to place his faith in a Jew named Jesus. Knowing the hatred between the two races, this God-fearing Roman turns to the local Jewish elders for help in approaching Jesus.

The elders use a humanistic approach. They believe the best way to approach to move Jesus' heart is to show the centurion's merit in terms of what he has done in their community. So they recount his qualifications. First, he is worthy for Jesus to grant his request. Second, he loves the Jewish nation, which is rare for a Roman centurion. Third, he had built a synagogue for them. This was the synagogue in which Jesus had already preached and cast out the demon.

By contrast, the centurion must have had second thoughts when he saw Jesus coming, so he sends some friends to say three things. First, he says, "Lord do not trouble yourself further, for I am not fit for you to come under my roof." A Jew would be defiled if he came under a Gentile's roof (Numbers 19). Upon reflection, the centurion realizes that a word from the Son of God will be sufficient to heal his slave, and it is not necessary for Jesus to come into his house. Second, he says, "I do not even consider myself worthy to

come to you." Although the Jews say he is deserving, this Gentile determines that he is unworthy of Jesus' presence. Third, he says, "Just say the word, and my servant will be healed." Knowing who Jesus is, the centurion did not see the necessity for Jesus to trouble himself by coming. Fourth, he says, "For indeed I am a man under authority with soldiers under me and I say to this one 'Go!' and he goes; and to another 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."

The centurion's Jewish friends want Jesus to save this officer's slave because of his good name, his love for the nation, and his good works among the Jews in Capernaum. This man, however, understands that Jesus is the great physician, because he has either witnessed or heard of the many healings in Capernaum. This Gentile centurion was willing to place his faith in the person and power of Jesus as the Son of God. He approached him in a position of helplessness, in a spirit of gentleness and humility. He knows who he is within the Roman system, a man under authority and one who has authority. He has the power of life and death over his slaves and they obey him without question. He also recognizes the power Jesus has over life, disease, demons, and death. Therefore, he knows our Lord's physical presence is not necessary to heal his favorite servant; his word is sufficient. In the centurion's Roman world, all he needs to do is speak and it is done. Likewise, in Jesus's world, the spiritual realm, all he needs to do is speak and it is done.

Jesus looks at this powerful but humble Roman and responds to the multitude, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith." In his message "Surprised by Joy," Steve Zeisler gives a refreshing definition of faith:

Faith is a willingness to bet your very life on the promises and character of God. If I were to try to pick a synonym for 'faith' I would choose the word 'adventure.' Faith is not a dry theological concept bound up in stodgy churchianity. Faith is a risky, adrenalin-pumping adventure.

Our Lord comes to the house of Israel to minister to the Jews, but in the meantime, the Gentiles begin knocking on the door of salvation. This Roman centurion was not placing his faith in the the person and power of Jesus, he whom the common Jews were coming to realize was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Messiah, the Son of God, the great physician of the sick, and the Lord who has power over death. As an authority over 100 men who watched his every move, this centurion makes a public statement that no other Roman has made. I do not think he knew at this point that Jesus was the Son of God, but he knew that all the religions that he had been offered, and all his power and background could not heal his servant. He knew that this man had power over dying humanity.

Many of the Jews who followed Jesus understood the scriptures and were looking for the Messiah who would come with the power of the Holy Spirit to "preach the gospel to the poor in spirit, release to the captives, free the downtrodden and proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." Yet when Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's prophesy, the Jewish leadership responded by plotting his death. In contrast, our Lord marvels at this Gentile's faith. According to Matthew 8 our Lord rebukes the Jews, "And I say to you [Jews], that many shall come from east and west [Gentiles from all nations], and recline at the table with Abraham [the father of all believers, Jew and Gentiles], and Isaac, and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the sons of the kingdom [unbelieving Jews who think they are saved] shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place their shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus went to the Jews with his message first, but here is an example of a knock on the door to salvation by the Gentile centurion. These sons of the kingdom had the truth and the opportunity to share the good news with the world, but lost the blessings of the kingdom because they rejected the king, Jesus. Now but the healing of this slave is not based on the centurion's worth, good works, money, or power expressed towards the Jews. Rather, it is based on his faith in Jesus as the great physician and as the master over physical death. The same is true of salvation (healing) for those of us who are sick unto physical and spiritual death. "For by grace you have been saved (spiritually healed) through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). According to Matthew 8, when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health: "And Jesus said to the centurion, 'Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed.' And the servant (boy) was healed that very hour."

In his book *According to Luke*, David Gooding writes,

Physical healing is always a shadow of the spiritual reality of the spiritual healing our world needs through Jesus Christ. Moving from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of life. . . . Faith according to this story, is not confidence that we have done the best we could, that God will assess our merits generously; faith is abandoning trust in our works and merit and any thought of deserving salvation, and relying totally and without reserve on the person of Christ and the authority of his word.

That is what the centurion does. He declares that his authority, his background in religion and his life experience is worthless. Nothing from his world will save the slave, so he accepts the evidence of Jesus' power and turns to him for help. There is nothing in this passage that says the centurion came to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, but I think he did. As he watched the slave return to health, I think the centurion said, "Oh God, is this Jesus your son? If he is, then I want him to save me not only from physical problems, but spiritual problems too. My spiritual problem is that I have no relationship with the living God."

I talked to a godly woman last week about her non-Christian father who has a serious heart problem and could step into eternity at any moment. While talking to him recently, she thought perhaps the Lord had given her an opportunity to share God's love with him once again. She began to talk to him about eternal issues, but he shut her off quickly, "Let's not go over that stuff again. Why are people so afraid of dying? It's all the circle of our existence, living and dying and then nothing." My friend told me she left the room and went to the Lord in prayer saying, "Lord, I realize more than ever that I cannot save my father, so I place his life totally in your hands. You are the only One in the universe who can save him." She said that now she is filled with peace because she had turned her father over to the only One who can do anything for her. This was the centurion's problem, and he had the joy of seeing life come out of death.

Luke moves from the story of a powerful centurion who humbled himself by trusting Jesus, to an unknown, weak and desolate widow who is first bereft of her husband and now grieves at the death of her son. How can we cancel our appointment with death? First, place our faith in Jesus Christ as the risen Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and then depend on the grace of God to move into our lives.

II. Depend on the grace of God, Luke 7:11-17

And it came about soon afterwards, that He went to a city called Nain; and His disciples were going along with Him, accompanied by a large multitude. Now as He approached the gate of the city, behold a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother and she was a widow; and a sizable crowd from the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, "Do not weep." And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said, "Young man, I say to you, arise!" And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. And fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and, "God has visited His people!" And this report concerning Him went out all over Judea, and in all the surrounding district.

Jesus and the disciples go to the small, unknown town of Nain 25 miles southwest of Capernaum and 10 miles south of Nazareth. There is no reason stated why Jesus walked with his disciples and the crowd to this small city, but it did present another authentication that he was the Messiah. Jesus sees the funeral procession of a young man, with his widowed mother following behind, she having tasted death for the second time. By losing her husband and now her son, she is not only in a terrible emotional state, but she has also lost the household provider. The size of the crowd shows that she was well known and loved.

The compassionate God who met Moses in the wilderness now appears through Jesus in the presence of death. According to Ephesians 2:1, all men are born in Adam and thus are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins. As a result, all men must suffer physical and spiritual death unless the God of love and compassion

steps into our graveyard and makes us alive! Our Lord does not preach a sermon, but is moved by the scene before him at the city gate: "He felt compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep," although she had experienced death twice in her family.

"And He came up and touched the coffin; and the bearers came to a halt. And He said 'Young man, I say to you arise!' And the dead man sat up and began to speak. And Jesus gave him back to his mother." When the Lord touches the coffin he became defiled according to the traditions of the Pharisees (Numbers 19:11-22). Yet here is another case of our Lord's willingness to involve himself with the common people's sickness and death. He touches the lives of the hopeless and helpless, those without physical, emotional or spiritual resources. This woman has no hope, no future, no joy, no husband, no son. There is nothing left for her but the unexpected presence and compassion of the Lord of Life.

Death had taken the man from his mother, but Jesus gives her son the gift of new, unexpected life without conditions or promises. It is an action of the unqualified grace of God. In Luke 8:49-56 Jesus speaks to the dead daughter of the synagogue official, "Child, arise!" He would do this again with his friend Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Martha says to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother shall rise again.' Martha said to Him, 'I know that He will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.'"Later Jesus would call with a loud voice into a burial cave, "'Lazarus come forth.' He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go" (John 11).

Our text continues: "And fear gripped them all, and they began glorifying God saying, 'A great prophet has arisen among us!' and 'God has visited His people!' And this report concerning Him went out all over Judea, and in all the surrounding district." The people knew that 900 years earlier the prophet Elijah had met the widow of Zarephath after he had prophesied the three-year drought to the wicked king Ahab. The widow provided for Elijah from the meager portion of food and water she had for her son and herself. However, "The bowl of flour was not exhausted, nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord which He spoke through Elijah." But then "the son of the widow became sick unto death. . . with no breath left in him. Then Elijah said to her, 'Give me your son.'" Then he prayed to the Lord of Life, "'O Lord my God, I pray Thee, let this child's life return to him.' And the Lord heard the voice of the Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived." He then returned the son to the widow and said, "'See, your son is alive.' Then the woman said to Elijah, 'Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true'" (1 Kings 17).

Elisha had the same experience with the son of the Shumammite woman who had died (II Kings 4). Elisha "went up and lay on the child and put his mouth on his mouth and his eyes on his eyes and his hands on his hands and he stretched himself on him and the flesh of the child became warm." Then he called the woman and said, "Take up your son." Deuteronomy 18:15 tells us of the great prophet to come, whom we now know as Jesus. In this case Jesus is more than a prophet; he is the very Son of God himself. But the villagers did not understand.

David Gooding writes of these two stories,

Put both stories together and they lay down positively and negatively what the conditions of salvation are. If you have many good works to your credit and good resources like the centurion, or nothing at all like the widow, it makes no difference, for salvation is not of works, whether many or few, whether good or bad, it is by grace through faith, it is the gift of God. . . . whether it is salvation from physical death, as with the centurion's slave and the widow's son, or whether it is salvation from spiritual death, the basic principles of salvation are the same.

We need to place our faith in Jesus Christ, plus nothing, to be free from facing the second death.

Recently a friend shared with me that he attended a funeral for a man who had been killed in a private plane crash. This young husband and father as well as his family were Jewish humanists. The service was conducted by another humanist who began by saying, "This is the darkest day of our lives. We don't know how we will ever get over this. The family has a hole, a void, that cannot ever be filled. We can never recover this loved one." The leader went on to say, "When Steve's little girl was with us after her birth, we promised to care for her and her family, protecting them always from hurt." Looking toward the little girl he said, "I guess we let you down." My friend said that he felt the entire service was a letdown for it was filled with people insufficient to meet each other's needs, letting each other down. They are hopeless, wandering people who are unable to cope with a world out of control. It is a world where young men fly airplanes with the sense they are in charge of their lives, only to find themselves flying into the ground to meet their appointment with death.

How can we cancel our appointment with death? Place our faith in Jesus Christ and in the grace of God. "If you confess with you mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the death, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed'" (Romans 10:9-11).

In 1955 I visited Jerusalem and found myself at another grave site, the Garden Tomb. What impressed me as I sat on the stone floor of this empty tomb was that there was no body there. Some of my friends had been telling me that Jesus was the resurrection and the life, that he rose again, defeating physical and spiritual death. I lay against the cold stones and asked the risen Jesus to become my Lord and save me. This he did, and by that act of faith I cancelled my appointment with the second death. Now I am free to live this life and eternal life fully.

Father, thank you for Christmas and for the joy of knowing that you sent your Son in the fullness of time to be our Savior. Thank you for these two stories and for your willingness to allow your Son to bring life out of death. Thank you too that in your compassion you are still willing to take anyone who is dead in their trespasses and sins and give them life. For those who do not know you as their Lord and Savior I pray that they will take you up on your offer to cancel their appointment with the second death. Amen.

Catalog No. 4134
Luke 7:1-17
19th Message
Ron R. Ritchie
December 17, 1989

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.