

Triumph in Tragedy

The Messiah's Ministry

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The pastor, he swallowed hard in his throat and he could feel the anxiety in his chest, and he was a little weak in the knees as he knocked on this young couple's door. He knew that this was going to be difficult, but as a pastor it was something he was called to do. He was at the home of Joe and Betty, two sheep in his congregation, and though the home looked serene and peaceful, he knew that in their lives there was no serenity because recently they had lost their son, 19 years old. Just 10 months earlier he had left for Afghanistan and he was gone. As far as they knew. He was gone. And there the pastor was, at the home of Joe and Betty, there to console them with the Scriptures. When they opened the door, and he entered into the house, and there was many words of cordiality spoken; they spoke of pleasantries for about ten minutes, and finally the pastor had to address the elephant in the room. "Joe and Betty, the whole church feels the loss of your son. Junior grew up in the church with us. We all knew him. We have felt deeply your tragedy but we are concerned with you now. You have not come out of your home in months." And they hadn't. They had become recluses. They were dealing with their tragedy with bitterness, confusion, and deep, deep sorrow. And so the pastor said, "Would you mind if I opened up a few Scriptures for you?" And he opened up to Romans chapter 8 verse 28, and he read to them, he said, "And we know that for those who love God, do you love God, Joe?" Yeah. "Do you love God, Betty?" Yeah. "Did Joe Jr. love God?" Yes, he did. "Well, we know that for all those who love God, all things work together for good." But before he could finish the verse, Joe said, "Pastor, listen, listen, let me just interrupt for a second. We appreciate you coming to our home. We appreciate your concern for us, but I need you to do just one thing for me." What's that Joe? "Could you walk down that dark hallway right there and you look in that room there to the left, and could you just check on Junior's room for us? We haven't been in there since." Now this is unexpected. And as he walked down the hallway, he walked awkwardly, nervously. He turned on lights as he went and he looked into the room and then he could feel a little of what they felt. He saw the tragedy. He saw the potential snuffed out in a moment. He looked into that room and he saw it empty of its occupants. And the mom said, "Do you see the posters hanging on the wall?" And he could see it there. Yeah, they're there. "Is this bed made up?" Yeah, it's there. "What about all his trophies?" Yeah. "How about his college book bag? Is it there?" Yeah, it's there hanging on the hook. And just at that moment, the father, through a flood of tears, said, "Pastor, oh, Pastor, what good could come from this? What good could come from my son being taken from me?"

And I don't know about you or me, but we ask that question often in tragedy, don't we? We know in our heads, sure, all things work together for good, but until we experience it, we don't ultimately know it.

Let's look to John chapter 11 verse 1 and see if we can answer this for Joe. I trust God, but what good could come from something like that? John chapter 11 verse 1, and today's lesson is a long one. It's a whole chapter. So we will be doing lots of reading, but let's read together verse 1. "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." That's important. Bethany is two miles outside of Jerusalem. Bethany was the staging ground of Jesus and the disciples as they would make forays into Jerusalem. He is about to enter into Jerusalem and be crucified. It is there in Bethany that he will raise Lazarus from the dead and many will believe in his name and many will go off and plot his assassination.

So they are in Bethany, "the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'" I like that about our Savior. He has normal, everyday friends. He comes to this world, the King of the universe, the second person of the Godhead, the Creator who spoke, "Let there be light, and there was light," and he has a friend named Lazarus and he goes to their house and hangs out with them, and they show hospitality to him. He didn't have his house. He didn't have a house of his own. He's there. "whom you love is ill. 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.'" Now that might surprise you because we all know that Lazarus dies. So what does he mean when he says it does not lead to death? What he means, I believe, is that the purpose of this sickness is not ultimately death, the purpose of this sickness is ultimately the glory of God and the glory of the Son, which interpreted means, "So that you disciples can see who I really am and what I am really like." That is the ultimate purpose of the tragedy in Lazarus' life.

So we have a partial answer there for Joe. Joe, what good can come from tragedy? Partially, God can be glorified. But the story unfolds very weirdly. "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill," this is the weird part, "he stayed two days longer." Isn't that, that's a strange love and that's a strange plan. There's a plan, you see the plan, he knows, "Oh this sickness is not going to lead to death, it's going to lead to the glory of God." It's as though he and the Father has already agreed on this. He knows, he is sovereign, he is in control, he is calm and collected as he deals with all of these issues and he says, "I'm not going right in this yet. We're going to wait a couple of days." And isn't that just like God? Isn't it true that God is always late? Have you ever put God on your schedule? He doesn't seem to notice, does he? He doesn't. He's like someone from the South. Always late. But he's late. He stays two days longer in the place where he was.

So verse 14, "Then Jesus told them plainly," we're skipping down to verse 14. "Then Jesus told them plainly," apparently he got news of it somehow, "Lazarus has died." So he waits and Lazarus dies. "And for your sake," now this is where it gets even more strange, he says, "for your sake I am glad." So Lazarus has died and I'm glad. Now, you

have to know some theology to know how that is possible and "I am glad that I was not there, so that you may," what's that word? "Believe." So now, Joe, we have two answers. We have a complete answer for you. How can any good come from tragedy? God will be glorified and your faith will be strengthened. In other words, God is the hero of all of life's problems, you just don't know it yet, and so this tragedy needs to teach it to you. That's what good can come from it.

So, but like I said a little bit earlier, we can all say that in our heads, right? "Oh Joe, it's for the glory of God and it's so that your faith can be built." But until you walk down that hall and you look in that room and you see that potential snuffed out, I don't think you can really feel it. You hear it with your ears, but like Job, you haven't yet seen it with your eyes. There's something missing there. So what I want to do this morning, we're going to look, we're going to dive deep into this tragedy and see if we can't associate, identify a little bit with this tragedy.

Look at verse 17, John chapter 11, verse 17. Like that pastor, we're going to walk down that hall. "Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been dead in the tomb four days." Now that's very significant. He's in the tomb and these tombs were basically holes cut out into the rock and there would be a stone which could be rolled into place and rolled out of place by the strength of a few men. And inside that tomb there would sometimes be a bench kind of in the middle, a stone bench where they would lay the decomposing body. In the sides of the cave there would be shelves where once the body was fully decayed, they would take its bones, place it in a sarcophagus, a flesh-eating box, a bone box, and they would stick it up on the shelves. And so these families had caves with the bones of their ancestors in them. And so Lazarus is laid down in the middle. He's wrapped in a sheet, not mummified. The Jewish people were much wiser than the Egyptians. There was no need to waste all of that preservative because it would go away eventually. And so they wrapped it in sheets and they would tie the two feet together, and then they would tie the arms to the body, wrap the head in a sheet, and the whole thing would be anointed to cut down on the smell for the people tending it.

So there's Lazarus in his tomb, but he's been there for four days. That's significant as well, because the Jews didn't have EKG machines. That's what it's called, right? And they didn't have brain monitoring devices. And so sometimes when someone looked dead, they would be resuscitated and so they had to deal with that. When is someone technically dead when you have no scientific machines to put on them? And so there was a tradition, a teaching that the spirit of a person would hover in the area for three days, and if the person was resuscitated, the spirit would return to them and life would go on. But on the fourth day, the spirit left and there was no longer any hope. So Jesus' delay, you see, it's been four days; there will not be a charge that he merely resuscitated him, it will be only clearly obviously a resurrection from the dead the fourth day. So he waited there to the fourth day.

John chapter 11 verse 18. Let's look at the believers' response to all of this. You know, they are witnessing firsthand the tragedy. Their brother has died. Let's see how they take it. Verse 18, "Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews

had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother." So there's a whole crowd. This is a funeral. You understand there's a whole crowd of people there. Jesus has just showed up.

"So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus," verse 21, this is key, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Now listen, this is not a rebuke. Many people think of this as a rebuke. I don't think this is a rebuke. I don't think she's saying, "Oh, you showed up too late." I think what she's saying is, "Listen, I know, Jesus, if you would have been here, you could have taken care of it. I know you could have healed a sickness, but it's been four days and it's too late." I think what she is saying is a statement of faith, "You could have done it." But it's small faith, isn't it? Have you ever said that, "God, where were you when I needed you?" Now, what that implies is that there was a window of opportunity that when it is shut, God's hands are tied. Now, do you see how that is small faith, as though God can't open up a window of an opportunity anytime he wants, as though we look out of the circumstances and we say, "God could work now, and he could work now, and now he could work," but then, "Oh! The omnipotent sovereign Creator of the universe, he missed his chance. Oh, I know if he would have been here, you could have done it. Maybe on the first day, maybe on the second. But now, Lord, he stinks. He's rotting. That's too much for you."

But then she goes on to verse 21, and it may seem to contradict what I just said, but look at it, verse 22, "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." She is not saying that, "Oh, you could raise him from the dead." We know this because later in the story, he's going to say, "Roll away the stone," and she's going to say, "No, no, no, no, no! He stinks in there. You can't do that." And he says, "Didn't I tell you if you would believe?" So this is not a statement of faith here. What she's saying is that, "I know that even though you're late, and even though you missed your opportunity, I know God still answers your prayers. I still know you have a special relationship with God. I know you're the Messiah." But she doesn't understand the full scope of who Messiah is and that's why it says he will be glorified in this event.

Now, "God, you missed your opportunity but I still believe in you." And you see how that's little faith? That's little faith. So, Jesus, though, he's, you know, he's not rude. He's going to condescend to her small faith and this is one of the most hilarious conversations in Scripture. He says to her, "Your brother will rise again." And she says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." You see, I've been to two funerals in my life. I haven't had a lot of people close to me die. And I preached at both of those funerals. And I remember at my grandmother's graveside, I said basically from 1 Thessalonians, "She will rise again." And that helps people a little bit, right? That's what she thinks is going on. She thinks he's giving her a funeral sermon. She thinks that he is giving her a little rabbinical lesson on the resurrection on the last day and she says, "I know that he will rise again on the last day. I know that." But he means in a few minutes. She doesn't get that.

So she thinks it's just a typical funeral sermon and then verse 25, Jesus, he still condescends to her level and her lack of faith. He says to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Listen, I'm not preaching to you about resurrection. I am the resurrection and I am the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live," that's one statement, "and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" So this is much greater than a funeral lesson. This is an announcement of who he is in his person.

He makes three statements here. You have to understand these to understand all of this. He says, "I am the resurrection and I am the life." It's two different things there. "I am the resurrection. I am the life." What he is saying is, "I am not telling you about the resurrection on the last day. I am the power of God for resurrection. I am the one who will say on the last day, 'Church, come out!' I am the one who will do that. I am the one who grants people who are dead in their trespasses and sins new life. I am the resurrection. I am the life. Do you believe this? Do you believe it?"

And then he goes on, he says, "Though the believer dies, he shall live. Whoever believes in him, though he die, he shall live." Now, what does that mean? That is a Christian belief that though we may die biologically, physically, we go on to live with Jesus Christ for eternity. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Amen. Amen. So though we die, we will be raised from the dead in the future but he says it basically like Ezekiel. Ezekiel says, "Thus says the Lord God, behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people." This is all prophesied in the Old Testament. John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day." So Jesus says, "I am the resurrection. Whoever believes in me, I will raise them up on the last day."

But he also says, "everyone who lives," now this is different, "everyone who lives and simultaneously believes in me shall never die." Now how can we handle that? What do you mean we will never die if we live and believe in him? Well, in some sense, obviously not biologically, but in some sense, believers never die. They go on to live with Jesus. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. So, "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish."

Now Martha says to all of this, "Yes, Lord, I believe," but I don't think she fully gets it yet. That's the kind of thing you have to show people, right? Some things you can say, but other things you just say, "Look, let me just stop and I'll just show you." I think that's one of those situations. Look at verse 28. "When she had said this," this is Mary, now she's going to go get her sister, "she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 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. 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.'" So we have the same thing with Mary as well.

And Jesus now becomes angry. That's right. And this is odd, and you might not see it here, but look at verse 33. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping," he sees this whole mob of people crying their eyes out. It's as though the pastor has looked into the home, into the room of the young boy who has died, and he turns and he looks at the parents and they are shedding massive tears. At that moment, Jesus becomes troubled. He becomes angry. That's the word. The word is for the snorting of horses. The word is irate. The word is angry. Every commentator, every conservative commentator says that. He becomes angry. Look at in verse 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." It's too soft. He becomes angry.

Now, why is he angry? I gotta ask that. If you have felt a tragedy, has it ever been mixed sorrow and anger? Maybe your anger was directed at God. That would be sin. Maybe your anger was directed at the violator, the one who caused the tragedy. Maybe your anger was aimed at sin itself. Jesus is angry though. What's he angry at? I think he's angry at death. It is his enemy after all. Amen? He will destroy it in the end times. I think he looks out at the victims of death and he is angry. He's angry. Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin." See, if you're new to Christianity, you need to understand this: death is not natural and it is not normal, it is the result of sin. It is the result of rebellion against God. "And so death spread to all men because all sinned." And if I hear another pastor say death is a part of life, I might lose it. Listen, death is not a part of life. That is reincarnation. That is the transmigration of the soul. That is the lion movie, the circle of life. That is not Christianity. Listen, death is not a part of life. Death is the opposite of life. It is the enemy of life, and it is the enemy of God, and it is the enemy of Christians. But we are reminded, when we see our enemy, we are reminded of what Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades, or the gates of death, will not stop us." You understand, Jesus is going to build his church regardless of whether or not they die, because he holds the keys to life and death. He is the resurrection and he is the life, and when he looks at that tomb and he looks at the victims of his enemy, it makes him mad. It makes him mad. And it should make us mad a little bit. It's not a part of life. It's the opposite of life.

Verse 34, "And he said," coming out of that anger coming out of that compassion welling up inside of him, he says, "Where have you laid him?" Let me go walk down that dark hall. Let me look into that room. Where have you laid the body? They said to him, "Lord, come and see." And the most, the shortest verse in all the Bible, one of the most powerful, "Jesus wept." Our God is a compassionate God and as though he is angry towards death, he is also filled with sorrow for the victims of death. And I wonder, I just wonder, I know Jesus is in heaven now and I know he is in absolute and utter control, and I know that he loves us and he cares for us, but as he looks at the suffering of this world, I wonder if he weeps. I would not be surprised to know that he does. And we Christians, sometimes we want to turn a blind eye to misery. We don't want to look at orphans. We don't want to look at those who have been ravished by the enemy death. But Jesus Christ stares right into the face of it. Understand that about your Savior, he does not avoid your struggles. He does not avoid your sufferings and your trials. He stares them down and

defeats them. Listen, there is not a problem on this planet that God will not be the hero of but he is going to do it in his own time and he's not going to do it in our time. He will be glorified. He will be magnified. And we will see him for who he is powerful. Amen?

Now, "Where have you laid him?" He weeps. Now the moment, the face off, verse 38, "Then Jesus, deeply moved again," so he is still filled with that anger and that compassion, "came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.'" And here's where the faith of Martha shows itself, the lack of faith. She says, the sister of the dead man, Martha said to him, "Lord, Lord," you know, "but Lord." Roll away the stone. "But, but, Lord, by this time there will be an odor." Not a great translation. No one speaks like that. He stinks. He is rotting. The King James says "he stinketh." "Lord, by this time there will be an odor," and that is normal. What is it that dead men can do? How is it that they can contribute to their resurrection? They can only do one thing, stink. And he stinks. He's been there four days. "Jesus, look, look, I'm glad you are here, but it's been four days. You want me to roll away the stone?" You don't talk back to Jesus. Right? You go with the flow. If he says roll away the stone, you roll away the stone. Have at it.

Verse 40, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" Didn't I not tell you that? Verse 41, "So they took away the stone." She called the men. The men take the stone. They roll it away. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me." Notice that, it's already been agreed upon. The sovereign plan of God is in effect. Jesus is carrying it out and he says, "Father, I thank you that you've heard me." He had apparently already prayed this. "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." See, they need to see who I really am, God. They know a little bit about me, but they don't know who I am yet.

Verse 43, "When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice," and with all the righteous anger, and with all the compassion, and through eyes of tears, he says, "Lazarus, come out." Notice that, it's personal. And people have been saying for a thousand years, if he just said, come out, all the dead would rise but he says specifically, "Lazarus, that's the one I'm looking for today, Lazarus, come out." And you were dead in the trespasses and sins but God being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved. Amen? Amen.

Verse 44, "The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound," so he shuffled, maybe he hopped. So Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go." And as miraculous, as fantastic as this is, it is just a shadow of things to come. Jesus will soon raise himself from the dead. He will have the keys of life and death. He will let people out of death whom he wills, all those who believe in him. He will build his church in spite of death and one day he will cry out, "Church, come out." Amen. And we will all come out of our graves.

So what do you say to the pastor? What does the pastor say to Joe and Betty in all this? And he looks in the room, he talks to them, he says, "Joe and Betty, you cry, you weep. Jesus wept. He wept with those who wept. Amen? You cry because death is sorrowful. But you don't cry as though there is no hope, amen? You don't cry as though there is no hope, because God is your hero. He is the Savior of all of our tragedies. And don't doubt God. He will work it for good. What good? For his glory, because you need to know what he's like a little bit more. And for your faith." As Job said at the end of his trial, he said, "Oh, I heard about you, but now I see it with my own eyes." And he basically learned this, that God was great and big and he was small. And oh, I love that God. Amen. Amen.

Let's pray.

Father God, thank you for the story of Lazarus. Thank you that you are the solution, the Savior, the hero of all tragedies. Thank you, Lord God, that you have given us your word, which gives us a little hint at why you work. We don't always understand it, but we know a little, Lord. We thank you for that. Help us as a church to trust you in spite of the tragedies that come into our lives. And Lord, if there is someone here who is not going through tragedy, help them to remember these truths when it does come. And if there is one who is going through tragedy, and they have asked, "Where are you, Lord, when I need you?" When they have asked, "What good can come from this?" Lord, show them your greatness. Show them your power. Show them your love and compassion. Produce fruit of faith inside them. We ask these things in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.