

## WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

### WIDOW OF NAIN: LESSON FOUR

by Sandy Harber

**"Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her." Luke 7:12**

The Bible doesn't give us many details about the widow of Nain. We don't even know her name. Or her age. We have a clue in that she was the mother of a "young man." The Greek language indicates that the deceased was a "youth," that is, he was under 40 years of age. No wife is mentioned for the young man so we might assume that he was on the younger side. No other children are mentioned for the widow so, again, we can speculate that the mother and son were all each other had. This seems likely based on Jesus' reaction to her situation in restoring her son to her.

The widow's circumstances are unknown. The son may have been old enough to work and support himself and his mother. Or, he might have been young enough that he was dependent on her. Opportunities for women to earn money in Israel were very limited. This was why the lot of a widow was often grave. If young enough to bear children, a widow would usually find another husband to support her. Older widows were dependent on their adult children.

The widow most likely resided with her son. Thus, she would have been the first person to realize that the young man had died. She would have initiated the customary mourning process by loudly wailing and lamenting his passing. Her cries would have alerted her neighbors to her tragedy. Upon investigation, the neighbors, apprised of her situation, would have joined her in loudly lamenting the death of the son. The noise of the grieving widow and friends would have drawn in many mourners. In wealthy households paid mourners would have been hired to add to the noise of weeping and wailing. To show the depth of their grief some mourners might have torn their clothes, heaped ashes on their heads, or beat their breasts in anguish. Some might don goathair garments (sackcloth) which made them physically uncomfortable and added to their torment.

Israelites buried their dead on the same day that they died. This was due to the climate which caused the body to rapidly decompose and smell bad. In preparation, the son's body was washed and anointed with spices and a paste that would penetrate the linen cloth that was wrapped around his body and cause it to harden, forming a cocoon around the body. A cap was placed on the young man's head. Possibly, a linen bandage was placed under his chin to hold his jaw in place. Finally, the body was placed on the bier, or open coffin, which was most likely just a wooden board.

And, so, the funeral procession began its progress through the town and out through the gate to the place of burial. As the widow and her neighbors walked down the streets people joined the procession until a large crowd had assembled. Their destination was a cave outside of the walls of the town. The dead were not buried in the ground but, instead, placed in caves or man-made sepulchers. The body was laid out on a shelf or ledge. The mouth of the cave was sealed with a disc-shaped stone that was rolled into an inclined groove in front of the cave. The caves and sepulchers were painted white so that people would know that the dead were entombed there. Later, when the body had decomposed, the cave would be reopened and the bones placed in an ossuary (stone jar). This allowed the cave to be used again by others since the number of available caves was limited.

The death of a loved one is indeed cause for mourning. And, while we don't beat our breasts or tear our clothes, we can understand why someone would take that action. Loss is painful. It's stressful. We are powerless to change the outcome. We will never again be able to touch or speak to our loved one here on the earth. We are condemned to walk through the rest of our mortal lives without the companionship of the dearly departed. But, for the Christian, there is the comfort of knowing that the one we lost isn't lost at all; he or she is with Jesus (assuming he/she has accepted Christ as Savior). While there is weeping now, there will be rejoicing in heaven when we are reunited.

*"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." Psalm 30:5b*