

# Say the Word!

1 Kings 17:17-24, Luke 7:1-17 (ESV)

February 6, 2005

“Say the word!” “Say the word!” “Say the word, and let my servant be healed.” The centurion of Capernaum understood that the very power of God resided in the word of Jesus Christ. His plea points to what is important here. The power of God to create, the power of God to heal, indeed the power of God to raise the dead resides in the word of Jesus Christ. The centurion understood this. And Jesus recognized this understanding as nothing less than saving faith.

There are three accounts of the power of his word in today’s reading. One has to do with the centurion’s servant. Jesus healed him from a distance, without seeing him, without touching him, with only a word. Another has to do with the dead son of the widow of Nain. Jesus raised him from the dead, and not the freshly dead, but on the way to the cemetery dead, with only a word. And the third account has to do with the centurion himself, who “heard about Jesus,” and hearing he believed, for believing he asked for help. And this third account of the power of the word, this conversion of a centurion to saving faith, is perhaps the greatest miracle of the three.

Do you see the significance for us of this healing, this raising from the dead, and this conversion, all by the power of the word? Jesus did not see or touch the centurion’s servant. Jesus performed no ritual over the dead son of the widow. And Jesus never met the centurion of Capernaum. He dealt only with the elders and friends whom the centurion sent. The one thing Jesus gave all three of these was his word. He spoke, and they were healed, raised, and converted. So it is with us. We cannot see or be seen by Jesus in the flesh. We cannot touch or be touched by Jesus in the flesh. But we can and do hear the word of Jesus. We can and do hear the gospel of Jesus. We can and do hear that word yet today. And the power of God still resides in the word of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus talks, even the dead listen! Of course, we all know that is not possible. The dead cannot hear. But in this reading, the dead man hears and obeys. And in that impossible possibility we find the very gospel of Jesus Christ.

For instance, it is not possible that I, as a sinner, could or would turn to God. The very nature of sin rules that out. And yet, when God calls me by name, his calling turns me around to himself. Thus, it is part of the gospel that God’s word speaks to my human impossibility and creates not only a possibility but a new reality.

Again, it is not possible that I, lost in a sea of self-concern and self-centeredness, could or would become centered upon God and concerned about others. Self-centeredness is a quicksand from which the self cannot escape by the self's own actions. And yet, when God's son, Jesus Christ, willingly and obediently suffers and dies on the cross, without deserving it, God draws my attention away from myself and refocuses it upon the majesty of God. So, it is part of the gospel that the terrible price paid by Christ in the crucifixion overwhelms my human impossibility and creates a new reality.

And again, it is not possible that I, having caused so much pain to God and others and myself, could or would ever be forgiven, restored, and reconciled into the joy and fellowship of the people of God. The wounds are too deep. And yet, when God calls me his own, so I am. Thus, it is part of the gospel that the power of God which created the universe by his word continues to work, taking our human impossibilities and making a new reality, a divine fellowship. Humanly speaking, none of this is possible. And yet, by the grace and power of God, all of this is not only possible but also real. He has said the word. And his word is gospel and life for us.

In today's reading, life and death were on a collision course. Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd that went with him were approaching the gateway of the town of Nain. Just at that moment, a funeral procession was coming out through the gate. The dead man was being carried at the front, his mother's only son, and she was already a widow. There was a large crowd with her coming out from the town.

Custom and courtesy dictate that one meeting a funeral procession get off the road and stop. But Jesus stood his ground. He did not get out of the way. He made the funeral procession stop for him. In fact, he turned the procession around. Jesus knew that with the loss of her husband and her only son, the widow was alone and had no means of support. He knew that when bad things happened, people regarded them as punishments from God, so this woman would be ostracized. And he had compassion on her.

That is when Jesus stopped the funeral procession. The crowds must have gasped when he touched the stretcher with the dead body on it. Dead bodies were considered ritually unclean. Christ's touch suggests an exchange, by which he absorbed the uncleanness of death into himself and gave the gift of life in return. Our minds run ahead to the cross, where Jesus exchanged his sinless obedience for all the sin of the world, including yours and mine, and after which he died and was buried so that we might live.

When the pall bearers stood still, Jesus told the dead man to get up! The dead man heard the word, sat up, and began to speak! Jesus spoke, and the man lived. Jesus restored him to life, to conversation, and to community. Then Jesus gave him

to his mother. What a wonderful gift! The funeral procession was stopped and reversed. Instead of a burial, they had a celebration of life. They all worshiped and glorified God, as the two crowds become one. While the prophet Elijah had to cry out to God to restore that widow's son to life, Jesus gave life without prayer and simply with his own command. Thus the people cried out not only, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" but also, "God has visited his people!" Their confession of faith is an invitation for us to confess our faith.

Now, what does it mean to us that when Jesus talks, even the dead listen? First, it means that God wills life and not death. Christ's raising of the dead man to life points ahead to God's raising of Christ on the first Easter to a new and different kind of life. Moreover, Christ's resurrection is the promise of our own. God has plans for us that even death cannot destroy. God's power to create life out of nothingness can also restore life even from the darkness of death. These are words of assurance and hope for us.

Second, the reality that even the dead listen to Jesus means that all the self-righteous schemes by which we presume to contribute something—anything—to our own salvation are shown to be false. We can no more save ourselves than the dead man could hear or rise on his own. His rising was completely the work of Jesus Christ, and so is our salvation. Four-hundred-fifty years ago, John Calvin wrote of this passage, "Here we have a shining example of [Christ's] free mercy, in reviving us from the dead."<sup>1</sup> By "free mercy" Calvin means that God in Jesus Christ acted to restore the dead man to life, not because the man deserved it, but simply out of God's sheer goodness.

In the twentieth century, William Temple elaborated upon this as follows:

All is of God; the only thing of my own which I can contribute to my own redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed. My capacity for fellowship with God is God's gift in creation; my partial deliverance from self-centeredness, my response to truth, beauty and goodness is God's gift through the natural world which he sustains in being and the history of man which he controls. One thing is my own—the self-centeredness which leads me to find my apparent good in what is other and less than the true good. This true good is the divine love and what flows from it appreciated as its expression. In response to that good, man finds his only true freedom, for only then does the

---

<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison, vol. 1 in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 252.

self act as what it truly is and thus achieves true self-expression....As the experience of grace becomes deeper, the conviction of its all sufficiency becomes more inevitable and more wholesome, until at last a man knows, and is finally “saved” by knowing, that all good is of God alone. We are clay in the hands of the potter and our welfare is to know it.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the reality that the dead listen to Jesus means that the power and the goodness of God are present in the word of God, in the reading and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, even today when Jesus is no longer physically present among us. Consider the account of the healing of the centurion’s servant. The centurion was not a member of the people of Israel. He was a Gentile, an outsider. He felt unworthy to have Jesus come into his home, and he was confident that Jesus could heal his servant by the power of his word, even at a distance. Jesus marveled at the centurion’s confidence in the authority of his word as an instance of faith, better than any faith he had found in Israel.

This reading is for all of us who have lived after the time of Christ’s earthly life, who have never seen Jesus in the flesh, and who have never heard his voice, but who have heard and believed his word, and who have been healed, forgiven, and raised to new life by his gospel. The power and goodness of God are present in the word of God, in the reading and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, even when Jesus is no longer physically present among us. This is the one thing the church has to offer to the world: the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, what does the word in this reading do for us yet today? It gives us the courage to die. The power that death holds over us is the fear of death, the fear of its finality, the fear of nothingness. The gospel tells us that God is stronger than death. This reading portrays God’s power in terms of restoration to this life which we understand, in order to tell us of resurrection to another life which we can scarcely imagine. This gives us no encouragement to hasten death. But it allows us to face and approach death with dignity and poise, confident in the greater power of God.

Therefore, this word from the gospel also gives us the courage to live. Since the fear of death robs us of the joy of life, the destruction of the fear of death gives us, in turn, the courage to live our lives in joy. We are here by the will of God, whom we love, serve, and obey. Given the knowledge of the will of God for life, we are set free from despair, free to live life fully and faithfully. We are invited and

---

<sup>2</sup>William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan & Co., 19340, pp. 401-402; cited in John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 228.

commanded to arise from death, to arise from fear, to arise from complacency and lethargy, to arise from sin, to arise from self-centeredness and satisfaction. Christ calls us out of death into the impossible possibility of genuine, authentic, faithful, loving, joyful human life.

This word from the gospel also gives us the courage to share the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, with others. God intends for the good news of his son, Jesus Christ, to reach all the people of the world. We, the people of his church, are his instrument for sharing that good news with everyone around us. Do you have members of your family who seem deaf to the good news, or dead to the gospel? Do you have neighbors who might benefit from a kind word about the love of God in Jesus Christ? Do you know people who are poor, despised, ill, suffering, and lost, who need to learn from us the ministry of the healing compassion of Jesus Christ? Is there anyone in our entire greed-driven, drug-numbed, and crime-infested society who does not need to hear the good news about the power of God that is greater than the bondage and fear of death, about the love of God that loves us when we least deserve it, and about the fellowship of forgiven sinners formed into the community of the people of God? We cannot keep this good news to ourselves. Share the word about Jesus Christ, and bring people to church to hear his gospel read and preached. After all, when Jesus talks, even the dead listen! So, “Say the word!” “Say the word!” “Say the word” of Jesus Christ that this needy world might be healed.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor  
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1627 Monument Avenue  
Richmond, Virginia 23220  
[www.grace-covenant.org](http://www.grace-covenant.org)