



Luke 4:38–39

38 Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. 39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.

Reflection

In the office the other day, one of the men

I respect most in world, eighty-year-old bishop Ray Smith, was sharing with us a recent experience of a funeral with an open casket. Ray, a veteran of many, many funerals confessed to be taken aback when confronted with the face of a dead person. For Ray, to see this lifeless person, this empty vessel, drove home the truth of human soul; but truth be told, seeing a dead person, someone you knew, no matter how well made-up and dressed, lying lifeless in front of you is very confronting even for someone as wise and experienced as Ray. This is because in modern Western society we have institutionalized aging and death. Few people have witnessed someone die. Very few people have seen a dead body. We have nursing homes and other facilities deliberately placed out of the public view to which

people go (or are sent) to die. Add to this that life expectancy has dramatically increased even in this century due in large part to medical advancements. In many ways people are coming to think, subconsciously at least, that death is a failure of medicine. This lack of familiarity and preparedness for death adds significantly to the shock and trauma of tragic accidents, as well as deepens our suffering and inability to cope when we are diagnosed ourselves, or when someone we love passes.

All of this was very different in the ancient world. People in the Roman world had an average life expectancy of between 20 and 25, and only 40 percent of the population reached that age because infant mortality was so high, with many mothers

also dying in childbirth. This meant that, at any given time, half the population would be less than 18–22, on third less than fourteen years of age and a negligible proportion over 70. Now of course wars and famines and plagues played their part, but today we tend to take for granted our medical advancements. In the ancient world a common cold very often a death sentence. The biggest killer in their rudimentary understanding, a fever. A common fever would hang over a household like the shadow of death. Which provides us, I think, the necessary background for today's passage, just two verses from Luke 4:38–39,

38 Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother-in-law was suffering

from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. 39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to wait on them.

Jesus is in Capernaum. He's just finished teaching in the synagogue to great acclaim. Ethnic Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism alike were astonished at the authority with which Jesus taught and even more astounded when he demonstrated his authority by exorcizing an evil spirit out of a man who had disrupted the service. It was customary on the Sabbath to go and eat the Sabbath meal right after synagogue. And so, a soon-to-be disciple named Simon Peter invited Jesus back to his home.

Jesus arrives at Peter's home to find the shadow of death hanging over his household. Peter's mother-in-law is suffering from a high fever. He's from a prosperous fishing family, so it's likely that all medical avenues had been exhausted, her fate uncertain and very much a matter of prayer. They weren't unprepared. Death in the ancient world was an everyday reality, and because it was so, most people had very developed thoughts, opinions and beliefs about the afterlife, Peter's Jewish family being no exception. But this did not make death any less distressing, or painful, and the wash of emotions that hit Jesus on arriving at Peter's house no doubt would have been palpable. Peter's wife's mum, likely in her late thirties or early forties was battling at death's door, unable to even get out of bed.

And then something extraordinary occurs. In desperation, they ask Jesus to help. Perhaps this was hidden in Simon's invitation. Immediately, verse 39,

39 So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her.

Moments earlier Jesus rebuked the demon in the synagogue and it came out of the man. Here Jesus rebukes Peter's wife's mum's fever and it leaves her. Perhaps this indicates that it was demonic in origin. Or perhaps Jesus simply is rebuking sin's effects on our world. Either way, she is completely healed.

Two things to briefly notice in this extraordinary text. Firstly, Jesus came to defeat

Satan, sin and death. We've already seen him doing battle with Satan out in the wilderness. The next scene he is demonstrating his authority over Satan's minions. The very next scene Luke pictures Jesus with an authority that even extends to death. Satan, sin and death. Even the first century's biggest killer, a common fever, flees from the presence of Jesus. In a society where death was so commonplace and life so uncertain imagine how they began to turn the significance of this miracle and this person over in their minds.

And secondly, did you notice Peter's mother-in-law's response? Verse 39,

She got up at once and began to wait on them.

She got up at once and began to serve them. She was saved to serve. Her response to the salvation that Jesus brought was to serve Jesus, her family and the other guests who'd come for the Sabbath meal. No doubt she was overjoyed, no doubt she was stunned with the miracle just worked in her own body, no doubt she would later go and tell the whole town but in a microcosm of the Christian faith, out of the heart of Peter's mother-in-law came the only true response to the Christian faith, and that is service of Jesus and his church.

Think & Pray

Unlike the ancient world, we do not prepare very well for death. We've institutionalized it, we like to fantasize that medical

and technological advancements will one day defeat it, we certainly don't expect it to happen to us or anyone we love anytime soon. Until it does, of course, and then we find it very, very difficult to cope. Because implanted inside every single human being is the foundational certainty that death is wrong, that death is unnatural. The author of Ecclesiastes spoke truly when he said that God has placed eternity in the hearts of humankind (Eccl 3:11). And so we shake our fists at death, eating healthily, staying fit, and quietly hoping that one day medical and technological advancements will defeat this ancient enemy. The great irony of course, and the great opportunity for us, is that there is one who has defeated death already. And through him we can too. So as you consider this morning's passage again for yourself now stop for an

uncomfortable moment to think about the reality of death. Think about death. And then in contrast think about the precious gift of eternal life that is ours in Jesus. Who is it you need to tell? Are you prepared for the day death visits your family? Who can you help prepare? In many ways death is the final mercy of God, almost like his last desperate attempt to get us to think about him. But in the same breath, God hates death. It is unnatural, it was never meant to be, it's sin's ultimate curse on our world. And of course, it is not the end, as Bishop Ray saw so clearly recently, our souls will live on, in one place or the other.

Praise God this morning that Jesus came to defeat Satan, sin and death, and that he has done it! And pray also that the re-

sponse of your heart and mine might be exactly that of Peter's mother-in-law because we too have been saved to serve.