
Why Jesus Wept

John 11:1-44

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I have a simple question I want to ask over our text this morning. “Why did Jesus cry at the tomb of Lazarus?” O, before you leap to an answer, you better join me in the story.

Scene One: Jesus Beyond the Jordan

(v.1-16)

John 10:40-42 sets the story of Lazarus up. Jesus is staying at the place where John was first baptizing. This would be where Jesus was baptized, filled with the Spirit and approved by the Father. John advances the argument of his book by pointing out that many believed, not because of miraculous works, but because of the true words that John the Baptist spoke. The point is that what John said, people believed.

The Messenger

(v.1-4)

¹ Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” ⁴ But when Jesus heard it 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.”

John begins by carefully identifying who the rest of the players are: Lazarus, Mary and Martha. The messenger comes with a carefully worded message, “Lord, the one You love is sick.” Now the message is calculated to draw out the compassion and concern and care that Jesus has and to channel it through his love for Lazarus. John wants us to begin to really feel how much Jesus loves them. They had experienced His love and now expected that love to move to do something about Lazarus’ condition.

Then Jesus says to the messenger what Mary and Martha want to hear. “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Here is both a prophecy and a promise. Go tell Mary and Martha that Lazarus’ illness will not culminate in death, but in God’s glory being seen in Christ’s glory. So what are they but to think that Lazarus will not die? John leaves to our imaginations the joy that this message brought to the household that Jesus loved.

The Delay

(v.5-7)

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” ⁸ The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?”

Now Jesus does what baffles us. He loves them, but He waits, He delays. It is not that Jesus sees no need for urgency. It is not that He does not care. In the light of the news, in the light of His reassurance to them, in the light of His love for them, He waits. And

He waits two long days. Why does He delay? Why does He not go? Because Jesus is always doing the Father's will in the Father's time for the Father's glory. But now (v.7) it is time to go.

The Discussion

(v.8-15)

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. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." ¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Now the disciples thought there was a perfectly good reason why Jesus did not go to Lazarus. Through their words, the Jews are brought forward in this story. Now listen, in the Gospel of John, the Jews are *always* the bad guys. John never uses this term in a positive way up to this point. Their malignant hatred for Christ was reason enough for the disciples to stay in the comfort and security of the trans-Jordan. The Jews had just attempted to stone Jesus, and there was no reason to think they would more kindly disposed now.

I love Jesus' enigmatic responses to the disciples. Can you sort of see them scratching their heads? Jesus' point here is that it is time to go. If they wait, they will be in the darkness that is *doing* outside the Father's will.

Now that Lazarus has fallen asleep (literally, into a rest of sleep) it is time to go. But why? If he has fallen into a restful sleep, then he is recovering? Why take the risk now? "See, what you said did come to pass. Don't sweat going there now!"

Jesus turns to them and speaks with great simplicity and with piercing plainness. "Lazarus is dead." Ooooooh. You can almost hear the collective gasp. Eyebrows go up. Heads swivel. The whispering starts out on the fringe. "But He said this would not end in death. Now He has hung around here and blown it. Going to face the stones of the Jews will be nothing to facing the grief of Mary of Martha. What does He mean that He was glad that He was not there?!"

The Decision

(v.15b,16)

¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Here we have another of John's clues. Jesus declares that it brought Him gladness not to be there for Lazarus because this all would bring them faith. Now that Lazarus is dead, now that we have waited, now that it is time for you to believe, let us go.

Make no mistake. John clearly identifies doubting Thomas as the one who makes this incredible assertion. Now I have to ask myself as I ask you – is this a declaration of faith or a resignation to failure? In fact, is it not a radical statement of unbelief? Is it not a fa-

talism? Is it not the way some head into the suffering they think is coming? O, well: there is nothing better. Might as well die.

Scene Two: Jesus and Martha

(v.17-27)

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.

Verse 17 really grabs me. On His arrival to the outskirts of Bethany, Jesus discovers with surprise, "found", that Lazarus has been entombed for four days. So it has been at least six days since the messenger came. From here to verse forty, the question keeps ringing through the text, "Why have you buried Him? I said this would not end in death but in glory."

The Comforters

(v.18-20)

Here are the stone slingers. The Jews. They have come down to comfort Mary and Martha. Jesus' enemies will use every opportunity to drive wedges between Christ and His followers. Why else would they come? Can't you hear it now? "I am so sorry Lazarus died. It is too bad that Jesus either couldn't or wouldn't do anything about it. I wonder why He didn't come? Imagine, after all you've done for Him." I hear in the sweet words of consolation the slithering hiss of the snake.

John points out that Mary stays at home while Martha comes. This ought to surprise us. This is backwards from what we would have expected. But then, maybe for once, the serving heart of Martha wants to understand.

The Confrontation

(v.21-27)

²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

Here in verses 21-22 is the struggle our faith wrestles with. God often seems absent from our troubles. We feel that deeply. If He had been there, our Lazarus would not have died. But. But, we still know that God can assert His power on our behalf. For Martha, it looks bad. But it is not hopeless.

Follow this dialog carefully.

Jesus states a truth: Lazarus will rise again.

Martha believes the truth for the future, but not for the present. She has faith. She believes. She knows the general truths and facts of God's Word. Yes, he will rise again in the last day.

Jesus asserts Himself as the Person of truth. I am the Resurrection and the Life. We are not here talking about abstract truth we are talking about a present reality. That Lazarus will rise again *will always depend on the fact that Jesus is the resurrection and the life*. Do you believe that?

Martha understands. She has heard the truth, affirmed the truth. But now she affirms who Christ is, places her trust in that great affirmation and bows to His sovereign power. She has just declared that she believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the very Son of God who has come into the world.

Scene Three: Jesus and Mary

(v.28-37)

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

Martha’s faith sends her to witness. Just let that sink down deep into your soul. She runs to Mary. “Jesus is here and wants to talk to you,” Martha whispers. Why whisper in secret? The Jews are hovering nearby.

The Confrontation

(v.30-32)

³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.”

Imagine this scene. Mary gets up and leaves the house quickly. She is on her way to see Jesus. But the Jews think she is on her way to grieve at the tomb. So they trail out after her. Can you see this in your mind’s eye?

She comes to Jesus and throws herself down at His feet, weeping and sobbing. And she is accusing. “Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died.” You said his sickness would not end in death, you stayed away, and now he is dead. It is your fault. Why?

The Grief

(v.33-37)

³³ 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. ³⁴ And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

Then John turns the camera on the Jews. They are weeping too. Now why would John do this now? Why have both Mary and the Jews both weeping and sobbing over the death of Lazarus? Because Mary is grieving just like everyone else! She is weeping like the enemies of Christ are. She is verbalizing what they are thinking. Yes, they loved Lazarus too. But there was nothing they could have done. This grief shown by Mary and the Jews *is an expression of unbelief – they did not believe the message Jesus sent to them*.

That is why Jesus was deeply moved and troubled. We are beginning to see it now. But wait, we need one more element. "Where have you laid him?" The question is not meant to gain information about the location of the gravesite. The question is meant to say, "Why have you buried him? What do you mean, come and see. Did I not say that this sickness would not end in death?" So they get up and begin to move in the direction to show Jesus the tomb. In the face of their glaring unbelief, Jesus weeps.

Now I know the sentimentalism that would have us seeing Jesus weep:

Because Lazarus is dead. He grieves because of the intrusion of death into the life and calm of this home;

Because of the weeping of those around. He grieves out of empathy and sympathy with their great sorrow and loss;

In anticipation of His own death and burial. The reality of His own impending death suddenly hits Him as He stands, looking at this tomb.

See, why should the Resurrection and the Life weep at a tomb? In fact, *He is not yet even at the tomb*. He is troubled and weeping *at their response*. I tell you, Jesus came to Bethany to raise Lazarus and they should not have buried him. If they had believed what Jesus told them, they would never have bound him in grave clothes and sealed him a tomb. *They are not expecting him to live*. This is why Jesus weeps.

Now, I must say two things:

A Christian may still grieve at the loss of loved ones. We are not stoics. We have feelings and affections and feel loss and pain. *But we not grieve as the world does*. For the resurrection of Christ is the ground of our assurance that those believers who die in Christ will one day rise again. So our grief must be tempered by the truth.

Jesus' weeping over unbelief is not without precedent. On a mountain outside Jerusalem, with the cold winds of rejection and unbelief swirling up around Him, He wept over Jerusalem. And He did so because of His love.

Make no mistake about it. The Jews are right in their observation that Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary and Martha greatly. But they thought it was compassionate sorrow at grief while it was really caring sorrow at unbelief.

Scene Four: Jesus and Lazarus**(v.38-46)**

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Now we come to the grave. Jesus is troubled. He knows that He is going to raise Lazarus. He knew all along. He had told them.

"Remove the stone," He says. "He's been dead for four days. By now, he has begun to rot. Surely you don't want to see Lazarus like this, do you? What's the point Jesus? Are you just trying to drive the wound deeper? Do not disturb his rest in death"

Here it is. "Did I not say to you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?" In this penetrating question Jesus links the message He had sent in verse 4 with the need for her to believe in verses 25-26. This question rumbles with thundering power into the ears and hearts of Mary and Martha and even some of the Jews. He is not pleading. He is not whining. He is sending out His Word as a sword to pierce through the hardness of their unbelief and to give birth to belief.

So the stone is rolled away (I wonder of shivers of delighted anticipation swept through the soul of Jesus, for in just a short time another stone would be rolled away from another tomb). And now His prayer. Listen to His words very, very carefully.

"Father, I thank You that You have heard me. I knew that You always hear me, but *I said this* for the benefit of the people standing here that *they may believe* that You have sent me."

Remember John 10:41-42? Many believed because all that John said was true. Many will here believe because of what Jesus said was true.

Lazarus hears Jesus' words and rises again. He comes to life and comes walking out of the tomb. Wonder who it was that finally stepped forward to loose him? I would love to have been there to have seen the looks on their faces. Amazement, astonishment, wonder and finally – belief. And on others, fear, anger and hatred fueled by unbelief.

Reflect and Respond

So when was the glory seen? When was Christ most magnified and God's great worth and majesty most clearly revealed? When Lazarus came from the tomb? When the Resurrection and the Life spoke with authoritative power and turned back death and imparted life? **NO.** Christ was most magnified, He was and is most glorified, when we believe and trust and treasure Him.

That is why the Resurrection and the Life can stand by a tomb and weep. Not out of grief at the loss. But out of sorrow over our unbelief. How it grieves the heart of God when we do not magnify His worth by trusting in His Word.

- Believer, are you like Mary and Martha? You hear the message, you affirm the truth, but you still bury your Lazarus's. Why would you so dishonor God by not trusting Him? Why are we looking for miraculous resurrections when the glory of God shines brightest in the lamp of our trusting Him – trusting Him with our wealth, our pleasures, our spouses, our children. Do your neighbors at church and in the community see your life and say, "How great God must be to be trusted so completely."
- Maybe you have come this morning because of this being a Sunday morning and it is your religious duty. You well know that you are like Lazarus, dead and buried in your sins. This Jesus, the very Son of God, came into the world, lived without sin and yet went to a cross and suffered death. Three days later, He rose from the dead and is alive forever more. This is not a myth dreamed up to console weak-minded people. It is a great reality that you will one day face. For this One God raised from the dead will one day return to judge all human beings. Will you stand before Him on that day, not having lived every moment of every day of every event of your life to glorify God—to magnify Him? And what will He say? Depart from me into eternal punishment. But today we plead and beg with you, be reconciled to God. Trust Christ and Christ alone. Bow to Him as Lord and Sovereign. Do it today before the deceitfulness of sin further hardens your heart to the voice of the Spirit in your soul.

May God be magnified in our belief.

