



“IF ONLY YOU HAD BEEN HERE”



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John 11:1-54
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We live in an era that values attending to oneself above all else. The journey inward is the most important journey. What I feel is what is true. In this environment empathy is considered the essence of love. If you don't validate my feelings then you don't care for me. We find something much different in the ministry of Jesus, however. He doesn't disparage self-discovery but he goes beyond it. Jesus makes it clear that he loves us best when he opens our eyes regarding him; when he directs our attention away from our natural perceptions towards faith in him.

Working our way through John's gospel we have come now to the account of the raising of Lazarus and we must begin with an acknowledgement of inadequacy. There are depths here we will never plumb—stirring theology, remarkable accomplishments, tender portraits and more. But inadequacy should partner with eagerness. This great text rewards every consideration that is given to it:

John 11:1-6:

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

⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. “So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

There are two questions that will guide us in this study: What do we learn about love? What do we learn about death? We'll see that love is more than empathy and that death does not have the last word, indeed that death is supplanted by the glory of God.

John 11:14-27:

Then Jesus told them [his disciples] plainly

“Lazarus has died, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” ¹⁶So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

¹⁷Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

Studies indicate that disappointment with God is the reason most people give when asked why they turn away from faith. God fails to act in a moment of crisis. Prayers for help seem to go unheard. This text raises these very concerns. How can Jesus be said to love those he deliberately hesitates to help?

The disciples are baffled by Jesus behavior. It would be understandable if he had gone immediately to Bethany or if he stayed away permanently because his life was under threat. But it made no sense to them for the Lord to endanger himself (and them) by going to Bethany after Lazarus had died.

The disciples were confused and the sisters were in pain. The poignancy of Martha's cry will be echoed by Mary as well. *“If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”* Later we hear mourners, men and women with no

connection to Jesus, make a similar observation, “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man could not have kept this man from dying?*” (verse 37). What are we supposed to learn about love from the hesitation of Jesus?

Verse 15 tells us what matters to Jesus. He said to the disciples, “*I am glad that I was not there so that you may believe.*” In verse 26 he asks Martha, “*do you believe?*” and in verse 42 he prays that the crowd of mourners “*may believe*” as well. Life changing faith—that you may believe—is more important to the Lord than short-lived comfort. Disappointment in the moment is often required to open our eyes. We are refused what we ask for so that we can be given something greater.

If Jesus had been at Lazarus’ sickbed and made him well, everyone’s familiar categories would have been reinforced. It was already well-known that Jesus cared for those in need and that he had the power to heal. But these insights also identify his limitations—the Lord could only be in one place at a time. Therefore, Jesus waited and journeyed to Bethany, not late, but with an entirely different mission. He came to proclaim victory over death; to empty a grave; to impart life without end; and finally to point forward to his own resurrection.

I suffered from asthma when I was young and one summer (when I was eight or nine) it was especially bad. I spent most days indoors, had a couple of emergency visits to doctors, slept in a modified bed because I couldn’t breathe when I lay down. I remember my mother’s anxious attentiveness and frequent expressions of concern about my condition. Eventually things got better and by the end of summer when school resumed I was back to normal health.

I walked most days to the local elementary school, about a third of a mile away. The most direct route home took me on a path with a footbridge that crossed a creek. At one point I became the target of two older boys who often harassed me into walking a longer way home from school, forbidding me access to the bridge. When I complained to my parents about the problem they replied by asking me what I intended to do about it. I know this will come as a surprise, but in those days I was big (not to say chubby) for my age and my tormenters though older than me were not particularly formidable. One day I walked down the path, pushed one of the bullies aside, walked across the bridge and the problem never came up again.

Because I had struggled to breathe all summer I saw myself as fragile and sickly. I wanted someone to intervene and come to the rescue, but my parents wisely

challenged me to see myself more accurately. Jesus did something similar for the sisters in Bethany. He didn’t act on their request; instead he opened their eyes to a greater understanding of what his love for them entailed.

Before moving on, let me observe that one of the great privileges of Christian community is hearing the testimony of those who have walked with the Lord for a long time. Our first experience of disappointment with God can be born more readily if we know that similar circumstances have led to a deeper faith in our more mature sisters and brothers. Paul wrote to the Galatians that scars earned in suffering for his faith were the ‘marks of Jesus’ (Galatians 6:17) and he wore them gladly. We should remember that our hard lessons of faith may someday serve to strengthen a younger generation of believers.

Let’s consider verse 28 and then skip to verse 32.

John 11:28, 32-37:

When she [Martha] had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

³²Now 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.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” ³⁷But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?”

The statement in verse 33, “*he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled*” does not convey the intensity of the Greek text. Jesus experienced strong waves of painful emotion and great physical distress. Any notion that Jesus’ love for this family was shallow must be rejected. The Lord was in pain because death had inflicted sorrow upon his friends. Mary’s tears moved him and, perhaps, he saw the specter of his own death not so far away—another event that would devastate his loved ones

The question “What do we learn about love?” in this story leads us to another observation. Because he loved them, Jesus treated the two sisters very differently. In this chapter and elsewhere in the gospels it is clear that Martha is an activist. She left the house, met Jesus on the road

and initiated a remarkable conversation. It is because of Martha's questions that Jesus made the world-changing declaration, *"I am the resurrection and the life."*

Mary is not like her sister. She was too grief stricken to move. Martha sought out Jesus but Mary needed him to call for her. The Lord loves each of us in the way we need him most.

John 11:38-44:

Then Jesus, deeply moved

(The same word for powerful emotion used in verse 33)

came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹Jesus 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." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice,

A couple of commentators render this, 'he roared with a loud voice.' I can't help but think of Aslan in Narnia.

"Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴The 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."

Jesus loved Lazarus as well. Returned to life for a time, this man's world would never be the same. He was allowed a special manner of connection with the Savior. Jesus was no longer just a beloved rabbi from Galilee and the same people who were more determined than ever to kill Jesus sought to execute Lazarus as well.

The Lord may need to disappoint us in order to open our eyes. In fact, Lazarus' death led to tenderness, teaching, and new life for every member of the family in Bethany. Jesus' love proved much greater than anyone could have imagined when the sisters sent him the message that Lazarus was sick.

In the age of the Spirit we need never question the presence of God—*"Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died."* (verse 21). But we still must choose to trust him in our disappointment. *"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus"* (verse 5). He loves us as well.

Our second question has to do with death and glory. *"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'"* (verse 4). Jesus' instruction of Martha beginning in verse 23 can help us in this regard.

John 11:23-26:

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

There are two big concepts in the Lord's words to Martha. First, Jesus affirmed what Martha already believed—that the righteous would be raised at the end of the age and that loved ones would be reunited.

My father is going to be 93 in a couple of weeks and he's getting more forgetful all the time. He's bothered by his memory loss and usually wants me to carry our conversations so that he doesn't get lost. A remarkable exception occurred last summer. My father began to talk about dating my mother during their college years and spoke for a long time. They grew up in a small town in central Ohio. On summer weekends they would go with their friends to the amusement park at Cedar Point on Lake Erie in order to dance to the music of Benny Goodman and Harry James.

My mother died two years ago and Dad has only a few memories of her final years, but he spoke eloquently of how beautiful she was and how much he loved her when he recalled the old days. At the end of his recollection he stopped for a moment and then said, "I am going to be with her again." Jesus' affirmation of the coming resurrection is a great source of comfort—it was to Martha, it is to my father, and should be for us as well.

Having spoken of the end of the age, the Lord goes on to make an even more remarkable statement—*"everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die"* (verse 26). Clearly, he is not speaking in medical terms about respiration that

lasts forever, or organs that never fail.

Jesus makes reference here to death as a principle; death as a commanding reality. Death forbids joy and highlights failure. Hebrews 2:15 declares that fear of death makes us slaves.

The beckoning grave mocks all thanksgiving. The dark voice is always near at hand. Beauty will always decay. Nothing good can last. Only fools take risks for love. Failure is irreversible. Words of hope are a lie. Suffering has no purpose. Prayers not answered are evidence of rejection.

Jesus said that everyone who believes in him will never die. Faith can silence the counsel of death; can lead to abundant life until our final day; and to resurrection at the end of the age.

I want to close with the great declaration of life's victory over death found at the end of Romans 8. "*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*" (Romans 8:35). The apostle answers his own question in Romans 8:37-39.

"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 rulers, 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"

The question Jesus asked Martha reverberates: "*Do you believe this?*"