

Message #43

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John

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JESUS, LAZARUS, AND THE PURPOSE OF SUFFERING

JOHN 11:1-16

INTRO AND REVIEW

In the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John records a vision that he received toward the end of his life from Jesus Christ. In Chapters 2 and 3 Jesus tells John to send messages to seven churches in Asia Minor, what we know today as Turkey. The second letter is to be sent to Smyrna. (PROJECTOR ON--- REVELATION 2:9) In vv. 9 & 10 of #2 John writes, **“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (REVELATION 2:10A) Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. (REVELATION 2:10B) Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”**

Ten centuries after John wrote these words, the Muslims conquered Smyrna. Around 1930 the Turks renamed Smyrna as Izmir. (IZMIR MAP) The city was almost entirely Muslim by religion. In 1993 a missionary who was a graduate of Wheaton College was sent by the Presbyterians to be involved as a church planter in this Turkish town. His name was Andrew Brunson. (ANDREW BRUNSON)

Both he and his wife came from missionary families themselves. In Izmir they were involved in pastoring a small Christian congregation that never grew beyond about 25 members. They tried to set up a prayer center there. They also led their congregation in helping the many Syrian refugees that flooded their country in the last few years.

Two years ago, Andrew and his wife went to a government office to apply for permanent residency in Turkey. They were both arrested. Mrs. Brunson was let go, but Andrew was incarcerated and charged with conspiring with terrorists and being involved in the 2016 plot to overthrow the government. Additional charges were piled on later. They were all bogus. Observers speculate that the government of Turkey was trying to use him as a bargaining chip to force the US to give up an opposition leader who is

living in exile in the US. But life in a Turkish prison was not good for Andrew Brunson. It was not clear what, if any, divine purpose there could be to his suffering. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Such has been the challenge to Christians throughout history. We have often encountered suffering that seems to serve no divine purpose that we can discern. Some suffering is simply the result of the human condition. But for people who trust in a sovereign and loving God, we at least want to know that there is some cosmic purpose for the trials that we endure. Such is the assurance that the passage before us this morning provides.

We have been dealing with events in the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel According to John. The setting in recent weeks in our study has been the Feast of Tabernacles and Hanukkah as they were celebrated in Jerusalem. Tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders are rising. We saw last week at the end of #10 that the religious leaders tried to stone Jesus for blasphemy. So Jesus and His disciples have retired to an area beyond the Jordan River where John the Baptist had previously been baptizing people.

(PEREA DECAPOLIS MAP) This region is called Bethany beyond the Jordan in #1 of this book. We do not know for sure where that was. The two leading candidates are a place east of Jerusalem and east of Jericho in Perea, which was under the control of Herod Antipas, and a place in Decapolis, which was Gentile territory further to the north near the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus received a much better response from the people in Bethany beyond the Jordan than He did in Jerusalem. Jesus did many miracles in Jerusalem and provided considerable evidence to the religious leaders that He fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah. He was rejected by them. Instead it was among the outliers of society that He received a good response. In that, I argued last week that there is encouragement for us. Today Jesus is dealing with a situation of suffering, which hopefully will also provide lessons of encouragement for us.

I.

In vv. 1-3 of #10, which is found on p. 897 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we learn about THE SETTING FOR SUFFERING. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE SETTING FOR SUFFERING) According to vv. 1 & 2, **“Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was**

Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.”

So there are two “Bethanys” in our story. In v. 40 of the previous chapter, John says that Jesus and His crew were hanging out where John the Baptist was first baptizing people. Chapter 1 v. 28 identifies this place as Bethany beyond the Jordan. That was somewhere on the east side of the Jordan River, either in Perea or Decapolis.

The Bethany of v. 1 (BETHANY MAP) was a couple of miles east of Jerusalem, just beyond the top of the Mount of Olives. It was here that Jesus would stay at night during His last week in Jerusalem. It is likely that Jesus and His twelve disciples also stayed here during some of their other visits to Jerusalem for the required feasts of Israel. Jerusalem and suburbs were packed out during these feasts. Jewish pilgrims stayed with relatives and friends. Others camped out in the surrounding countryside. Somehow Jesus and company had a connection with the family of Lazarus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

“Bethany” also happens to be the name of our congregation. I don’t recall hearing how that name was chosen. Most commentators and linguists say that “Bethany” literally means “house of figs.” Figs were a common product in ancient Israel. I don’t know of any connection that we have had with figs. I suppose the name was chosen because Bethany was a place in which Jesus hung out in the New Testament.

“Lazarus” was a common name in the first century among the Jews. It is the Greek equivalent of Eleazar, which means “God has helped.” Jesus earlier told a story about a poor man of the same name who went to heaven. This is not the same guy. The Palestinians today call Bethany “al-Eizariya,” basing it upon the Arabic name of Lazarus.

So Lazarus and Mary and Martha are siblings from Bethany. The story about Mary anointing the feet of Jesus appears in the next chapter. But that story was also included in the other three gospel accounts. Those Gospels were written several decades before the Gospel of John. The writer of the our account seems to assume that the Christians in his audience were already familiar with that story. A burial cave was discovered near Bethany several years ago. The names of these siblings were found in the cave.

The issue of suffering in our story relates to the sickness of Lazarus. We read in v. 3, **“So the sisters sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’”** The illness is a serious situation. Mary and Martha

would not have sent a representative on a two to four day journey to give this message to Jesus if their brother was merely dealing with a flu or a cold.

Mary and Martha have probably witnessed Jesus exercising miraculous power to heal people. They enjoy a close relationship with Jesus. They do not specifically ask Him to come and see Lazarus. They may be aware of the danger that Jesus faces from the religious leaders in nearby Jerusalem. Perhaps Martha and Mary have either seen or heard about incidents where Jesus healed people from a distance.

So this is the setting for suffering for those close to Jesus. This is also the setting for the final and climactic seventh of seven signs, around which John's Gospel is organized. The first of those miraculous signs happened at a wedding. This last sign involves a funeral.

II.

In vv. 4-8 we find that JESUS' RESPONSE TO SUFFERING DOES NOT ALWAYS MAKE SENSE. (PROJECTOR ON--- JESUS' RESPONSE TO...) The Apostle John writes in v. 4, **"But when Jesus heard it [the news about Lazarus] he said, 'This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.'"**

If indeed a messenger from the sisters was sent to Jesus and, and if he heard this reply, and if he returned immediately with this message, the sisters probably would have been encouraged. The implication would seem to be that Lazarus will not die from this sickness. If Jesus and the disciples were hanging out in Decapolis, Lazarus would likely have died by the time that the messenger returned. In either case, this word from Jesus would be confusing.

Lazarus does die from this illness. The only way that we can interpret the message from Jesus is that death is not the fate of Lazarus in the end. Something will result that brings glory to God. One commentator argues that the glory of God in John's Gospel refers not primarily to that which produces praise toward God but rather that which leads to God's self-disclosure. Indeed, the power of God is about to be revealed in what happens to Lazarus. Something about the character of Jesus and God the Father will be disclosed.

The Apostle John is fond of recognizing double meanings in the words of Jesus. As we will see, the sickness and resulting death of Lazarus will lead to a miracle in him being restored to life. But this

miracle will also lead to growing opposition from the religious leaders which results in the death of Jesus. But His death will be followed by resurrection, and the Son of God will truly be glorified through that.

Verse 5: **“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.”** Some suspect that Martha was the older sister, because she is usually listed first. From other Scriptures we get the picture that she was the practical worker and organizer. Mary was the more contemplative of the two sisters.

It is the strongest Greek word for “love” which is used by Jesus in this verse. We will see that Jesus delays His return, and Lazarus dies. What happens will not seem to make sense. Why did Jesus not prevent His death? That is the question that we have in the midst of suffering: Why did God allow this to happen? In anticipation of the bad thing that happens, we have the assurance from the author here that Jesus truly loved each of the members of this family. That is the assurance that we Christians need in the midst of difficult circumstances.

According to v. 6, **“So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.”** In view of the assurance of Jesus’ love in v. 5, the initial question would be: Why did He delay two days? If he really loved this family, would He not have left immediately to do something about the sickness of Lazarus?

If indeed the messenger or messengers returned immediately after hearing the message from Jesus, the sisters may have wondered why Jesus did not return with them. Why did He not return the next day, or the day after that? Lazarus died before Jesus showed up on the scene. Why did He not show up in time?

We are told in vv. 7 & 8, **“Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?’”** Last week we saw in #10 that Jesus had been in Jerusalem for Hanukkah. The religious leaders there tried to stone Jesus for blasphemy. This was seemingly a significant factor that led to Jesus and the disciples to move to a rural area outside of the Roman province of Judea.

So why is Jesus talking about returning to this dangerous place? Perhaps the disciples heard about the report concerning Lazarus. But they had also witnessed situations where Jesus had healed from a distance. In #4 of John we were told about a royal official from Capernaum who came to Jesus and asked Him to go to Capernaum and heal his son. Jesus told him to go back to Capernaum, and he would find

his son healed. Such was the case. The other Gospels tell about another situation where a Roman centurion came to Jesus, requesting that He heal his sick servant. Jesus also healed him from a distance.

If Jesus had done that with these strangers whom He did not know--- one of whom was a Gentile, why could He not do that with this family that He loved? Besides that, in returning to Judea, Jesus was not just putting Himself in danger, He was putting His disciples in danger. What sense did that make?

The situation that Andrew Brunson faced did not make a lot of sense to him. He was simply trying to be faithful to his responsibilities in his small little congregation in Turkey. Then he found himself jailed on bogus charges. For a time, he was put in a cell with 21 other prisoners that was designed to hold only 8 people. He had limited contact with the outside world. For a long time, he was not allowed to have anything to read, including a Bible. At one point he was put in solitary confinement. During his imprisonment, his daughter got married. He missed out on that. He lost fifty pounds. He became very depressed.

Andrew Brunson had several hearings in court. Additional charges were made against him. There were secret witnesses who testified. They did not even know Brunson. The missionary pastor told Sean Hannity this week, **“It was a very difficult time. I was surprised because I had never contemplated prison as a possibility and the costs for that. I was isolated by culture and by language but especially by religion. It was very difficult to be the only Christian among them.”**

Doug Bailey from our congregation is facing a situation where his daughter-in-law is dying. She is only in her forties. That situation does not make sense. Many of us have faced death and divorce and health problems and financial reversals, and these situations often have not made sense.

III.

We find then in vv. 9-16 that GOD USES SUFFERING TO GLORIFY HIMSELF AND TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH. (III. GOD USES OUR SUFFERING TO...) Verse 9: **“Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.’”**

The Jews and the Romans divided day and night into twelve parts each. The length of each part varied according to the season of the year. The obvious idea in a world without much artificial lighting was that travel needed to be done in the daylight. The significant addition in this statement is that the source of

light is the light of the world. Jesus had recently declared Himself to be the light of the world. So the idea seems to be that the disciples will be OK if they are walking with Jesus.

Conversely, there is a problem with walking in the dark. Jesus continues in v. 10, **“But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”** Walking apart from Jesus is bound to produce problems. Perhaps there is a hint here of what will happen when Jesus leaves them--- when He dies and is absent from them for a couple of days, and then when He first ascends into heaven. The disciples will seem to be stumbling around.

Verse 11: **“After saying these things, he said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.’”** Notice that Lazarus is described not just as the friend of Jesus, but as the friend of the other disciples as well. Probably Lazarus and his sisters had hosted them during their visits to Jerusalem.

Jesus is talking about death, but the disciples do not initially get it. There is no indication that another messenger has arrived to give the news about the death of Lazarus. It would seem that Jesus’ information comes from supernatural knowledge.

Verse 12: **“The disciples said to him, ‘Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.’”**

Verses 11 & 12 follow a pattern that is common in John’s Gospel. Jesus speaks figuratively, but His listeners take Him literally. It was a common understanding then, as it often is now, that sleep is good and helpful in recovery from sickness. But Jesus is not talking about literal sleep.

Thus the author explains in vv. 13 & 14, **“Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘Lazarus has died...’”** The word “sleep” appears some 18 times in the New Testament. Only in four of those instances does it refer to literal sleep. The rest of the time it is used to refer to the death of believers.

It is a good picture. The body is at rest, but the soul of the believer is very much alive. There is an anticipation of the body being awakened in the resurrection from the dead. Jesus told a story about another Lazarus who died and went to heaven. He was pictured by Jesus as interacting with Abraham in heaven.

The disciples had been exposed to another situation like this earlier in the ministry of Jesus. A synagogue official by the name of Jairus came to Jesus and begged Him to go with him to save his daughter who was at the point of death. When Jesus arrived at the house, servants told Jesus and Jairus that the daughter had died. Beginning in v. 39 of Mark #5 (MARK 5:39) we are told, **“And when he [Jesus] had entered, he said to them, ‘Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping’ (MARK 5:40) And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. (MARK 5:41) Taking her by the hand he said to her, ‘Talitha cumi,’ which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise.’ (MARK 5:42) And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement.”** The disciples witnessed a similar miracle in Luke #7 when Jesus raised a widow’s son from the dead. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There are many students of theology who make a distinction between restoration to life and resurrection. The son of the widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus and Lazarus were restored to life. In Christian resurrection, believers are not just restored to life, they receive a resurrection body. That is what happened to Jesus when He rose from the dead. That is what will happen to us when we rise from the dead.

The disciples are slow to catch on to what Jesus is saying in our passage. Their faith needs to be strengthened. Thus in v. 15 we see Jesus complete His sentence begun in v. 14, **“...and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”** The twelve have left everything to follow Jesus, but their faith is not yet mature. They have needed to have the same lesson taught to them more than once.

Why was it good that Jesus was not present with Lazarus? Perhaps He would have had to heal Lazarus before His death. Jesus wants His disciples to witness a greater miracle. He is also preparing them to handle His own death.

This is also a lesson that Jesus wishes to teach the sisters. He truly loved them. He wants their faith to be strengthened by the miracle that He is about to do before them. He wants them to be assured that there is a purpose for their suffering. That is the assurance that we also need when we face the storms of life. It is especially the assurance that we need in the face of death. Jesus can raise the dead. Not only did He raise Lazarus from the dead, but He was also soon to be involved in His own resurrection from the dead.

The Apostle Paul described the assurance that we can have in death in 1 Thessalonians #4. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13) Beginning in v. 13 he told fellow Christians, **“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:14) For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:15) For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:16) For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:17) Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (1 THESSALONIANS 4:18) Therefore encourage one another with these words.”** Such is the assurance and faith that we need.

Our passage concludes with v. 16: **“So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’”** This Gospel is the only one that gives us any information about Thomas, other than his appearance in the list of the twelve apostles. Some of your translations have the word “Didymus,” which is the Greek word for “twin.” Later in this book we will find the incident that leads to his description as “doubting Thomas.” It appears that Thomas had something of a gloomy, pessimistic outlook on life. But still he had commitment to Jesus such that he was willing to follow him to Judea, even if it meant his death. One commentator describes him as a “courageous pessimist.” Perhaps his attitude was reflective of that of most of the other apostles.

The Apostle John often recognizes double meanings in the statements of Jesus and other characters in the drama surrounding His life. Thomas here expresses a certain Biblical truth. Jesus called upon His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him. Following Jesus means a certain death to self--- to pride and self-will.

So we see here in this part of our passage that a key purpose for suffering in the life of the Christian is the strengthening of our faith. For much of the time that Andrew Brunson was in prison, his wife was his only outside contact. Even then she was allowed to visit him for only a half hour once a week, and they were separated by a glass partition. This past week Andrew Brunson told an interviewer, **“She would bring encouragement to me and tell me that people were praying for me. And as I learned that, I began to see that God was involved in this and that God was going to do something with my suffering.”** You see, his faith was strengthened.

Back in v. 4 Jesus assured the messenger from Martha and Mary, and His own disciples, that the Son of God would be glorified through this suffering that was about to happen. We will find out next week that Lazarus was raised from the dead. Mary and Martha, the disciples and even some of the religious leaders would witness this miracle. This was to be a tremendous revelation of the power of Jesus Christ. It was another demonstration that He was truly the Messiah and that He was God in the flesh.

This miracle would also lead to the final decision of the religious leaders to kill Jesus. This in turn would lead to His death, but it would also result in His resurrection, which would produce great glory.

The assurance that we have here is that Jesus can also use our suffering to bring glory to Him. We saw that this week with Andrew Brunson. Not only was His faith strengthened, but his story brought glory to Jesus. He was dramatically released from prison and sent back to the US. His release brought international headlines. Andrew Brunson had opportunity to describe His faith in Jesus. His story reached a certain culmination when he ended up in the White House. Here we see what happened. (VIDEO--- WHITE HOUSE PRAYER--- OVERHEAD FLOURESCENT LIGHTS OFF)

[One minute video that shows Andrew Brunson praying for President Trump.]

This pastor from a tiny congregation in a remote part of the world faced a situation of significant suffering. But in the end he brought great glory to God that culminated in his presence in the White House. (PROJECTOR OFF)

God uses suffering to glorify Himself and to strengthen our faith. These are not the only purposes for suffering. At times the Lord uses suffering to discipline His children, to bring judgment upon unbelievers, and to draw people to Himself. Our responsibility as Christians is to stay the course, to trust God in the midst of suffering and to believe that God will accomplish good purposes for us in the midst of it.