

# MAKING SENSE OUT OF SUFFERING

There are a number of concepts I've had trouble getting my mind around. The whole concept of suffering and how to handle it is one of them. And after years of parish ministry and counseling, I've discovered that I'm not the only one! That said, I was able to understand suffering in a great deal better when I listened anew to the words of the Gospel account of the *Raising of Lazarus* ([John 1.1-45](#)) Here follows a condensed version of the text—I highlighted salient points—on which I shall focus. (Jesus words are written in red.) My Scriptural comments first; the *points* last.

Now a man was ill in **Bethany**, the brother of Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Master, the one You love is ill." When Jesus and His Disciples heard this He said, **"This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."** After three days, Jesus said to the Disciples, **"Lazarus has died. And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him."**

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Martha said to Jesus, **"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."** But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, **"Your brother will rise."** Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus told her, **"I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in Me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"** She said to Him, **"Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God."** Then Jesus said, **"Where have you laid him?"** They said to him, "Sir, come and see." **Jesus wept.** So the Jews said, "See how he loved him."

Jesus came to the tomb, a cave, and a stone lay across it. Jesus said, **"Take away the stone."** Martha said to Him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." Jesus said to her, **"Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?"** So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, thanked God, and **said, "Lazarus, come out!"** The dead man came out, **tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth.** So Jesus said to them, **"Untie him and let him go."**

**"This illness is not to end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."** and **"Lazarus has died."**

Jesus tells His Disciples that Lazarus' sickness will not be fatal. This is interesting, as the next things we hear about Lazarus is that he has died. And we get that news, as the Disciples did, from Jesus: He who told His followers that Lazarus' illness was not terminal!

While they were confused and worried—Lazarus was the Disciples' friend as well—they stayed with Jesus. They had to wonder why Jesus did not go immediately to Mary, Martha

and Lazarus, to comfort the former and heal the latter. Similarly, they had to wonder why Jesus said that Lazarus' sickness—the very thing associated by first-century Jews as a direct result of personal sin—would glorify God. Good question: How can God work through sin?

**Martha said, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

It was natural for Martha to blame Jesus for her brother's death. We will see a little later in the text that Martha believed that Jesus was the Messiah—God—and, as such, she assumed that everything that took place was because God wanted it to happen. She seems to have temporarily forgotten a Scripture she heard in the Synagogue, “You, God, are good and You do only good. Teach me your statutes!” (Psalm 119:68) Hurting and grieving, she lashed out at God, who stood before her. And she's not the only saint to lash out at God in pain.

**“Your brother will rise.” and “I am the resurrection and the life... and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”**

Jesus responds to Martha in love, even as she lashes out at him, with truthful words (as we shall see), that are intended to comfort her. In reality though, Jesus has not told her in these words anything that He did not already tell her, above. But that's not all: after the Truth, Jesus asks her if she believes what He has told her.

**She said to Him, “Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that You are the Messiah, the Son of God.”**

Something happens here for and in Martha: she no longer lashes out, but makes a profound statement of faith. Interestingly enough, Martha is the only person other than Peter who tells Jesus that He is God in such plain and simple words. ([Peter's words](#).) Note that Jesus does not say that Lazarus' pending life is predicated on her believing; rather, Lazarus will have life independent of Martha's faith. Her faith, however, will allow her to see it. Without faith, she will not.

**Jesus wept.**

This verse—[the shortest verse in the Bible](#)—shows that Jesus truly loved Lazarus. His death saddened Him. Jesus was also very likely to have been saddened by Martha's initial reaction to Him, as He was saddened for the women of Jerusalem who would weep as they saw Jesus carry His Cross to Calvary. All pain and death saddens God: pain and death are not what we were created for. God created us to live forever in Paradise with Him. Anything else is bad news to God, as it is to us! And it hurts Him even more than it hurts us!

**“Take away the stone.” and Bethany**

That the burial site for Lazarus was a cave sealed with a stone is significant. And, for that matter, that this story took place in Bethany is significant. Take a look...

Jesus, not unlike Lazarus, found His lifeless body sealed in a cave by a stone. And...

Not long after this event, Jesus [set out for what He knew would be His death](#) in Jerusalem. During the last week of His life—Holy Week—Jesus spent the days in Jerusalem, but because of the crowds during Passover and the limited amount of hotel space and finances, Jesus and His Disciples spent the nights in Bethany. It was from Bethany that Jesus entered Holy Thursday and the horrific events that would follow on Good Friday.

The whole Lazarus event was a foreshadowing of *what* would happen to Jesus, and in large manner, *how* as well.

said

This little word contains a big truth. When God created the earth, [He spoke](#). God's Word brought life to creation. Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate (in the flesh) brings life as well. In this little word "said." John's Gospel reminds us that Jesus is not only God, but was the very Force present at creation that made the world and all that is in it. God's word—God's speech—always involves life.

Lazarus was tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth.

We already know that sin results in death; we all inherited original sin. And who among us hasn't experienced death in some way as a result of a sin we have committed (i.e., a friendship or a relationship, perhaps even losing part of our freedom)? John uses this opportunity to remind us that sin enslaves—it takes away our freedom. But he is quick to remind us that sin and death are not the end of the story!

Jesus said, "Untie him and let him go."

Jesus links Lazarus' life with freedom, just as He linked healing with activity when He healed the paralytic and told him, ["Take up your pallet and walk."](#) We already know that [Jesus linked freedom with truth](#). It follows, then, that for Christians, truth, freedom and healing are all wrapped up together in life. Eternal Life.

### So what? So this...

Sickness, loss, pain, death; they all bring suffering. But, as it is for everything else in this world, **suffering is temporary**. In the face of suffering, it serves me well to know and remember that....

- † **Suffering—physical, emotional, psychological and/or spiritual—cause us to lose focus on what we know, what we believe, and in Whom we put our trust;**
- † **Jesus reminds us that suffering—in whatever form it may come—is temporary. It will not kill us, even if it kills us! It won't be pleasant, but it won't kill us;**
- † **We are confused by suffering, whether it is our suffering or watching the suffering of those we love. Just as the Disciples did not know how Jesus was going to manifest His love in Lazarus' suffering, we don't always know how He will manifest His love in ours;**
- † **It is natural, although not helpful, to lash out at others when we suffer and even lash out at God as well. It's not always easy to remember that God only gives us what's good for us; it's easy to think that, if it happens, God wants it to happen. But that's just not always true!**
- † **When we suffer, Jesus suffers. Our sufferings actually hurt Him more than they hurt us, because He is One with the Father who created us. Anyone who has ever been a parent knows that it's easier to endure personal suffering than that of your child.**

- † **God's Word brings life hope. One of the best things you can do when you are suffering is to turn to the Word of God—the Sacred Scriptures—for answers. Do a Google search on "[God's power through suffering](#)" and read what you find. Or open the Bible and read [stories about suffering](#). The Word—the Bible and Jesus—brings life and hope! It really does.**
  
- † **God can, and does, ehlp us make sense of our sufferings and promises to work through them in ways that are marvelous than we can ever imagine! Just like it says in [Romans 8.18-39....paraphrased...](#)**

Paul writes to the Church in Rome, saying, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of God, because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. But in this hope we were saved. And if we hope for what we do not see, we must wait for it with patience."

"We know that, in everything, God works for good with those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose." What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all: will he not also give us all things with Him? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword? As it is written, *For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.*"

"No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, a few prayers that might be helpful, and a link to an article that I think is marvelous by someone for whom I have a great deal of respect. May God help you sort out the suffering you experience and those of your loved ones, so that you might find in them hope, peace, and a promise of what God holds for us all!

~~Robert W. Bosworth, Jr., M.Div., Ph.D.

**Prayer in Time of Need:**

O Lord, in my present need, help me to believe that You are aware of my trouble and will do what is best for me. Give me the strength to trust You and put the present and future in Your merciful hands. Grant this through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

**Healing Prayer for Those Who Suffer:**

Lord Jesus Crucified, I bring before You in prayer all those I know and love and all people throughout the world who are suffering in body, mind or spirit. The sufferings of Your own Agony and Passion were offered to Your Heavenly Father out of love for us. Help those who suffer today to unite themselves with You in living memory of Your Passion. Console them, Lord, ease their pain, and strengthen their hope in everlasting life with You. Amen.

**Other Prayers for Those Who Suffer:**

[http://bcponline.org/PastoralOffices/ministration to the sick.htm#Prayers](http://bcponline.org/PastoralOffices/ministration%20to%20the%20sick.htm#Prayers)

For a great article by a great woman on the subject of suffering, see...

<https://www.ewtn.com/library/mother/ma11e.htm>

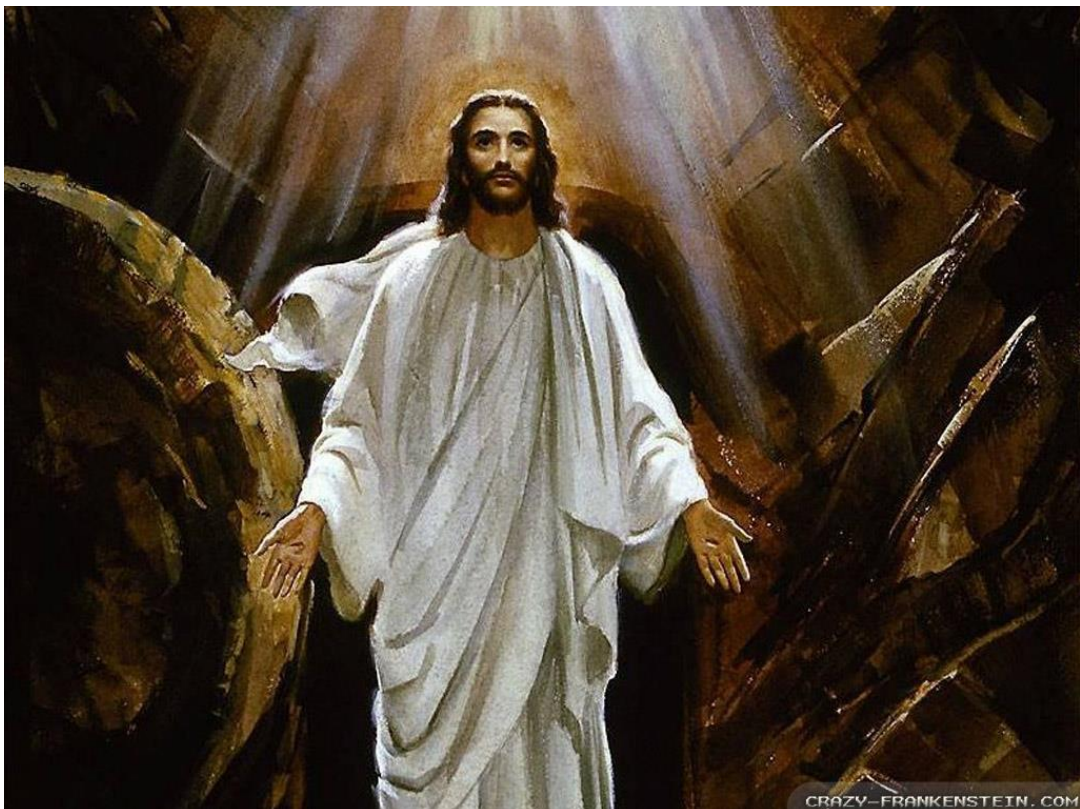
## THE BEGINNING:



## **THE SUFFERING:**



## **THE JOY:**



**THE END (AND OUR END):**



**THANKS BE TO GOD!**