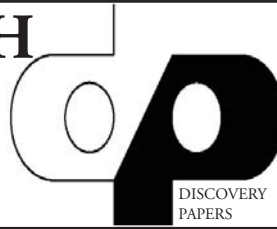


WRESTLING WITH FAITH



SERIES: COME AWAKE!

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John 11:17-37
2nd Message
Scott Grant
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Because of my longstanding affection for the story in John 11, I have taught it in many locales and venues: churches, retreats, and Bible studies. I even had occasion to teach on John 11 in Bethany, Israel, the original setting for the story. When a group from our church visited Israel, we stopped to peek into what is reputed to be the original tomb of Lazarus. Whether it is actually the tomb where Lazarus was placed no one can say for sure. In any event, there, at the mouth of the tomb, I taught from John 11, while the rest of our group stood before me at the side of the road, doing their best not to get hit by passing cars.

John 11 features a story of loss. Martha and Mary lose their brother, Lazarus. The story of loss is also a story of faith, for the death of Lazarus causes both Martha and Mary to wrestle with Jesus' failure to come to Bethany when there was still hope for their brother.

In the movie *Shadowlands*, C.S. Lewis, after the death of his wife, opens up to her son, Douglas Gresham. Both are grieving their loss. Both are also wrestling with faith. Douglas, a boy, contends that prayer "doesn't work"—it doesn't prevent people you love from dying—and Lewis agrees. Lewis still believes in heaven but Douglas doesn't, though he desperately wishes he could see his mother again. Lewis says, "Me too." Then he begins sobbing. Lewis collapses into the arms of Douglas, and they weep together, man and boy.¹

What sort of loss have you suffered? How has your loss affected your faith? As you bring your story to part two of John 11, watch for how Martha and Mary wrestle with faith and for how Jesus interacts with each of them. In part one, John 11:1-16, we learned to deal with disappointment. In part two, John 11:17-37, we learn to wrestle with faith.

Martha goes out to meet Jesus

John 11:17-27:

¹⁷On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss

of their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

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

²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus is dead and long gone. Four days is not a long time, but it's more than long enough to be certifiably and irreversibly dead. The hero comes, but he comes too late.

Martha and Mary had sent word to Jesus concerning the illness of their brother. Now, when Martha receives word that Jesus is coming to Bethany, she leaves the village to meet him. Martha's belief in Jesus doesn't seem to be shaken even though he did not respond immediately to the message concerning Lazarus' condition. She believes that Jesus could have healed Lazarus if he had arrived in time, but she doesn't complain about Jesus' delay. Martha wants Jesus to know she believes in him "even now"—even after Jesus took his time responding to her urgent message. She believes, even knows, that God will give Jesus whatever he asks: the fact that Jesus didn't heal her brother hasn't shaken her belief that Jesus can heal others. She believes that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for even though Jesus did not give her what she asked for.

Jesus promises Martha that her brother will rise again, which Martha takes as an attempt to comfort her concerning the eternal destiny of Lazarus. Many Jews, based on their Scriptures, believed that God would raise his

people from the dead at the end of the age (Daniel 12:2, Ezekiel 37:1-14). Martha doesn't need Jesus to remind her of her brother's future, for she knows that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

Be that as it may, Jesus is not attempting to comfort her concerning her brother's eternal destiny; he's attempting to deepen Martha's faith. Martha assumed that Jesus was referring to the resurrection at the last day, but Jesus was referring to himself as the resurrection. Whatever takes place at the last day is in the power of the one with whom Martha is speaking. Those who believe in Jesus will live even if they die. So, yes, Jesus is talking to Martha about Lazarus, who has died, but he's also talking to Martha about Martha. Literally, Jesus says, "whoever is living and believing in me will never die." Who is living? Who believes in Jesus? With whom is Jesus speaking? Martha! Because Martha believes in Jesus, she will never die. Oh, she'll die, but the life she has in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, will never die.

Because of Jesus, Lazarus, who is dead, will live again. Because of Jesus, Martha, who is alive, will never die. Jesus asks Martha if this is what she believes. She answers yes, and she says what she believes: Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Her confession of faith is significant, to be sure, but it constitutes a theological abstraction without the personal application at which Jesus was driving.

Martha acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah, but she doesn't acknowledge the life she has now, the life that will never die. She believes that Jesus is the Son of God but does not realize that the Son of God will be glorified through her brother's illness (John 11:4). She believes that Jesus could have done something for Lazarus had he been present but not that Jesus could do something for her now. She believes that God will give Jesus whatever he asks for but not that Jesus will give her beyond whatever she could even hope to ask for. She knows all the right answers, but is she afraid to relate them to her life? Her faith is resilient but not so personal. She went out to meet Jesus, but Jesus wants her to get still closer.

The shield of knowledge

Many of us who believe what Martha professes, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of God, continue believing in him even if he lets us down. If we suffer loss, the way Martha suffered loss, we might say, along with Martha, that we believe in Jesus "even now." Many of us who believe in Jesus, however, have no problem believing that Jesus will do great things for others while at

the same time doubting whether he will do great things for us. If so, what does Jesus want to do for us? He wants to break through the surface of our hearts, where we profess belief, and penetrate the deeper regions, where we're not sure whether we can trust him with everything.

Because we're not sure we can trust him with everything, we're afraid to let him go to the deeper regions. One of the ways some of us keep Jesus from penetrating our hearts is by knowing a lot. Knowledge is integral to following Jesus. There's nothing wrong with knowledge—unless, of course, we use knowledge as a shield to protect our hearts from the Lord. Some of us are comfortable with theological abstractions but fearful of personal applications. Because of what we know, we are able to arrange our lives so that we won't be too disappointed with the Lord. Even when we suffer loss, we can tell Jesus, "But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." But we can't tell him, "But I know that you will do something beyond whatever I could even hope to ask for."

New York Times columnist David Brooks writes that researchers across a diverse array of fields have observed the critical place of emotions in human decision making, even among those who don't consider themselves particularly emotional. The prevailing view in our culture, however, ever since the Enlightenment, is that we progress to the extent that reason suppresses emotions. You can believe that if you want, Brooks implies, but your emotions, and even subconscious motivations, will nevertheless play a large part in your decision making. Brooks says that research shows that

Emotions are at the center of our thinking; emotions are not separate from reason, but they are the foundation of reason because they tell us what to value.²

If the researchers are right, then obedience to Jesus isn't simply based on intellectual ascent; it also proceeds from the deeper regions of the heart. If this is the case, then we'd better let Jesus go there. If we don't, passion for Christ will not govern our passions; instead, our passions will govern our passions.

I know a lot. I study the Scriptures intensely and devour the works of biblical scholars, theologians, and spiritual writers, hoping that the knowledge I gain from such endeavors will help me follow Christ and guide others. Sometimes, I wonder if I know too much—if what I know is too far ahead of what I live. If I find myself in a tight spot, my first instinct is to think my way out, not

pray. I'm not sure that I need new spiritual insights as much as I need to trust and act on the spiritual insights I've already received. Sometimes, I wonder if what I know protects me from God instead of drawing me closer to God.

You've got a package

If we become aware that we are keeping Jesus from penetrating our hearts, how might we drop our shields, so to speak? Based on his exchange with Martha, we may conclude that Jesus wants us to believe not simply that he is the Messiah, not simply that he is the Son of God, not simply that he will raise people from the dead at the end of the age, and not simply that he can do whatever he asks of God. Based on his exchange with Martha, we may conclude that Jesus wants us to also believe that the life we have now in him will never die and that he wants to do something for us now beyond whatever we could even hope to ask for.

First, the life we have in Christ will never die. If you believe in Jesus, your body will die, but you will not. And that life, which is stronger than death, you have right now. It's better than the fountain of youth; it creates a fountain of living waters springing up to eternal life (John 4:14, 7:38). If you believe in Jesus, you have it. You have it now, and you will have it forever. Because the living waters within you are bubbling up even now, you might therefore take some time to notice them.

Second, Jesus wants to do something—and do something now—that you may not have even hoped to ask for, and if you had hoped to ask for it, you probably had no idea how awesome it could be. Jesus wants to deepen your faith. He wants to go to the deeper regions of your heart to give you what you really need—an intimate, personal faith—even if you had not considered asking for it. Don't you think that what you really need is to completely trust someone who is completely trustworthy? Jesus is the one.

If it is true that Jesus has already given you life that is stronger than death and if it is true that he wants to give you beyond what you could even hope to ask for, don't you think you can trust him? Don't you think you can let him in? Don't you think you can allow him to penetrate the deeper regions of your heart? Don't you think you want not simply to be interested in Jesus, but also to be stirred by him?

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the protagonist, Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, is serving time in a Soviet labor camp. While

he was at a previous camp, Shukhov had received a few packages from his wife, after which he wrote and instructed her to save her meager resources for their children and to never send any more packages. He didn't want to take bread out of his children's mouths, so he decided to go without. Solzhenitsyn writes:

All the same every time anybody in his gang or in his part of the barracks got a package—and this was nearly every day—he felt a kind of pang inside because it wasn't him. And though he told his wife she must never send him anything, even for Easter, and he never went to that post with the list on it—unless it was to take a look for some other guy who was well off—still he sometimes had the crazy idea somebody might run up to him one day and say, “Shukhov, what are you waiting for? You've got a package!”³

Jesus wants to give you something now that you may not have even hoped to ask for. He wants to go the deeper regions of your heart and give you the faith you really need. What are you waiting for? You've got a package!

Jesus, having nurtured Martha, now turns his attention to Mary.

Mary falls at Jesus' feet

John 11:28-33:

²⁸After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him.

³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

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

When Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus concerning the illness of their brother, Jesus remained

where he was. Then, when Mary received word that Jesus was coming to Bethany, she remained where she was. Now, Martha tells Mary that Jesus wants to see her. Martha doesn't identify Jesus by name but by the title "Teacher," or "Rabbi." There are, of course, more significant titles for Jesus, those that Martha used, for example: "Messiah" and "Son of God." For some women, though, the title "Rabbi" carried special significance. In Jesus' day, rabbis taught disciples, and those disciples were men. Jesus, though, has already shown a proclivity in the Gospel of John to teach women, much to the amazement of his male disciples (John 4:27). Later in the Gospel of John, a stunned Mary Magdalene, upon encountering Jesus, will simply address him as "Rabboni," an Aramaic word for rabbi. The Gospel of Luke, in fact, depicts Mary of Bethany at the feet of Jesus, in the posture of a disciple (Luke 10:39).⁴ The title Rabbi meant everything for women who had the door of discipleship opened to them by Jesus.

Why did Martha go out to meet Jesus, and why did Mary stay home? Martha didn't need to be asked; she simply went out to meet Jesus. It didn't matter whether Jesus wanted to see her or not; she went out to see him. Mary, on the other hand, doesn't go out until she receives a personal invitation. Martha's faith in Jesus hasn't been shaken by his delay. Mary, on the other hand, seems to have taken his delay personally. Martha's faith in Jesus is resilient but not so personal. Mary's faith in Jesus is personal but not so resilient. Jesus sought to deepen Martha's faith; now he seeks to restore Mary's faith.

Jesus had allowed Mary to be a disciple and even defended her place as a disciple against the protests of Martha (Luke 10:40-42). He opened up a whole new world for her. Jesus didn't come to Bethany when Mary wanted him to come. Now that he has finally come, she doesn't believe that he has come for her. She must be thinking something like, "I guess I don't matter to Jesus as much as I thought I did. Maybe I was a fool to think that the Rabbi would make me one of his disciples." Jesus opened her heart; then he broke her heart. Jesus stayed where he was; now Mary stays where she is.

Ah, but Martha tells Mary, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you"—the Teacher, the Rabbi. Martha could not have conveyed Jesus' invitation to Mary in a more compelling way. Jesus, Mary's rabbi, has come to Bethany for her after all, and he wants her to know that he has come for her.

Martha, when she heard that Jesus was coming, simply "went out" to meet him. Mary, when she received a personal invitation, "got up quickly" and went out to him.

Literally, she "was raised." Jesus, after all, is the resurrection; a mere word from him raises his brokenhearted disciple. It's almost as if Mary can't help herself: she doesn't get up; the message gets her up. Mary, like Martha, tells Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," but she does so from a different position and with demonstrable emotion. She falls at the feet of Jesus and weeps. Unlike Martha, Mary says nothing more, nothing about believing that God will give Jesus whatever he asks. And Jesus, who had plenty to say to Martha, says nothing to Mary—not one word. Instead of saying something, Jesus feels something: he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The anguish of Mary triggers an emotional convulsion in the heart of Jesus. Unlike Martha, Mary needs no words.

Jesus needs to speak to the mourners, however, to learn the location of Lazarus' body.

Jesus inquires of the mourners

John 11:34-37:

³⁴"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

The mourners' answer, "Come and see," triggers another emotional response in Jesus: he weeps. Earlier in the Gospel of John the words "come" and "see" were employed to invite others to come and see Jesus (John 1:46, 4:29). Jesus himself used the words while inviting two men, who would become his disciples, to see where he was staying (John 1:39). The two words now come back to haunt him. Others get to come and see him, but he has to come and see something wretched: the tomb of a dead friend. Therefore, he weeps—for the loss of a friend, yes, but also for Mary and Martha, for the mourners, and beyond that, it seems, for all human suffering, and even, perhaps, for himself. The death of Lazarus and the words "come and see" take him back to the beginning of his journey (John 1) and connect him with the purpose of his journey: to take the suffering of humanity onto himself. It is no coincidence that the narrator employs the same two verbs, "come" and "see," when describing events that transpired in or near the tomb of Jesus (John 20:1-2, 4-5, 8, 18). The prophet Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would be "a man of sorrows" and "familiar with suffering" (Isaiah 53:3).

The mourners don't see the big picture reflected in the tears for Jesus; in fact, they hardly see the little picture. They observe, "See how he loved him!" Jesus loved Lazarus, of course: Mary and Martha could even identify Lazarus to Jesus as "the one you love" (John 11:3). Jesus, though, was deeply moved and troubled when he saw Mary weeping and the mourners also weeping. When Jesus wept, he was also weeping for the mourners, but the mourners remain oblivious. Still, having followed Mary, they see something of the love of Jesus. If you don't believe in Jesus, but if you follow someone who's following Jesus, you'll see that he loves someone. Then, you might be able to discern that he loves you, too.

Like Martha and Mary, the mourners wonder what might have been had Jesus been present when Lazarus was sick. Neither Martha nor Mary nor the mourners, however, wonder what might be. Many of us, like the players in the drama, fixate on what might have been instead of wondering what might be.

Staying where we are

Many of us who believe in Jesus suffer crises of faith when he lets us down. If we suffer loss, the way Mary suffered loss, we take Jesus' failure to intervene personally, perhaps too personally. Our faith is personal but not so resilient. Whereas before we delighted in the presence of Jesus, now we keep him at arm's length, wondering if we were foolish to trust him and open our hearts to him. Some of us wonder whether what we experienced earlier was real or imaginary. Perhaps someone else—say, your sister, who goes out to meet him, who goes out to every church meeting—may have experiences with him, but we stay away, afraid to have our hearts broken again. If Jesus is real, if he's coming to town, so to speak, we assume that he's not coming for us. Therefore, we stay where we are.

As a young boy, Brent Curtis, a counselor and writer, encountered the wonder of God during the summer on a family farm in New Jersey:

Something warm and alive and poignantly haunting would call to me from the mysterious borders of the farm that was my world. . . . The earth was warm and brown and fragrant and seemed to invite a sort of barefooted ecstasy with no worry of stones or other debris to cause me harm.

He remembers squatting down near the edge of a creek that bordered the farm:

The voices of crickets, katydids, and cicadas would come to me, carried above the sounds of the creek and mingled with the pungent odor of tannins. Tens of thousands of stream-side musicians sang to me the magic stories of the farms and forests. It seemed as if the songs were carried all the way from the headwaters—those mysterious beginnings of the waters that came up through mosses and cattails in a manner no less magical than if they had been called to life by moon-dusted fairies. The creek waters would rest in the darkness under the bridge before continuing their journey. The surface stillness of the resulting pond played host to the shiny green lord of the young river, the deep-throated bullfrogs. They added their own intermittent bass notes to the melody; a call to order unheeded by the great mass of musicians.

The magic of the place assured Curtis of

"Loves and lovers and adventures to be joined and mystery to be pursued."

He remembers falling asleep at nights,

"Romanced by some unseen lover that, back then, I only knew from those singers in the summer moonlit night."

By the time he had finished college, though, Curtis was directionless. He paid a visit to the family farm, and to the creek, hoping to find some clarity of vision:

I stood there that November day looking down onto a small, brown stream bordered in lifeless gray hardwoods and monochromatic fallen leaves. The waters themselves flowed listlessly over the barriers of leaves and sticks in their path, as if wearied by the constant chore of movement. In many places, the dams built by the winter debris stilled their life with little resistance. A few hundred yards off to my right stood our old farmhouse, now vacant with a large hole in the roof. The barns and sheds and corrals that had given it a reason to exist were gone. Weeds grew in a tangled confusion where the corn had stood in ordered wildness. The weariness of it all came together in the silence of those absent August songsters from so many years ago.

I remember feeling a sharp pain in my chest that I silenced with cold anger. I thought what a fool I had been all these years to believe in the summer message of this place. Laid out before me in the light of day

*was obviously the reality that had always been there. It was time I stopped believing a lie. The mysterious Love and Lover that had come to me in childhood were frauds.*⁵

Some of us resonate with Brent Curtis' story—and with Mary's. Wonder touched us, then hopes were dashed; faith was birthed, then resignation set in.

Picture the scene

If we identify with Mary, what does Jesus want to do for us? He wants to mend our broken hearts and restore our faith. How might he do it?

Perhaps he will do for us what he did for Mary. If so, then he calls to us in a unique way that reminds us of the special relationship we have enjoyed with him. No, what we experienced before wasn't imaginary. It was real. He was real. He *is* real. He's coming for us, and somehow we know that he wants us to know that that he's coming for us. At this point, going to Jesus becomes almost like a reflex. We don't have to mull it over; we just get up quickly and go. Jesus' desire to be with us raises us.

Like Mary, we run to him, fall at his feet, and pour our hearts. Now what do we need? Perhaps we don't need words. Sometimes, you don't need someone to speak with you; you just need someone to be with you. Many years ago, I attended a retreat during which those of us present shared our stories with each other. After I shared my story, I was emotionally exhausted. I stood up, but my head was bowed, and I was staring at the floor in a bit of a daze. I hadn't noticed that a man had walked across the room toward me. Finally, I noticed his feet (I was staring at the floor), and when I looked up, I saw his face, about a foot away from mine. He was looking into my eyes, and he didn't say a word. His eyes were red and moist with tears. The difficult parts of my story touched a deep place in him. At that point, it was comforting to know that someone cared.

Perhaps we need to know that Jesus cares; perhaps we need to *feel* that he cares. Perhaps we need to feel that he feels. Based on Jesus' interaction with Mary, we may conclude that our anguish triggers an emotional convulsion in the heart of Jesus. Therefore, we can imagine him weeping with us as he wept with Mary.

If someone of note notices us, we tend to get excited. Such a brush with fame creates a lifelong memory that we can trot out on certain occasions when names are being dropped. Jesus, though, is not simply some celebrity; he's Lord of the world. Picture this scene and hear these sounds: Jesus not simply noticing you but weeping for you. Sights and sounds such as these can mend a broken heart and restore faith. Such is the power of Jesus: He doesn't have to do anything to restore us; he just has to be with us, and we are restored.

*I will arise and go to Jesus;
He will embrace me in his arms
And in the arms of my dear Savior,
There are 10,000 charms.*⁶

Brent Curtis, by the way, came to once again value his creek-side encounter with God as a boy, deeming it an important chapter in his journey with God. He went on to write about it in the book he co-authored with his friend, John Eldredge: *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God*. Also, Douglas Gresham, the boy featured in *Shadowlands*, grew up to be a believer in Jesus. Suffering loss and dealing with disappointment can build a more profound faith.

What are you waiting for?

Some of us identify with Martha: our faith in Jesus is resilient but not so personal. We need to let Jesus go to the deeper regions of our hearts. Some of us identify with Mary: our faith in Jesus is personal but not so resilient. We need to let Jesus mend our broken hearts and restore our faith. Some of us identify with Martha and Mary at the same time. Some of us identify with Martha for one season and with Mary for another season.

What are you waiting for? You've got a package! The Teacher is here, and is asking for you.

NOTES

¹*Shadowlands* (Home Box Office), 1998.

²David Brooks, "The New Humanism," *The New York Times* (March 8, 2011). David Brooks, TED Talks (February 2011).

³Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 154.

⁴In Acts 22:3, Paul literally reports that he, as a disciple, was educated "at the feet of" a rabbi.

⁵Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 14-16, 26-27.

⁶Joseph Hart, "Come Ye Sinners" (1759).