

Message #44

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John

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JESUS AND GRIEF

JOHN 11:17-37

I.

There was sadness in our extended church family this past week as Doug Bailey's daughter-in-law died last Sunday after a brief illness. She was only 45. Some of us knew Staci, at least by face, from her job at Albertsons. Her husband Josh has had a connection here through the Bailey family over the years. Our church family has another serendipitous connection through the Kenneston family. Joann Kenneston was our church office administrator for many years. Robert Kenneston had various leadership positions in the church. Robert's son is married to the sister of Staci, who just died.

There is obvious sadness and grief over the death of this wife and mom and daughter-in-law and sister and other relative and friend, especially at such a young age. Most of us, at some point, have been touched by such grief and tragedy, whether through death or divorce or illness or financial reversal or accident. Such events point us toward cosmic questions. Is there some kind of meaning or purpose for what has happened? What am I to make of this? How am I supposed to respond? It is these questions which are addressed in the passage before us this morning.

We are halfway through the Gospel of the Apostle John, but the rest of the book is going to deal with the events immediately before and after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Chapter 11 deals with the last of seven sign miracles around which John has organized his biography of Jesus. In #20 John explains that these signs that he has described are designed to point his readers to the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that they should believe in Him so that they might have eternal life.

In #10 we saw that rising tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders almost led to His stoning in Jerusalem, where he was celebrating Hanukkah. As a result of that episode, Jesus took His disciples away from Jerusalem to a more remote area outside the province of Judea. But then Jesus got word that Lazarus was very sick. It appears that Jesus and His disciples had often stayed at the home of Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary when they were attending the feasts in nearby Jerusalem. Now Jesus

goes to see Martha and Mary after Lazarus has died. We will see what lessons there are here for us in regard to dealing with grief and tragedy.

II.

In vv. 17-32 of #11, which is found on pp. 897 of the black Bibles under many of the chairs, we find that IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF AND TRAGEDIES, WE NEED TO DRAW CLOSE TO JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF AND...) According to vv. 17 & 18, **“Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off...”**

A messenger was sent to Jesus from Martha and Mary to tell Jesus that Lazarus was sick. Jesus and His disciples were at Bethany beyond the Jordan. (PEREA DECAPOLIS MAP) We don't know exactly where that was. It was somewhere on the east side of the Jordan. It could have been in Perea, which was territory governed by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. It could have been further north in a Gentile region known as Decapolis.

The disciples of Jesus were not happy about returning to the vicinity of Jerusalem, knowing the desire of the religious leaders to have Jesus killed. But they returned with Him to Bethany. (BETHANY MAP) This was a different “Bethany.” This was a village a couple of miles east of Jerusalem and just beyond the top of the Mount of Olives.

There were three annual festivals in Jerusalem to which good Jewish men were required to go. It seems likely that Jesus and friends had stayed in the home of Lazarus and his sisters for these feasts. Earlier in this chapter, the Apostle John stressed that Jesus loved the members of this family. Yet He had delayed His return to their home for a couple of days. Now Lazarus was dead.

We are told specifically that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Most Jews could not afford to have a tomb. So the fact that Lazarus has a tomb burial is an indication that this family had some significant financial resources.

Jews were normally buried the same day in which they died. The indication that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days may have significance in regard to the traditional thinking of the Jews. The Talmud was written a couple of centuries later. Most scholars think that this Jewish religious work describes Jewish thinking even in the time of Jesus. At one point the Talmud (TALMUD QUOTATION) says this: **“For**

three days [after death] the soul hovers over the body, intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its appearance change, it departs..." (Leviticus Rabbah 18.1) That Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days would mean that religious Jews would believe that Lazarus was a total goner. There was no hope for him on this side of the grave.

Soon after death, the deceased would be wrapped with cloths, and spices would be applied to reduce the smell from a decomposing body. There were no funeral homes or mortuaries. Family members would carry out these duties. The body would be buried or placed in a tomb on the day of death. By three days after death, human tissues begin to decompose and produce hydrogen sulfide and methane gas. Green liquids ooze out. By day four, any faint hope of life returning was gone. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The other thing to notice about the setting is that Bethany was right along the main route from Jericho to Jerusalem. Many religious pilgrims took this route to Jerusalem from points north. The feast of Passover was approaching. So there was probably a significant number of Jewish worshipers who were passing through Bethany on their way to Jerusalem. Some of them were probably going to bring to Jerusalem news of the miracle that was about to happen.

According to v. 19, **"...and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother."** "The Jews," we have seen, is a term that is used by the Apostle John to usually refer to the religious leaders, most of whom are in opposition to Jesus and His claims. The fact that many of the Jews come to Martha and Mary to express condolences is a further evidence that this family had considerable prominence. This would not normally be done for other villagers who lived outside of Jerusalem.

Judaism has always recognized that it is a religious duty to show sympathy to those who have lost loved ones in death. The practice is known as "sitting shiva." "Shiva" means "seven" in Hebrew. The practice that appears to go back to ancient times begins with the death of a loved one. Burial for religious Jews still typically happens on the day of death. After the burial, the grieving family returns to the family home. Friends and relatives come by and bring food and express sympathy for the grieving family. These mourners often stay for an extended period of time.

The Talmud (TALMUD QUOTATION) provides this simple description: **"Three days for weeping and seven for lamenting and thirty [to refrain] from cutting the hair and [putting on] pressed clothes."** (Talmud, MK 27b) For the first three days there was understood to be a time of extreme expressions of grief. For the next four days there was expected to still be considerably crying and sadness. For the

remainder of the month, there was still mourning, but it was not expected to be as extreme.
(PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 20 of our passage the Apostle John writes, **“So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.”** Literally the text says that Mary was sitting. This was the expression used of “sitting shiva.” Perhaps Jesus sent one of His disciples ahead of the group to let the family know that Jesus was approaching Bethany.

Martha was apparently the older sister. In other accounts of Martha in the Gospels we get the picture that she was the worker and organizer in the family. In Luke #10 she gets upset that Mary is not helping her with household duties when Jesus is around.

According to v. 21, **“Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”** This could be interpreted as a complaint or criticism addressed to Jesus. I suspect that it is more likely a simple statement of regret and sadness. “Jesus, if you had only been here this would not have happened.”

This is typically how our minds work in situations of grief and tragedies. We think along these lines: “If only I had been there, this might not have happened.” “If only I had done things differently, this might not have happened.” “If this person had left just a little sooner, this accident might not have happened.” “If only this person had gone to the doctor sooner, perhaps this medical problem would have been found.”

Then we address these kinds of questions to God: “Lord, if only you would have kept this person from falling asleep at the wheel.” “Lord, if only you would have given this person power to overcome his addiction.” “Lord, if only you would have gotten this person’s attention sooner.”

Martha was obviously confident that Jesus had the power to heal. But she had a question about why Jesus did not come sooner. How was she to make sense of that?

She continues in v. 22, **“But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.”** Is Martha hoping that Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead? Probably not. For in v. 39 we will see next week that she objects to Jesus’ request to have the stone moved away from the tomb. I suspect that

Martha is simply expressing her trust in Jesus and her confidence that He has a special relationship with God the Father.

Verse 23: **“Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’”** There is no “again” in the Greek text. Jesus literally says, “Your brother will rise.” This is an ambiguous statement. Verse 24 tells us, **“Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’”**

Martha understands Jesus to be speaking about a future resurrection from the dead. This was a mainstream Jewish belief. The Sadducees, who dominated the family of the high priests, did not believe in a future resurrection from the dead. They also only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. The Pharisees had greater influence. For most all of the rabbis were Pharisees. They accepted the testimony of the prophets, including Daniel. For Daniel (PROJECTOR ON--- DANIEL 12:2) wrote in #12 v. 2 of his prophetic book, **“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”** Thus the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead has its roots in the Old Testament.

Back in v. 25 of our passage, we read (PROJECTOR OFF), **“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.’”** We have seen in John’s Gospel that there are not only seven signs but also seven “I am” statements. This is number five. In the other statements, Jesus compares Himself to people and things: bread, door, light, shepherd. This is a bit different.

In #6 Jesus called Himself “the bread of life.” In that chapter He performed the miracle of multiplication of the loaves of bread. In #8 Jesus described Himself as the light of the world. He then proceeded to give sight to a man who had been born blind. Now Jesus describes Himself as the resurrection and the life. Now He will proceed to raise a man from the dead.

Jesus continues in v. 26, **“...and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”** Jesus affirms the traditional belief in resurrection from the dead. He also indicates that physical death does not mean the end of life. The life that Jesus is describing is not physical life. It is spiritual life. It is life that comes from being born again.

But Jesus in vv. 25 & 26 is going beyond the traditional doctrine of resurrection from the dead. He is claiming that resurrection life is dependent upon Himself. He is responsible for resurrection from the

dead. He is the source of eternal life. He is the light of the world. He is the One into whose hands the Father has committed eternal judgment, as was described back in #5.

The question that Jesus directs toward Mary is not about her fitness or worthiness or goodness to receive resurrection life. It is about her belief. Does she believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life? That is the issue with us as well. Our deeds or behavior can never merit eternal life. The issue is whether we have believed in Jesus. He is soon to die on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. The issue is whether we believe that Jesus is God and man and that He died as our Substitute for sin and rose again. If our trust is in this Jesus, then we have eternal life.

Verse 27: **“She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.’”** This is a significant testimony. It is perhaps the clearest expression yet in the Gospel of John of a correct understanding of Jesus. It ties in with the stated purpose of this book, as John describes it in #20 v. 31. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 20:31) There the Apostle John writes, **“...but these [sign-miracles] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**

It is also significant in that this testimony comes from a woman. Traditional Judaism did not accept the legal testimony of a woman in court. Jesus and New Testament Christianity take a different perspective. The apostle John takes the testimony of Martha and Mary as something that his readers need to believe and accept. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 28 & 29: **“When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.”**

Notice that Martha regards Jesus as not simply “a teacher.” He is “the Teacher” who has no equal. Martha also desires that her sister have an opportunity to speak to Jesus in private.

We read in v. 30, **“Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him.”** Jesus was likely to attract a crowd when and if He entered Bethany. But it was not to be that His presence would go undetected.

For we read in v. 31, **“When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.”**

Again, this term “the Jews” is likely to have special reference to the religious leaders. Back in v. 19 it was

noted that “the Jews” came from Jerusalem to console the family of Lazarus. If the family of Lazarus indeed had some prominence in Judea, it was appropriate that representatives from the religious leadership come to show their support for the family.

According to v. 32, **“Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’”** These are the same words that Martha spoke to Jesus in v. 21. There is now a larger audience to witness this interaction with Jesus. There is a certain expression of faith in Jesus in the statements of these two women. But there is also an implied question: “Why? I believe that you are the Son of God. You have a unique relationship with God the Father. What is the cosmic explanation for what has happened? What am I to make of what has happened?”

Such are the questions that we have in the midst of grief and tragedies. The important thing to see here is that in the face of this terrible loss, these two women came to Jesus. They did not reject Him. They did not turn away from Him.

In the face of the most difficult circumstances of life, the temptation is to turn away from Jesus and from God the Father. “You let this happen to me. I am done with You. I don’t want anything more to do with You.” Or will we turn to Him in trust, though we cannot make sense of what has happened? That is the test.

II.

In vv. 33-35 we find that IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF AND TRAGEDIES, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT JESUS CARES. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF...) In v. 33 we read, **“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.”**

The Talmud said that even a poor family who lost a loved one in death had to have at least two flute players and one professional mourner present for the mourning period. The evidence suggests that this family had significant financial resources. So there were likely more musicians and professional mourners present. The practice in this culture was to have more vocal and emotional displays of grief than we usually have in our culture. When we go to a wake or a funeral in a funeral home or a church in our culture, usually everything is quiet and somber. Not so in the Middle East. Everything was loud and noisy. We need to have this in mind when we try to picture this situation in our passage.

The most important thing for us to notice here is the reaction of Jesus. He was “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.” There is debate among scholars over the exact nuance of the first verb. It appears only five times in the New Testament. Some say that there is a hint of anger in the meaning of the word. Clearly there is a strong emotional reaction implied. The spirit, it would seem, is his human spirit. This reaction is reinforced by the use of the second verb. He was “greatly troubled.”

This God-man is not an aloof, detached Person. He feels the pain of humanity. (HEBREWS 2:17) In Hebrews #2 v. 17 we are told, **“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”**

As to what Jesus was feeling and thinking, we are not specifically told. But we can make a reasonable consideration of the possibilities. He was dealing with the death of a friend, Lazarus. Even though Jesus knew that He was about to raise Him from the dead, He felt sadness about the situation. He experienced the pain that the family members of Lazarus felt. Perhaps from His divine perspective, Jesus was also appreciating on a human level the effects that human sin, which originated in the Garden of Eden, had upon the human race. Perhaps He was upset at the stubbornness of these religious leaders to recognize His true identity. Perhaps He was considering His own human death that was soon to take place. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We come then to vv. 34 & 35: **“And he said, ‘Where have you laid him?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, come and see.’ Jesus wept.”** In v. 35 we have the shortest verse in the English Bible. It is perhaps appropriate. It makes the care and concern of Jesus more memorable. Certainly Jesus is feeling the pain of the human condition. His emotional reaction is also a reminder to us that the display of grief is entirely appropriate in tragic situations. Many of us men were raised with the idea that real men don’t cry. Jesus’ reaction here gives the lie to that notion.

In the midst of the grief and tragedies of life, most of us want to know: Does God care? Does Jesus care? Here we find evidence that Jesus does care about situations of grief and tragedy. If we have trusted in Jesus, we can be confident--- on the basis of John #1 v. 12--- that we are part of His family. We can see here that Jesus certainly cares about family and friends. He is not aloof from our circumstances.

III.

In vv. 36-37 we also find that IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF AND TRAGEDIES, WE NEED TO REMEMBER THAT JESUS IS SOVEREIGN. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF...) Does Jesus not only care, but does He have some power over my situation? Does He have some meaning and purpose for my circumstances?

According to v. 36, **“So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”** The Greek word for “love” here is *phileo*. The brotherly love of Jesus for Lazarus was evident to the Jews. I suspect that the author is referring to religious leaders. Compassion for those experiencing grief through death was universally recognized by religious Jews as a good thing.

But these religious leaders also knew about some of the unique abilities of this Jesus. They at least had heard about His healing of the blind man and other miracles. Perhaps some of them thought that Jesus was sad about His late arrival and His inability to prevent the death of Lazarus. This Jesus really cared about Lazarus, but He just showed up too late to do anything about it. These circumstances were now beyond His ability to manage.

Verse 37: **“But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying.’”** If Jesus had only shown up four days earlier, He might have been able to prevent this death. Too bad!

You see, these Jews seemed to recognize that Jesus was loving and caring. But they had no conception that He was God, that He was sovereign. If Jesus was sovereign, He would not have shown up late. But Jesus did not show up late. He was in complete control of the situation. He was about to do something about it.

In the tragedies and grief of life, we want to know not only that Jesus cares, but also that He is still in charge. The hardest situations of life cause us to think that either Jesus is not truly loving or that He is not truly in charge. He is not really in control.

There is a small group of Christians who call themselves evangelicals who adhere to a theological belief known as “Open Theism.” These Open Theists believe that Jesus and God are truly loving. But they are not completely sovereign. God has established plans and goals for the future. But how things turn out is

dependent upon the decisions that people make. God makes a good guess about how things will turn out, but He does not exactly know.

There are a number of problems with this theological belief. Not only are they doubting the sovereignty of God, they are also doubting the omniscience of God--- His ability to know everything. They are saying that God doesn't really know how the future will turn out. This is in contradiction to statements in Scripture like Ephesians #1 v. 11 which asserts that God works all things after the counsel of His will. He does claim to be in charge.

Grief and tragedies are a human reality. But the evidence of this passage is that Jesus cares, and He is sovereign. Ben Witherington is an evangelical Methodist scholar. A few years ago his daughter died unexpectedly at age 32. He writes, **"Here is one paradox of grieving. Grieving, for a Christian, is about you. We are not grieving because someone is pain-free in heaven with the Lord! That's cause for celebration! We are not grieving the condition of the Christian loved one who is deceased. For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. ... No, we are grieving for our own sense of loss, our own sorrow over the sudden departure, our own feelings of being alone. Grief is the self's shock over what has happened to itself, and the shock is both physical and emotional."**

"Something is wrong, terribly and profoundly wrong, if we have no capacity to mourn the passing of someone we have loved with all our heart. In other words, it takes a strong person to weep and not be afraid to show your mortality and vulnerability. Our macho culture doesn't get that. ... We need to let ourselves grieve."

Witherington goes on to point out that a Christian whose grieving goes on perpetually also has a problem. He or she has become too self-absorbed. A balanced perspective is needed. He continues, **"What does it mean, then, to grieve as one who has hope? It means we grieve with one eye forever fixed on the eschatological horizon--- that is, looking to the end of history. It means we grieve knowing that resurrection will reverse death. It means we grieve knowing that death will not have the last word."** (*Christianity Today*, 4/2012)

So it is that in the midst of grief and tragedies, we need to remember that Jesus cares and He is sovereign.