

Sermon for Sunday, July 26
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LIFE AND DEATH
John 11

We continue our study of John in chapter 11 this morning. Turn with me there in your Bibles. What does it look like for Jesus, who holds all the power of the world in his hand, to grieve? Jesus had a close relationship with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Listen to how Jesus loses a friend.

John 11:1 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Do you ever grow angry or disillusioned with the way things are in this world? With the problems close to you? Over the past number of weeks, I've felt anger at sin, death, and brokenness in a deep way. Perhaps you have as well. Is that a spiritual thing? Would Jesus approve, I wonder?

You all are aware of Lance's brain surgery two weeks ago. Should such a good man, who has loved so many so well, be stricken in a way like that? Robbie and Jane-Ellis' son George had major heart surgery on Wednesday. It was a scary time to consider the brokenness in this little one's body. It pains my heart to think of such a precious little one, a special covenant child of God, in such dire straits. The surgery went well, praise God. But were any of you just a little heartsick that it was necessary at all? My grandfather, whom I love dearly, is in his last days. He suffers serial strokes, and he is no longer recovering well from them. I find myself angry over watching this man I love, who has been so strong and a rock in my life suffer in weakness. Surely it isn't supposed to be this way.

There are those who've lost loved ones over these past weeks. I've seen church members in the hospital battling cancer. Some have been lost parents over the past two weeks.

The brokenness is not only in the body. As I reflected on this passage, my emotions were breaking as I thought of marriages on the brink of break-up. Some have shattered. There are addictions gripping hearts and lives and countless other fears, worries and sins, within and without. What does God think about all this? Do you ever get the feeling it shouldn't be this way?

This is why we need John 11. Jesus' friend Lazarus died; he saw his friends Mary and Martha in deep pain. And he wasn't a cold god who is distant, without emotion, stoic in his fix of the problem. He wept. We need this passage because here we see what Jesus thinks about all these things that hurt his children and make us angry. He is saddened and weeps. He grieves with us. Clearly we see what he thinks about how everything has gone haywire.

But he isn't impotent. He doesn't weep without strength. He weeps, then does something about it. He feels and acts. He sees and he conquers. We need this passage because here we find that God is with us in our grief, but also He conquers death with life.

I. Christ is with us in Our Grief

Think about the characters in this episode:

Martha and Mary are friends of Jesus who call for Jesus because their brother is dying. They know He is special, having some unusual intimacy with the Father. So they called to Jesus to see if He could help.

Jesus came to see them and look how Martha first greeted him in verse 21:

John 11:21 "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

She was confused, grief stricken and angry as anyone would be who had watched a brother suffer and die. And yet her grief and confusion was mixed with faith. She isn't some stoic character in a story. This is a real woman who has absorbed the blow that her brother is dead. Can you hear the blame mixed with faith? "If only you had been here, maybe my brother wouldn't have died...but even now, you can do something about it." That sounds like my heart sometimes.

Jesus responded in verse 23 that he would rise, and I get the feeling that Martha sort of blows him off thinking. "Yeah, yeah, I know he will be raised on the last day...but what about the time between then and now? Stop the well wishing..."because she didn't understand what Jesus meant.

Do you ever have a mix of anger and faith? It is a sign of strong faith in someone's life to be honest about their disappointment with God...to his face, to believe God can handle the frustration and even anger. Some feel the need to pretend not only before others, keeping up the appearance of being super-spiritual, above the fray of disappointment and grief, but a robust faith is one that can be honest with Jesus, telling Him of our pain and trusting that His shoulders are wide enough to handle our disappointment.

Psalm 62 says to "pour out our hearts before him." Do you feel freedom to do that, pour out whatever your heart feels before God? He calls on us to be honest before Him because He cares for us, and He is the one who holds the power of life and death in His hands.

How about the **Disciples**?

They wondered if it was worth it to help. In verses 7-8 when Jesus announces his desire to go to Lazarus, the disciples objected. He had just escaped the stoning at the hands of harsh Jews. They are terrified to return to that place. Bethany, where Lazarus was, was just couple of miles from Jerusalem. The place where they were at the time was about a four day journey by foot.

Then word came that Lazarus was sick. Lazarus was still alive when Jesus heard. Verse 4 says the "sickness will not end in death," not meaning he won't die, but that death won't be the end of it. There

was more to the story. But the disciples missed Jesus' point and essentially say, "He'll wake up." Jesus clarified; he's dead (verse 14).

Can you hear the fear present with them? They asked whether it was worth it for them to risk their lives just to go to a funeral for Lazarus. Thomas expects that their own death awaits them, in verse 16, "Let us go too that we might die with him."

Sometimes Jesus takes us to places that fill us with fear. He calls on us to follow him into a place that seems like death to us. In order to do what? In this case to speak life back to Lazarus. He calls on us as his disciples to take words of life to our neighbors.

Sometimes he calls us to follow him into darker places, to speak his call to life into marriages that are broken down, seemingly dead to our eyes, because Jesus can bring the dead to life. Into lives trapped in addiction, Jesus calls us to move with life, his life, bringing help and assistance. He calls us into the neighborhoods that may scare us, where there is violence or people who make us uncomfortable, places like north city. Jesus calls us to go with the words of life in partnership with churches and believers that are there. Why? Because Jesus can bring dead things to life. He's the only one who can.

How about **Jesus**? What was he feeling?

His reaction is striking to me. He isn't mourning an irretrievable loss like we do when we mourn. He knew he would be raising Lazarus from the dead in just a few moments, yet he was very emotional.

John 11:33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then 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 have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said.

Jesus wept; he was crying. Further, he was "deeply moved and troubled", (verse 33) and "deeply moved", verse 38. Deeply moved and troubled doesn't quite communicate what John is saying here. The word for deeply moved is more like shaking in anguish and anger. He was agitated intensely. He was outraged is another way to translate it. It is a word that is used for the feeling that happens when you sternly warn and admonish someone. It is the word that is used of snorting horses when they are agitated.¹ Do you get the picture?

Jesus knows what grief feels like, and he knows what it feels like to be angry, shaken and undone by sin, death, pain, grief! He was angry and grieved because things are not the way they are supposed to be; so much is broken and wrong. This world that was created so good and beautiful now is filled with such pain and brokenness. He isn't angry in an abstract sense; a family he loves is broken and shattered with the effect of sin and death.

When we feel the effect of death at times as Christians we feel like we must grieve as the stereotypical British person, keeping a stiff upper lip, never letting anyone see that we are in anguish. But that is not how Jesus behaved when face to face with sin and death ravaging someone he loves. He is our perfect

¹ Carson, D.A. The Gospel According to John, PNTC (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 415.

high priest, without sin. See how he not only felt but also expressed his pain. It is not faithlessness to grieve and express grief.

We don't have to pretend like it doesn't hurt and undo us. It is OK to be anguished over the frailty of life. Feeling deeply is not unspiritual. Jesus' anger is the kind that keeps grief from being merely sentimental, and also the grief keeps anger from being hard and callous².

What does he think about your loss, your pain, as one of his beloved family? Sometimes we feel isolated in our hurt, as if God couldn't know how we feel. Is He cold and callous toward the depth of what you feel? Not at all. We have a God who knows what pain and loss feels like. Our Father lost His only son so that we would not be crippled in our loss. We have a God who feels these things, is grieved for His children. You are not alone. Cry out to Him where you are. He hears and feels. And the good news is that He is not impotent in the midst of grief. He is able to act, to bring life from death and save us.

II. Christ Conquers Death with Life

Imagine the scene at the tomb. John wants you to picture yourself there, with all the sights and smells. Lazarus has been in there four days. He is beyond any suspicion he was asleep. Traditional Judaism of the day thought that the soul left the body after three days. Lazarus had been dead for four. No hope he was coming back...until the last day.

Death robs us of life. But for those who believe it is not final, it is the end of a period of life. But for those who believe, life continues. Want proof? Lazarus came back, simply by Jesus calling out to him in a tomb in verse 43. Jesus says, "Lazarus, come forth". He wasn't asleep or just really ill. Lazarus was dead. He heard the voice of God and sprung to life. He walked out! Our God gave Lazarus his physical life back. Raising Lazarus is a sign that points to new life for all believers.

Rock City is a series of caves and rock formations on Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. It is a spectacular sight.

If you've driven through the south, you know that every few miles there is a road-side sign that says "See Rock City X miles." Now no one would ever stop by one of these signs and have their picture made with the kids to show off that you had been to Rock City. The sign is not the same as the place itself. But the sign does point the way to the place. The sign gives a picture of what is ahead.

Raising Lazarus is amazing, yet points to something so much bigger, Jesus' conquering death with his life. We have a certain future because Jesus was raised from the dead. He will raise us because he is victorious over death.

Jesus said in verse 25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

Jesus is the master over our physical life, and our spiritual life, both here and now and into eternity. He gives us life, that quality of being that we were created to enjoy, a fullness he desires for us. Today we sit in the "in between" time. He has already been raised from the dead, and yet we wait for the full expression of that victory over death when he returns again to make right everything that is wrong.

In his life, all that has the taint of death is defeated. The death blow has been given and we await final victory. Our sin, our guilt, our selfishness, our taking advantage of other people, the way we tear others

² Ibid, p 416.

down with our words - all of it went into the grave with Jesus, and he left it there, walking out pure and radiant, making the way to follow after him by faith.

This miracle tells us something about why Jesus came. He came to make all things new. That is the principle of all of Jesus' ministry. He came to give sight to the blind, freedom for the captives, care for the poor, and to raise the dead to life. Jesus' ministry is to restore the broken, the dead and to rid this world of its effects of sin. And he does it in you and me, one person at a time, and through us, one community at a time. Jesus conquered death. Does your heart have hope?

Whether we are trapped by our sin, guilt, sense of limitation, whatever it is, or our impending death, Jesus' words to us are of victory, his victory in conquering our enemies. His life beats back our death. It is in this story that we see a Jesus who loves us enough to come to us when we cry out to him, who can feel the depth of what we feel and is strong enough to do something about it. It gives me hope to know Jesus conquers all our brokenness and pain. We may not experience that victory in fullness until the last day, but it is assured. On that day, there will be no more crying, no more illness, no more death. He will restore.

But something still puzzles me about this whole thing. In verse 4, John said Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. The next verse, (5), literally begins with "so then", or "therefore". Follow the thought here. Jesus loved them, SO or THEREFORE he let Lazarus die (verses 4-6). How is this love?

Although this pain is very real for all involved, Jesus included, he says it is for the good of that family...and is also perfectly loving for them. There was more love to be had by the family with Lazarus dying than by his living in this short term. How is that love?

Jesus' love was to give them what was best even when they couldn't see it, as he so often does. They, at first, couldn't recognize Jesus' love. They pled for his life; their brother died. When he was in the tomb four days, they despaired. But what about on that fifth day? Did they know his love then? Even more than healing Lazarus when he first fell ill, think of what they (and we) learned from this! Jesus holds the power of life and death. There is nothing he can't do!

The next time Mary, Martha or the disciples faced challenge, even death, what do you think filled their minds? Lazarus. Jesus raised him. He is the resurrection.

When so many of the apostles faced their own death and martyrdom, do you think they remembered Jesus and Lazarus? When you are staring at the death of a loved one or even your own...remember Lazarus. If you belong to Jesus, death is NOT the end. Being with Jesus ALIVE, eternally alive is the end. We go immediately to be with him upon death and await his return where we will receive new and imperishable bodies.

Clarity about Jesus' power over death is the most loving thing we can ever know.

Yet, although Jesus gives us what is best, sometimes we think we know what is better. The Lord's loving gift is often one we'd like to give back. Sometimes when we are in desperation, we may cry out to God for immediate deliverance. "Remove the pain," we pray. But at the same time, we must know that often he answers by giving us a greater and deeper sense of dependence upon him. His best gift and highest love is to demonstrate our need of him and his presence to fulfill that need. At times he answers the prayer of "remove the pain" by removing a deeper pain of feeling alone, isolated and independent of him. We should not be surprised when our God answers our pleas for help by helping us see our dependence and his strength.

The grief of Martha and Mary lasted four days, but they saw Jesus lift them up in the midst of their need. And what they saw of him gave them hope for life eternal that began that day. "Do you believe", she was asked in verse 26. "Yes, you are the long awaited Christ", she answered. Life that could never be taken away is bound up in that one statement. Do you believe this morning?

Famous Philadelphia pastor Donald Barnhouse lost his wife to cancer when she was in her thirties, leaving him with three children under twelve. Her funeral was held on a bright winters day. As they neared the place for the funeral a large truck came to stop before a red light. The sun was shining on it at just the right angle that spread its shadow across the snow on the field beside it. As the shadow covered that field, he said, "Look children at that truck, and look at its shadow. If you had to be run over, would you rather be run over by the truck or by the shadow?" The youngest child said, "The shadow couldn't hurt anybody." "That's right and death is a truck, but the shadow is all that ever touches the Christian. The truck that could harm us ran over the Lord Jesus. Only the shadow is gone over mother."

For Lazarus, for you and me, death does not have to be final. Because of Jesus it no longer has the power to separate us from God. If we believe and trust in the Lord and have become his child, Jesus died in our place and was alienated from God in our place, so that we never have to experience that alienation and loneliness. The destruction that death threatens is blunted by Jesus who stood in death's way to take it for those who believe.

But just as Jesus asked Martha, he asks each one of us, "Do you believe?"