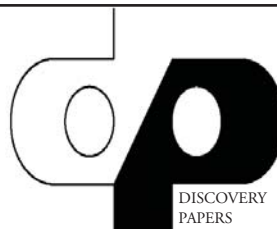


DEALING WITH DISAPPOINTMENT

SERIES: COME AWAKE!



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John 11:1-16
1st Message
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When I first read John 11, shortly after coming to Christ as a teenager, I was encouraged by what Jesus said in response to the illness of his friend, Lazarus. Lazarus' illness, Jesus said, would serve to glorify God. Reading Jesus' words led me to consider that perhaps God could use whatever trials came my way, or my friends' way, for some great purpose. Since that day, the chapter has held a special place in my heart. It has both comforted and challenged me as a follower of Jesus. As I come to John 11 again, and as we consider it together, it will help us deal with disappointment, wrestle with faith, and finally rise to life. "Come awake, come awake / Come and rise up from the grave."¹

In Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Angels in America*, set in 1985, the protagonist, Prior Walter, has this to say about God to two angels at the end of the drama:

He isn't coming back. And if he did, if he ever did come back, if he ever dared to show his face or whatever in the garden again, if after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century, he returned to see how much suffering his abandonment created, if all he has to offer is death, you should sue [him]. That's my only contribution to all this theology. Sue [him] for walking out. How dare he? ... And if he returns, take him to court. He walked out on us. He ought to pay."²

Should we take God to court and make him pay for all the suffering in the world? Should we make him pay for the suffering in our own lives? In light of "all this destruction" and "all the terrible days," such an impulse is understandable. In John 11:1-16, however, Jesus gives us another way to approach suffering.

In John 10, Jesus offended some of his countrymen in the region of Judea to such an extent that they were ready to stone him, but he eluded their grasp and withdrew to the region east of the Jordan River, where many came to believe in him. In John 11, he hears a report from Judea—specifically, from the village of Bethany—and responds to it in surprising ways.

John 11:1-16:

¹Now 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.) ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

⁴When 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." ⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?"

⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

¹¹After 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."

¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

¹⁶Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Jesus disappoints Martha and Mary

Martha and Mary appeal to Jesus in behalf of their sick brother. However, they don't mention Lazarus

by name; instead, they identify him as “the one you love.” Jesus’ love for Lazarus was demonstrable: the sisters know that he loved their brother. Martha and Mary also know that Jesus has healed people, and they want Jesus to heal Lazarus, but they don’t specifically ask him to do so. They know Jesus; therefore, like good friends who can communicate with mere gestures, they neither need to be specific nor want to be specific. They know Jesus will understand.

Jesus’ response seems to imply that he expects to heal Lazarus, whose grave illness “will not end in death” but will instead glorify both God and the Son of God, namely Jesus. If the sickness will not end in death and if God will be glorified because of it, Jesus is going to heal Lazarus, right? So we think. John observes that Jesus not only loved Lazarus but also that he loved Martha and Mary. Mary, in particular, is noted for her devotion to Jesus. Based on his love for this family, we expect Jesus to heal Lazarus.

Instead of leaving for Bethany, however, Jesus stays where he is for two more days. More confounding, verse 6 literally begins with the word “therefore.” Why does Jesus stay put? He stays put because he loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Therefore, because Jesus loves them, he does not immediately leave for Bethany to heal Lazarus. Huh? Is this what Jesus’ love looks like? If this is love, what does neglect look like? Is this how God glorifies Jesus? Does Jesus love people by letting them squirm and, quite possibly, die and does God glorify him as he does so?

God’s problem

Based on John 11:1-6, why would anyone want anything to do with Jesus? Why would anyone want anything to do with God? The world squirms. People suffer and die. The church shouts, “Jesus loves you,” and people say, “Huh?” Because Jesus doesn’t seem to respond to the urgent needs of the day, many people in our world don’t believe either in him or the God he represents. Because of the Holocaust, because of earthquakes and tsunamis, because of disease and poverty, some people find faith in a loving God to be downright repugnant.

Suffering also challenges the faith of many people in the church. Bart Ehrman, a widely read professor of religion at the University of North Carolina, writes of his experience with faith in his book *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. As a young man, he committed himself to Christ. Then he trained for the ministry and became a pastor of an evangelical church. However, in his book, he

writes:

I no longer go to church, no longer believe, no longer call myself a Christian.” The reason: “In particular, I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God actively involved with this world, given the state of things. For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering. I came to the point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it.”³

Many people suffer crises of faith because their experience of Jesus matches the first six verses of John 11. We’ve been led to believe that Jesus loves us, but when we, like Martha and Mary, speak to him of urgent needs, he, by all appearances, stays where he is, wherever he is. When you call 911, the paramedics come to your rescue. When you call Jesus, sometimes, he takes his own sweet time, it seems, if he comes at all.

Marian Fontana’s husband was a New York City firefighter when the World Trade Center was attacked on September 11, 2001. That day, she “wandered into every church in my neighborhood in Brooklyn” to ask God to protect her husband. Turns out her husband was one of the 343 firefighters killed when the twin towers crashed to earth. A year after her prayers to God went unanswered, Fontana said, “I can’t bring myself to speak to him anymore because I feel abandoned.”⁴ Who can blame her?

After disappointing Martha and Mary, Jesus confounds his disciples.

Jesus endangers the disciples

Jesus, after two days of biding his time beyond the Jordan, gets it in his head to return to Judea, where his enemies recently attempted to kill him. What’s worse, he wants to take his disciples with him and expose them to further risk. Furthermore, he offers no rationale for his decision, at least at first; he simply tells his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” The disciples think he’s nuts.

Jesus answers them with an illustration. If they walk in the daytime, by this world’s light, they won’t stumble. In other words, if they trust Jesus, who is the light of the world, they have nothing to fear. If, on the other hand, they walk at night, without light, they will stumble. In other words, if they trust themselves, play it safe, and distance themselves from Jesus because he endangers them

for no apparent reason, they'll have plenty to fear. Jesus is saying, "Trust me and come to Judea with me."

Finally, Jesus tells them why he wants to go: he wants to wake up their friend, Lazarus. The disciples can't fathom that waking up a sleeping friend is a cause worth dying for, and in any event, what on earth does Lazarus need someone to wake him up for? Jesus was speaking of sleep figuratively, but his disciples understood him literally. In speaking figuratively, Jesus opened himself up to being misunderstood. He's testing his disciples. First, he gives them no reason for going to Judea. Second, when he articulates a reason for going, he does so in a confusing way. What's he doing? He's challenging the disciples to trust him even if they don't understand him. Alas, the disciples need more from Jesus.

Finally, he tells them that Lazarus is not asleep but dead. But that's not all: Jesus wants to return to Judea not only for Lazarus but also for the sake of his disciples. He even rejoices at the prospect of returning to Judea because of the prospects for his disciples' faith.

If you're a disciple, here's what you have to track with: First, Jesus asks you to return to Judea and risk your life because ... well, simply because he asks you to. Second, he wants you to return to Judea with him so that he can help a friend who apparently needs no help (he's simply sleeping). Third, he wants you to return to Judea with him so that he can help a friend who can't be helped (he's already dead). Fourth, he wants you to return to Judea with him for your sake, in order that you might believe. Jesus isn't making much sense, is he? Whatever sense he's making, he might make a dead man out of you if you listen to him.

That's exactly what Thomas thinks Jesus will make of him: a dead man. You might call Thomas doubting, based on an episode later in the Gospel of John, but you wouldn't call him cowardly. He doesn't understand Jesus, but if Jesus wants him to go to Judea, he'll go to Judea. He's also a leader: he rallies the other disciples for what he fully expects to be a suicide mission.

First, Jesus disappointed Martha and Mary because ... he loved them? Now, he endangers his disciples so that ... they may believe? What manner of Savior is this?

Confounding leadership

Sometimes, Jesus disappoints us with the way he responds to us, as he disappointed Martha and Mary.

Other times, he leads us in ways that confound us, as he led the disciples in ways that confounded them. He confounds us so much, in fact, that sometimes we wonder whether he's leading us at all. When we actually try to follow him, as the disciples tried to follow him, it seems as if he wants to endanger us, not protect us—and for reasons that make no sense to us. It's as if he speaks in figures of speech that we can't decode. Or, if he speaks plainly, it's as if he's asking us to risk our lives for a lost cause. In more ways than one, Jesus destabilizes us with his leadership.

William Backus, a psychologist and Lutheran pastor, began drinking seriously after his marriage fell apart. He writes:

Why was I doing this—to hurt myself? No. To hurt God? I never said, "Take that, God," but I truly believed my hurt was His fault. He had betrayed me, let me down, failed to protect me, ignored my record of faithful service and broken all promises to hear and answer prayer. He had chosen what was bad for me, and not something good. Underneath it all, I had a big, hot disagreement with God. A major rift. I can remember the anger breaking out into rage one night when I was driving home from a party I have long since forgotten. I don't even recall what trivial frustration had set off the outburst of fury, but I remember well how violently I stormed and shouted at God.⁵

Jesus leads, you serve, and you still might lose your marriage—or who knows what else.

Why suffering?

Two axioms emerge from the narrative of John 11:1-16: 1) God will be glorified—that is, revealed for who he is—through human suffering: "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." 2) Jesus loves us: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." The two axioms are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. Or, to put it another way, the glory of God and the love of God are two sides of the same coin. God is glorified when his love is evident. God will be glorified—that is, his love for us in Christ will be manifest—through suffering. Suffering is not an end; God draws suffering up into his glory-filled and love-saturated purposes. In the end, but perhaps not now, suffering helps us appreciate God's love for us and thereby serves to glorify him.

In Isaiah, the Messiah, even before he is born, says

this:

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me ...
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for all who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
The planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.”
(Isaiah 61:1-3)

Isaiah, like John, links the splendor, or glory, of God with the love of God. The Messiah replaces ashes with a crown of beauty, mourning with the oil of gladness, despair with a garment of praise—all so that God might be glorified. If God is somehow able to make something beautiful of all this destruction, then his love for us indeed “surpasses knowledge,” as the apostle Paul says (Ephesians 3:19).

The sickness of the world will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, and he loves the world. If you believe in Jesus, your suffering, no matter how severe, will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, and he loves you.

The solution, then, to “God’s Problem” can be summed up in one word: “wait.” Why suffering? Wait. Wait for God to be glorified. Wait to see how much God loves us. Wait to see how he draws suffering up into his purposes. Wait for him to make something beautiful of all this suffering.

While you’re waiting, though, consider this: Later in the Gospel of John, when Judas departs to deliver Jesus over to his enemies, Jesus tells his disciples, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him” (John 13:31). Later still, Jesus tells them, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). God didn’t stop Judas. He didn’t stop the Jewish leaders. He didn’t stop the Roman governor. He didn’t stop the executioners. They nailed the Son of God to a cross, and God didn’t rescue his Son from the cross. Why? So that God might be glorified, so that the Son of God might be glorified. Why? Because God loves us, because Jesus loves us. The Son of God laid down his life for us, his friends. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ—the apex of all suffering—served to glorify God and to enact his love for us.

Martha, Mary, Lazarus, and the disciples were caught up in grander purposes than they could have imagined. Jesus wanted to do something more for them than they wanted for themselves—something that had to do with faith. Jesus didn’t do what they wanted him to do so that he might enlarge their faith. We are caught up in grander purposes than we can imagine for ourselves. In light of such purposes, we need faith, whether or not we know we need it, whether or not we even want it. To get the faith we need, the faith that “God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8: 28), we need to wait. Those who wait expectantly in the Lord “will renew their strength,” not when the Lord delivers but as they wait for the Lord to deliver: “They will soar on wings like eagles; / they will run and not grow weary, / they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

Jesus not only encourages us to wait, he also challenges us to do something. Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” Jesus asks us to follow him into places of suffering and risk for the sake of others, trusting that doing so will be to the betterment of our faith. He promises that if we trust him, we have nothing to fear. He also warns us that when we play it safe, that’s when we should be afraid—afraid that we’re wasting our lives. “The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Should we believe him? What do you think? Sometimes, in the face of Jesus’ confounding leadership, the best we can say is what Thomas said: “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

The story isn’t over yet

Leith Anderson, a pastor, tells the story of a couple who were traveling in their minivan, along with their children, on a highway in Wisconsin when their gas tank was hit by a piece of road debris. The vehicle burst into flames. The parents survived, but five of their six children were killed. Presumably, the mother cried many tears—and may even weep for the rest of her life. Presumably, she said many things, but here’s one thing she said to her husband that borders on the incredulous: “This is what God has been preparing us for all of our lives.” I suspect that it will take more than the rest of their lives to see how God draws their suffering up into his purposes.⁶

You can take God to court. You can stop going to church. You can give up on prayer. You can storm and shout at God. Do what you must, to do business with God. But just remember: the story of the world isn’t over yet. Your story isn’t over yet. The story of John 11 isn’t over

yet. Keep reading.

NOTES

¹Matt Maher, Mia Fieldes, “Christ is Risen from the Dead” (2010).

²Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (HBO Films, 2003).

³Bart D. Ehrman, *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 2-3.

⁴“Faith and Doubt,” *Frontline*, PBS (September 3, 2002).

⁵William Backus, *The Hidden Rift with God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1990), 26.

⁶Leith Anderson, *Leadership That Works* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 207.