

“WHEN HOPE LIES DEAD AND BURIED”

John 11:17-27, 38-45

The Apostle Paul wrote: **“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope,”** Romans 15:4. This is certainly true of John 11 and the resurrection of Lazarus; an event which occurred two thousand years ago, and was recorded in Scripture that we might have hope amid our hopeless situations.

Given its emphasis on resurrection and life, most of us are familiar with John 11 from funeral addresses, specifically verses 25-26: **“I am the resurrection and the life,”** said Jesus. **“He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.”**

John 11 also contains the shortest verse in the Bible, **“Jesus wept,”** John 11:35. Yet, this shortest verse of the Bible is also one of its most profound verses. For when Jesus wept at the funeral of Lazarus, God was weeping—the Greek verb used means a quiet crying or tearing up. God weeping at a funeral. God weeping at the pain, heartache, and loss of death. Just as God would weep over unrepentant Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, as stated in Luke 19: **“As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.’”**

Along with Christ’s true humanity, John 11 also displays Christ’s true deity. BEHOLD the almighty power of God, as Jesus stands before the sepulcher where Lazarus has lain dead and buried for four days. HEAR the almighty word of God, as Jesus cries out in a loud voice—no, not for the sake of Lazarus, but for the sake of the listeners; for your sake and mine: **“Lazarus, come out.”** SEE Lazarus step forth from the tomb, bound by grave clothes but no longer by the grave.

The resurrection of Lazarus not only points back to the Prologue of John’s Gospel and the remarkable words, **“In Him was LIFE, and that LIFE was the light of men,”** John 1:4; it also points ahead to the conclusion of John’s Gospel and the remarkable words of John 20:30-31, **“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have LIFE in His name.”**

The story of Lazarus is a familiar story; not simply in terms of Scripture, but also in terms of daily experience, our experience. One day Lazarus was feeling fine, out the door, off to work. The next day he wasn’t feeling well. A few days after that he was dying—perhaps a man in his early thirties; perhaps unmarried; perhaps with a thousand unfulfilled dreams. This isn’t just Lazarus’ story. It could be anyone’s story. I once had a dear friend who went to the doctor for a routine medical examination and

left with a diagnosis of cancer and only months to live. She died at the tender age of thirty-nine.

All of us have faced desperate circumstances in which our hopes, like Lazarus himself, grew ill, weaker and weaker, until they eventually died and were laid to rest. Most of us could tell stories which begin with the words **“I never thought that would happen. Never.”** I never expected to lose a loved one. I never expected to get sick. I never expected my marriage to fail. I never expected to live alone. I never expected to see my children turn from the Word of God or turn against each other. I never expected to lose my job or home. I never expected to spend my retirement struggling to buy groceries and medication. I never expected any of this to happen.” Don’t you think Mary and Martha felt the same? I do.

At times, I believe desperate circumstances like these can be even more difficult for Christians; not because we doubt God’s control, but because we confess it; not because we doubt God’s love, but because we believe it. In Scripture we read verse after verse about God’s sovereignty and control of the universe. Jesus said, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me,”** Matthew 28:18. We read verse after verse about God’s love. God said in Jeremiah 31:3, **“I have loved you with an everlasting love.”** “Yes, but...God, if You are in control of everything; and if you love us so much; why did this terrible thing happen?” You know the questions. You’ve asked the questions.

And we’re not alone in asking the questions. The prophet Habakkuk complained, **“How long, O LORD, must I call to You for help, but You do not listen?”** Habakkuk 1:2. The psalmist asked, **“Why do You hide Your face and forget our misery and oppression?”** Psalm 44:24. Job lamented, **“The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison,”** Job 6:4. Even the great prophet Elijah slumped down beneath a juniper tree and said, **“I have had enough, LORD. Take my life,”** 1 Kings 19:4.

What did Mary and Martha do when Lazarus became desperately ill? They sent a message to Jesus. What did the message say? **“Lord, the one You love is sick,”** John 11:3. These are important words. Note that Mary and Martha did not presume to tell Jesus what to do. Instead, they simply entrusted the matter and their brother to Christ’s love. ‘The one YOU, Lord, is sick. You love Lazarus as much as we do.’

Nevertheless, what must these sisters have thought as the hours passed and Lazarus grew increasingly ill and Jesus failed to appear? It takes little imagination to see Mary and Martha sitting at the bedside of Lazarus; dabbing his feverish forehead with cool, wet cloths; whispering to him, “Don’t worry, brother. Jesus is coming. Jesus is on the way. And when He arrives, everything will be fine. You’ll see. Fine.” Yet. I wonder how many times, when away from Lazarus, Mary and Martha peered out the

window, asking each other in hushed tones of desperation: “Where is the Lord? Why isn’t He here? What’s taking Him so long?”

John 11 contains no record of Mary and Martha asking Jesus what we are so often tempted to ask Jesus: “Did You allow this to happen, Lord, because You don’t care?” But notice what both sisters did say to Jesus. **“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”** Identical words spoken at different times; by Martha in John 11:21 and subsequently by Mary in John 11:32. It’s hard to miss the sadness and disappointment in these words, and perhaps even a hint of reproach. “Jesus, if You had been here on time; if You had only acted instead of waited; if You had been doing what You should have been doing; our brother would not have died.”

Haven’t we entertained similar questions? I remember thinking such thoughts when my mother died after a quadruple bypass: “The surgeons did a decent job, Lord. Why didn’t You do Your part? Where were you? All my mother ever talked about was living long enough for me to return to Florida permanently. Was that too much to ask?” I remember thinking similar thoughts when going through a failed marriage, struggling with finances, and leaving the ministry in 1987. “If only You had been here, Lord, none of this would have happened. But it’s too late now. Too late.”

Are any of these assumptions true? Are there in fact times when God ignores or neglects or forsakes us? Are there circumstances in which Jesus yawns and says, “Yeah, well, I know Lazarus is sick and in trouble—Lazarus, Mark, Frank, Liz, Alice; INSERT NAME HERE; but I’m so tired and so not in the mood to help.” Does the Almighty God ever think such things or say such things?

Ironically, a casual glance at John 11 may lead us to think so. Notice the wording of John 11:5-6. **“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days.”** How do we explain these two verses? Aren’t they saying that Jesus purposely delayed going to Lazarus? And if so, was His love consistent with His actions? After all, if Jesus truly loved Lazarus, wouldn’t He have hurried to his bedside? And since He didn’t hurry to that bedside, perhaps Jesus didn’t love Lazarus that much after all. A common, disconcerting argument. And according to Scripture, an argument that is entirely wrong. John 11 teaches many important lessons. But this morning, let’s focus on three.

First, even in our darkest hours and most hopeless circumstances, God still loves us. Allow me to share two important insights about John 11:5-6 not readily apparent from the English translation. The first has to do with the word LOVE. Ancient Greek had three primary words for love: EROS, referring to sensual love; PHILOS, referring to a friendship love; and finally, AGAPE, the love of deep understanding and unswerving commitment.

When John 3:16 declares that **“God so loved the world,”** it uses the word

AGAPE. When John 11:5 states that **“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,”** it uses the word AGAPE. Clearly, then, what Jesus did in delaying his trip to Bethany, as strange or unsettling as that delay may seem, was done out of AGAPE; that is, out of deep and committed love.

But there is more. Consider again the words of John 11:5-6. Unfortunately, the term “yet” in verse 6 is not the best translation, because the Greek word OUN also means THEREFORE. Notice how the meaning of John 11:5-6 changes when we substitute “therefore” for “yet”: **“Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Therefore when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days.”** In other words, it was precisely because Jesus loved Lazarus, Mary, and Martha that He delayed going to Bethany.

How vital we understand this. When difficult problems go on and on with no resolution and with no Jesus in sight, we inevitably equate our suffering with God’s indifference. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus deals with us in the same way He dealt with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. We may not always understand the circumstances. We may not always recognize the beautiful picture among the jumbled pieces of the puzzle. But the one thing we can be absolutely certain of its this: God is always dealing with us out of AGAPE; that deep, committed love that will never forsake us, never give up on us, never leave us to our own foolish devices; that same deep, committed love that led Jesus Christ unswervingly to the cross and kept Him there when He had every legitimate reason and every necessary means to come down from the cross.

Even when God makes us wait, He is dealing with us out of pure AGAPE. Knowing this makes a powerful difference to our Christian lives and hopes. This is why King David, in a psalm that opens with the lament **“out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD,”** also says, **“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I put my hope,”** Psalm 130:1,5.

The Hebrew verb translated as “wait” in this psalm, KAVAH, literally means “to bind” like strong rope. This is what enables us to hang on, to have hope, amid the most hopeless of times; namely, the knowledge that God is faithful and that God is always dealing with us in absolute love. As the hymnist wrote: “Someday I shall see clearly that He hath loved me dearly.”

Second, the solutions God will bring about in your life will be for your good and to His glory. Notice what Jesus said in John 11:4 about the illness of Lazarus: **“This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.”** To His disciples Jesus said in verse 14: **“Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.”** To Martha Jesus said in verse 40: **“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”**

I submit to you, Christian friends, that today and every day of our lives, especially those dark days when all hope seems lost, that Jesus is saying exactly the same words to us. Exactly the same words: **“Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”** This text may be two thousand years old. The village of Bethany may be seven thousand miles away. But human problems are the same. Better still, Jesus Christ is the same. As much as I’ve wrestled, sweated, fretted, and resented problems in my own life, I can honestly say that God has never failed to force even the worst circumstances to serve my best interests. Never.

Remember the words of Psalm 50:15? **“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will glorify Me.”** And not only you, but others who see you and glorify God because of you. Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever considered that the **“day of trouble”** in your own life will not only result in you glorifying God, but in others glorifying God because of you? It’s true.

If you want proof, turn to John 12:9-11. **“Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in Him.”**

My grandparents, Emil and Ernestine Weis, were like second parents to me. When my grandfather died in 1985, I flew home to Florida for the funeral. I remember walking into the funeral home in Winter Haven, Florida; seeing my grandfather’s coffin; and then seeing my grandmother sitting in one of the front rows of the viewing room. “She looks so small,” I remember thinking. “What will she do now? She and grandpa were married for more than fifty years.”

When I sat down next to her, she looked at me, smiled, and slipped one arthritic hand into mine. There were tears in her eyes, yes. How could there not be? But amid the tears, I also saw great faith and a quiet peace in the Lord. Christians talk incessantly about how to witness for the Lord. But I’ve never seen a better witness for the Lord than the one I saw that day in the funeral home. I didn’t have to ask my grandmother if she believed the words of Jesus, **“I am the resurrection and the life.”** I could see her belief; and I glorified God because of her.

Third and finally, the means to life in every sense of the word, whether physical or spiritual or eternal, is through the living word of God. “Well, what’s so important about hearing the word of God? Why bother going to church?” I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard such questions; and perhaps I shouldn’t tell you the number of times I’ve asked them myself when working on a sermon until eleven o’clock on Saturday night or when the alarm beeps early Sunday morning. We could wish for the repose of a Mary, who sat at Christ’s feet, listening to Him teach; unwilling to let anything, no matter how pressing, distract her from God’s word. Yet, perhaps we

are often more like Martha, who fretted and fumed over dinner preparations—or in our case, perhaps over NBA Playoffs—until she heard Jesus say: **“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed,”** Luke 10:41-42.

If you want to know why regularly hearing, reading, studying, and meditating on the word of God is so important; if you want to know the power of God’s word for the life you now live and the eternal life yet to come; I’m not going to recite the Third Commandment to you, as important as its admonition is: **‘Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.’**

Instead, I’m going to direct you to a grave in Bethany, Israel, where Lazarus lay dead and decaying for four days—and to these words of John 11: **“When He had said this, Jesus called out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.’** If we need more incentive than this to hear the word of God, I can’t imagine what it would be.

When your hope lies dead and buried, like Lazarus, turn to the living, almighty word of God. And in its power, do what Jesus empowered a once dead-and-buried Lazarus to do: **‘Take off those grave clothes and be free.’**