

A Clash at the Gates



Gary Wilkerson September 17, 2018

Confronting Darkness with Powerful Light

I grew up in a Christian home with a father who believed the powers of darkness are not to be left alone; they're to be confronted. When we see evil wreaking havoc, we're not meant to run from it—we're to run toward it. As Christians, we're created to do warfare with the enemy of humankind.

When God led the Israelites into the Promised Land, he left enemies there that his people had to face. Why? He intended his people to do warfare. No human being anywhere on earth is left un-harassed by Satan. And if we're not engaged in warfare with him, we're being beaten up.

The good news is, we've been given weapons for this warfare, and they are not carnal. Our weapons are found in Christ—and he won every battle he ever faced.

If you're feeling defeated, discouraged, or distraught, there is probably a battle waiting for you. Many are losing their battle because they're not fighting it. But if you run toward the fight, you'll win because of Jesus.

Luke illustrates this warfare with a clash that took place at a city's gates.

“Soon afterward (Jesus) went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold...” (*Luke 7:11-12, ESV*).

I picture Nain as a walled community with massive iron gates that crowds flowed through daily. As Jesus neared those gates, the crowd behind him might have numbered in the thousands. Most New Testament uses of “great” describe that sort of large number.

It must have been quite a sight because these people were happy and joyous. Jesus had touched them miraculously, healing some of diseases, delivering others from demonic oppression, and feeding them all supernaturally. Their bodies had failed, their families fallen apart, their lives devastated—and Jesus brought them life.

Now, as they approached Nain, they sang, danced, and shouted his praises because he was their victory.

Just as this joyful crowd approached the gates, a different kind of crowd was coming out.

“As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her” (*Luke 7:12*).

It was a funeral procession, with a grieving mother surrounded by her friends. Surely the mournful group

wondered, “Why would you allow this tragedy, Lord? Why do such hard things come upon your people?”

It was just opposite of the mood of Jesus’ crowd. And as the city gates opened, the two clashing processions collided, standing face to face.

In this kind of situation, politeness tells the celebratory group to step aside. It’s the same kind of respect that bystanders show when a hearse passes them. Everyone stops what they’re doing to honor the grievers.

You might expect Jesus to show that kind of consideration, shushing his followers, saying, “Everyone, keep it down. These people are mourning a great loss.” But Jesus didn’t do funerals well. According to Scripture, he ruined every one he attended by raising the dead to life!

The clash at the gates of Nain was one of death confronted by life.

Jesus didn’t step aside quietly to let the mourners pass. Instead, he approached the mother, who must have been at the lowest point of her life.

She might have thought, “Can’t this man let us pass? His people are all laughing, their kids running around playing, while my child lies dead. Where is his respect?”

But the next verse reveals what Jesus was up to: “When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her” (*Luke 7:13*). I love this verse and everything contained in it. First, Jesus *saw* her. This means more than merely noticing. He looked inside her at her moment of deepest need.

Today, Jesus sees us the same way. He looks into our crisis, our darkest hour, our heart full of need—and he has compassion. “(He) said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (*Luke 7:13*).

What an unusual response. Some might think it was insensitive. But Jesus was signaling to her, “You are overcome with the spirit of death. But I am coming to you with life. There’s no reason to cry, because your circumstance is about to change.”

“Then he came up 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, and Jesus gave him to his mother” (*Luke 7:14-15*).

What an incredible scene. In an instant, Christ turned everything around. He brought life where there had been only death.

Jesus brings the same message of life to every “city gate”—wherever people are hurting, distressed, or grieving.

Sometimes the “gate” where Jesus shows up is surprising.

I was in Boston to preach a while ago, and I stayed in a hotel which had a small restaurant. As I ordered dinner, for some reason my heart was filled with compassion for the waitress. I didn’t know what it was about, but I knew the Lord wanted me to say something to her. When she brought the pizza I ordered, I didn’t know what the Lord wanted me to say. A half hour later, as I finished eating, I still didn’t know. “I think I’ll order dessert,” I told her, stalling.

Still blank moments later, I considered letting the opportunity to pass. But I couldn’t shake this deep conviction to talk to her. When she arrived with the cake, I blurted, “I guess I’ll have one more Diet Coke, too.” As she left, I prayed under my breath, “Lord, I can’t keep eating! I really need a word from you.”

This time, when she arrived with my drink, two words popped into my mind: “lonely” and “wounded.” “Excuse me,” I said, clearing my throat, “you’ll think I’m an idiot, but I have to tell you something. I’ve been praying for you this whole meal. And there are two words I feel God wants to say to you about your life. The words are ‘lonely’ and ‘wounded.’”

She stared at me shocked. “How did you know?” she asked. Then I noticed a fading bruise on her neck. She said, “A few weeks ago, my husband beat me and broke my collarbone. He’s done this several times. So I finally got up the nerve to leave him. For the past two weeks I’ve been staying by myself at a cheap hotel.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “You’re right, I’m lonely,” she said, “and I’m wounded. I can’t believe God would tell you to say that to me. I didn’t know God was kind.”

As she went to get my bill, I thanked the Lord for speaking. But he wasn’t finished. When she returned, I said, “There’s something else God wants you to know: This isn’t the first time you’ve been wounded by a man.”

Now she began to cry. “Twenty years ago, I was married to a different man, and he was abusive, too,” she said. “He knocked me down the stairs several times. I left him, but I felt empty and worthless.” She looked frightened. “Is there something wrong with me? Did I do something to deserve the type of men I’ve married?”

“No, no,” I answered, “God loves you. That’s why he wanted to tell you all of this. He sees your life and into your very heart.” Between tears, she nodded. Then she left with my credit card to pay the bill.

I was witnessing a clash take place at the gates of this woman’s life. All of her hurt and pain were coming out—and the love of God was going in. Yet the Lord still wasn’t finished. When she came back with my receipt, I joked mildly, “I’m sorry—every time you come to the table, I bring up things that are hard for you. But the Lord wants me to tell you one more thing. When you were six years old, someone hurt you badly.”

This time, she got angry. I gulped, thinking I’d finally crossed a line. She shouted something and stormed away. I waited a few minutes for her to return, so I could at least apologize before I left. But when she came back, she was sobbing deeply.

“I can’t believe what’s happening here,” she said. “I never told anybody I was sexually abused when I was six. I don’t know how you knew.” I repeated, “I told you, it’s not me, it’s Jesus. It’s his love for you. He wants you to know he sees your need, and he loves you.”

She shook her head. “I’ve cried myself to sleep the past two weeks,” she said. “When I was little, I never understood what the priests were saying in church. But I remember someone quoting from the Bible that Jesus loved me. These past few nights at the hotel I remembered that. And I’ve prayed, ‘Jesus, is it true? If you really love me, would you send me a message somehow?’”

I stood up, grabbed her hands, and we prayed for her to receive Christ there in the restaurant. She got saved. She got healed. When I saw her the next morning at breakfast, she looked completely different. “I’m changed!” she said. “I can feel it, I’m different!” She was testifying of God’s love and didn’t even know it.

Jesus didn’t let her pass by—just as he didn’t let a grieving widow pass by. In both cases, he stood up and said, “The funeral stops right here. Death is gone. I have brought you life.”

Jesus’ message is never just for one bruised, grieving person but for the entire community.

The mournful group at the gates of Nain were transformed by what they witnessed. “They glorified God, saying, ‘A great prophet has arisen among us!’ and ‘God has visited his people!’ And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country” (*Luke 7:16-17*).

No power of darkness can stop Jesus. He changes marriages. He changes children. He changes minds, including suicidal thoughts. He transforms lifelong hurts and pain into testimonies of healing and joy. And he changes communities and cultures.

Is there a clash at the gates of your life? It’s time to run toward the darkness and proclaim life in Jesus’ name. Take advantage of every opportunity he brings you, and watch him perform wonders. He calls us to run into the battle with his healing and hope. May we be faithful to do so. Amen!

Links

[1] <http://worldchallenge.org/printpdf/25217/>