

## **When a Loved One Dies**

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**John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series**

**John 11**

I've been doing an extended series from the gospel of John. Today we arrive at John 11 – the story of the death of Jesus' dear friend, Lazarus.

I want to tell you about a dear friend of mine named Dennis. We were best friends in college. I was best man at his wedding. He was a fantastic artist. His paintings were these incredibly gorgeous portraits reminiscent, for those of you familiar with art, of the paintings of John Singer Sargent. The portraits were lush and full of emotional depth. He was a wonderful musician, very sensitive. In some ways I felt toward him like his older brother. We were dear friends. He always looked to me for counsel and, perhaps, a little bit of leadership.

Dennis won awards all over the Northeast at various art shows for “best in show.” For many years Marlene's and my get-away trip was to go to Cleveland to visit Dennis and his wife, Susan. And for many years they would correspondingly drive down to Columbus as we had our children.

One New Year's Eve, Dennis and Susan were driving down to Columbus to meet with us and they didn't show up. We waited and waited. We called, and no one knew where they were. We called Dennis' mother and talked with his brothers. Finally, we heard the next day that Dennis had had a seizure on the way down I-71. He had

driven across several lanes of traffic, off the road, into a tree. He didn't die, but the doctors discovered that my dear friend, Dennis, had a brain tumor, which caused his seizure.

Over the next ten years with seasons of grace interspersed, the trajectory of Dennis' life was downward. The last time I saw Dennis, I drove up to visit him in a nursing home in Cleveland. He had lost his hair as the result of radiation. The tumor had taken away his capacity to speak. I spent the day with my friend talking to him, playing some board games, wheeling him around in a wheelchair outside. Towards the end of the day when I needed to go, we held one another and we both cried for about a half hour. I knew it was the last time I would ever see him alive. When I said "goodbye" there was just a profound sadness in his eyes.

My friend, Dennis, died a few weeks later.

Dennis' death left a hole in me. One of the most powerful books I have ever read is a little book of meditations written by a man named Nicholas Wolterstorff titled "Lament for a Son." It was written as a series of thoughts and meditations following the death of Wolterstorff's son, Eric, in a tragic mountain climbing accident. Here's one of the meditations that he writes:

There's a hole in the world now. In the place where he was there is now just nothing, a center, like no other, of memory and hope, of knowledge and affection, which once inhabited this earth has gone. Only a gap remains. A perspective on this world unique in the world

which once moved about within this world has been rubbed out. Only a void is left. There's nobody now who saw just what he saw, knows what he knew, remembers what he remembered, loves what he loved. A person, an irreplaceable person, is gone. Never again will anyone apprehend the world quite the way he did. Never again will anyone inhabit the world the way he did. Questions I have can never now get answers. The world is emptier. My son is gone. Only a hole remains, a void, a gap, never to be filled.

Here is his meditation on his son's funeral:

I buried myself that warm June day. It was me those gardeners lowered on squeaking straps into that hot dry hole, curious neighborhood children looking down in at me, everyone stilled, wind rustling the oaks. It was me over whom we slid that heavy slab, more than I can lift. It was me on whom we shoveled dirt. It was me we left behind, after reading Psalms.

One of my dearest friends, Lance Pittluck, who pastors in the Vineyard movement – he pastors the Vineyard Church in Anaheim, actually the original Vineyard church planted by John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard – my friend, Lance, lost his son, who died at age 3½ in his arms of a weird virus that leaped to his heart. His wife's grief, of course, was overwhelming at their son's funeral. She simply could not speak or move. She sat there curled up in a little ball, dumbstruck.

I spoke with Lance a number of months later about how he was doing. He said, "Rich, it feels like I have been shot. Life continues to go on, but there is a hole in my heart that I don't know if it will ever be filled."

The oldest book that we human beings possess is the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which dates back to the birth of Egyptian civilization sometime between 5800 BC and 4500 BC. It was written to prepare a person for death and for life after death. The oldest philosophy that we possess of humanity's view of life was that life was a rehearsal for death.

Throughout history, until the last century, people used to pray to be spared a sudden and unprovided for death. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century people feared not thinking about death more than they feared death itself. Today people pray for a sudden and unprovided for death. They pray that they will go before they have to think about it.

It is a very odd thing that we now live in a time in which not only does the larger society not speak about death, but we Christians - whose faith, when it is all boiled down, is most essentially centered on the issue of death and resurrection - we Christians and Christian pastors, and Christian churches have ceased talking about death. In some ways we have been co-opted by the larger society and its concern with the here and now. Our larger society completely dismisses any discussion of afterlife or eternity.

Today I want to talk about a fundamentally Christian subject, a fundamentally human subject. I've called my talk, "When a Loved One Dies."

John 11 signals a transition in the book of John. For nearly ten chapters John has been telling us in one way or another that Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism. He is

the fulfillment of everything the Old Testament pointed to – the Temple, the rituals, the holidays. And we've seen, as we've gone through the first ten chapters, Jesus as the fulfillment of the Passover, the Sabbath, the Feast of Tabernacles and Hanukkah. And now we reach a transition point in the gospel of John.

In chapters 11 and 12, there is a change of scene and Jesus is moving toward the cross. Chapters 11 and 12 are about death and life. They are signposts pointing us toward crucifixion and resurrection. Let's read John 11.

*Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister, Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now laid sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."*

Bethany is a little village that is just a couple of miles southeast of Jerusalem. Now, it appears that Bethany was the home base for Jesus when he ministered in Jerusalem, just as Capernaum and the home of Peter was Jesus' home base when he ministered in Galilee. It seemed that the household of Peter functioned as an extended family for this single man, Jesus, when he was in Capernaum. And it seems that the household of these three siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, functioned as an extended family for Jesus, a single man, when he was ministering in Jerusalem.

I want to make one simple point here before we return to our subject of delay. That is the need in every society for extended families that incorporate single people. At

Vineyard Columbus about 45% of people over the age of 18 are single. This includes young adults from 18-30 who have never been married, but are planning on getting married. This includes widows and widowers, folks who have been married but are now divorced, and never married adults over the age of 30.

The point is that for whatever reason you may be single, you have a need for extended family. Jesus didn't live alone in happy isolation. In one instance he lived with a large extended family of Peter and his wife, and mother-in-law, his children. In another instance, three single siblings formed a singles community with Jesus.

I would like to challenge those of you who are single out of any isolation here in the church. As I said, you may never have been married; you may be divorced; you may be widowed; you need to have around you the extended family of other Christians. You need to get involved in one of our groups. And families, husbands, wives, roommates, you need to open the doors of your families to involve a single. Marrieds, is there a single person that you are currently incorporating into the life of your home for holidays? The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is coming up – Thanksgiving and Christmas.

We read that the sisters sent word to Jesus: *Lord, the one you love is sick. When 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."* Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.

And here we have squarely presented to us the problem of delays. These two sisters send word to Jesus that a situation involving their brother is urgent. Lazarus' condition is grave. He is near death. There is an implicit plea for the intervention of Jesus. They know he has the power to heal. They know he has the power to shut the door on death. And yet, when Jesus hears this urgent request, it says *He stayed where he was two more days.*

And so the sisters could do nothing but wait. In a certain sense, these two sisters, Mary and Martha, are a portrait of billions of people throughout history who have waited, longed for, hoped for the intervention of God in their lives. The apostle Paul says in Romans 8, *The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pangs of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption of sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

The picture that the apostle Paul is painting, according to one great writer, Martin Lloyd-Jones, is of people and the entire creation straining like a dog on a leash, pulling, standing on tip toes, waiting for the intervention of God.

Are any of you desperate for God to act on your behalf? You are at a crossroads. You need a word from God regarding your job, your finances, your future. You are desperate for the intervention of Christ to heal a loved one, to finally deal with a

physical problem that's been going on and on and on. You keep waiting and waiting and hoping and hoping for a change in your marriage.

The author of the Psalms several times cries out, "How long, O Lord, how long will you delay your salvation." Or in Psalm 70, "Hasten, O God, to save me. O Lord, come quickly to help me. I am poor and needy. Come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer. O Lord, do not delay."

How many of you are waiting today for the intervention of Jesus Christ in your life?

It is important to underline one central truth regarding waiting. Christ does not keep me or you waiting because he is callous or indifferent. We read in v. 3, *So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."* And in v. 5 we read, *Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* The delays of God are not the result of a lack of love in the heart of Jesus towards you or me. They are not the result of him being unaware of our situation. But it is apparent that Jesus' timetable is simply different than ours.

Throughout the gospel of John, we see Jesus moving according to the timetable of God the Father. Way back in John 2 we saw that even when Jesus' own mother, Mary, made a request of him to help a young couple out on their wedding day who were going to suffer the social embarrassment of running out of wine, Jesus said, "Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come." "I'm working according to a different time table, the time table of my Father in heaven."



And I told you back in John 2 that God has two huge blades on his lathe. As we are spun around by the circumstances of life, God has two enormous blades that he uses to refine us and perfect us. One is pain and the other is waiting.

It is likely that Jesus during the day was wrestling regarding the Father's will for his own life as he looked forward towards the cross. And he was listening for the Father's will concerning Lazarus.

But I do believe that the two greatest means of your and my maturing in faith is pain and waiting. In the furnace of waiting and the frustration that we feel, God refines us, he prunes us, he humbles us, he causes us to see that life at its most fundamental is about trusting him. See, waiting is a test of faith. Will you trust God or will you take matters into your own hands? Well, God, there are no Christian guys to date. So I'll just date outside the faith. I'm tired of waiting for my husband or wife to change. I need to separate. But I'll tell you, whenever you pray, whenever you engage Jesus, you need to be prepared for the unexpected.

*We read in v. 7, Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" Jesus answered, "Are there not 12 hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light. After 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." His*

*disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us all go, that we may die with him.”*

Whenever you engage Jesus, whenever you turn to Jesus in prayer, you need to be prepared for the unexpected. Jesus here overturns the disciples’ expectations by going to Bethany first of all. At the end of John 10, the authorities in Judea tried to kill Jesus and he escaped. Now he’s going back. That confuses the disciples. You are walking into the trap, we don’t get it.

Then Jesus tells them that Lazarus has fallen asleep. They believe that he means simply natural sleep. But Jesus means death from which Jesus will awaken him.

But then Jesus says, “Let us go to him,” and Thomas thinks that he means, “Let’s join our friend, Lazarus, in death.” Thomas believed that Jesus was leading them in one grand climatic final battle that may lead to martyrdom.

Jesus didn’t mean any of those things. When you deal with Jesus, you need to be prepared for the unexpected. Let me explain this.

There’s an old saying: that there are only two certainties in the world – death and taxes. And for a long time, America has even taxed death. But the truth is, there is

really only one certainty – death. Taxes are not certain. The problem we have with death very often is that it feels so unexpected. The truth is, and this is a horrible reality, but we all live with a terminal disease. From the moment we come into the world, we all begin to die.

Some of us are aware of this terminal disease. We know we've been diagnosed with something that will inevitably lead to our deaths in the next year, five years, or next decade. And others of us have a terminal disease that will lead to our deaths in a few more decades.

Death is really not so shocking. But it feels that way. Because death strips away the illusion of our immortality, especially when death affects the young. We have the illusion that the young will at least live 70-80 years.

But what is truly unexpected is not death. Rather, what is unexpected is the grace of God. This is one of the most fundamental things that we could ever understand about Christianity. Christianity is all about the grace of God, the unmerited, undeserved favor of God, the intervention of God when you know you don't deserve it and when you are totally not expecting it. Grace, the grace of God, not as a result of you putting enough coins in the slot by praying for 40 hours, but simply the heart of God to bless you, to be good to you, to intervene on your behalf.

According to the Father's timetable, Jesus does respond to the request of the sisters. He does go to Bethany. He does go to the place of pain and death. But why should

he? In fact, why should Jesus ever respond to any one of your or my requests? The fact is, friends, that when it comes to God, there are no shoulds. God is under no obligation to us to answer us or to intervene in our lives apart from his self-imposed obligations, his self-imposed covenants.

Let me ask you a question. Have any of you been recently surprised by grace? Have any of you seen in your own life just totally unexpected favor? Blessings that just drop into your lap? Something worked out not because of you, but because of God? Have you ever been protected or rescued? Has a loved one ever been protected or rescued or healed or saved because Jesus chose to move toward you? Have you recently been surprised by God's favor?

Well, there was a delay. And during the delay, Lazarus died. Verse 21, Martha said to Jesus, *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know even now God will give you whatever you ask."* Jesus said to her, *"Your brother will rise again."* Martha answered, *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* Jesus said to her, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* "Yes, Lord," she told him. *"I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."*

There are a number of ways that we human beings deal with tragedy – the tragedy of death, the tragedy of an accident or illness that leaves someone disabled, the tragedy of a house fire or car accident, or a divorce, or bankruptcy. If you have in

some area of your life experienced significant pain, one of the ways you might try to deal with it is by creating a fantasy, a rewritten past. Verse 21, *“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here my brother would not have died.”*

Have you ever desired to rewrite the past? Have you ever fantasized about what life would be like if you had made a different choice at a crossroads, or if you had gone to a different college, or if you had married a different person?

*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

The fantasy of the rewritten past is what’s behind the Back to the Future movies. You’ve seen Back to the Future with Michael J. Fox traveling back through time in a DeLoren to the very moment when his father and mother’s romance was about to be kindled. And by interfering with the past, he sets history on an entirely different course so that the present is infinitely better than it otherwise would have been.

What would you like to rewrite about your past? Perhaps you’ve had trouble with one of your children and you wish you could go back and change the way you parented them. Maybe you have regrets that you worked too many hours, that you were uninvolved or you were too permissive or indulgent or too strict. Maybe you regret quitting school too early. If only I hadn’t quit. If only I hadn’t fooled around, I wouldn’t be stuck in this dead end job. If only I had gone on to college or gotten my degree. Perhaps you regret your first exposure to pornography on the Internet. If

only I hadn't opened the door. Perhaps you regret giving up too soon on music lessons.

How many times have you said to yourself, "If I had just done this differently, if I had just listened to my parents, if I had just known Christ earlier in my life, if my mom would not have died, if I hadn't given up on my marriage...?"

I want to read to you a column that was in Dear Abby just this past week. Here's what this guy writes:

Dear Abby,

This is almost 25 years late, but I need to apologize to someone. When I was a junior in high school, I dated Carol. She had many fine qualities and I really enjoyed her company.

After Carol and I had dated for almost a year, I met Marie. She was cute and exciting and I immediately fell in love with her. Marie broke up with her boyfriend and I broke up with Carol so that we could be together. I'll never forget the day I broke up with Carol. She was at a friend's house when I told her. She stood on the porch crying as I drove away to meet Marie.

I joined the military after graduation and married Marie later that year. Our marriage lasted 10 months. Marie left me for another guy the same way she had left her boyfriend in high school for me. Carol married a great guy a few years after high school. They have been together for more than 20 years.

To Carol: I'm sorry I hurt you. I should have chosen you over Marie. Everybody saw that but me. You and I would probably have had a nice life together. I hope you are happy. If there is one thing that I've learned is that the flashiest people are not always the right choices.

Here's a man who wishes he could rewrite history. He wishes now that he could have had a happy life, a happy family, a great wife – but he threw it away.

If you had been here, Lord, if we could just go back in time, my life would be totally different.

You may not be the kind of person who fantasizes about “what if” and all the should've, could've, would've's. Maybe you have never thought about what it would be like if you had married a different person, or had a different wife or husband, or a different job, or whatever. You may be one of those hard-headed realists who take an approach to life of “let's not cry over spilt milk.” You might accept life with a stoical resignation. What's done is done. It's just water under the bridge. We can't change it, so let's try to make the best of the present moment. I'm not going to sit around and cry. You might be the sort of person who looks at those who fantasize as being rather weak or sentimental.

But let me suggest to you that you are not in a superior spiritual position as a realist to those who fantasize. Because neither one's approach, rewriting the past or stoically accepting the present, is Jesus' approach to tragedy. What is Jesus' approach to present pain and difficulty?

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

Jesus' approach is to get our eyes off of the past, indeed, not to cause us to stoically accept the present. Jesus' approach is to get us to look to the future. What will be. What must be with the intervention of God. Your brother will rise again.

*Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Yes, that is true. As a good Jew, Martha believed in a last day resurrection. Yes, I suppose that one day way off in the future life may change. One day off in the future I might experience the intervention of God.*

Then Jesus says in v. 25, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And he who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?*

What Jesus is saying is that the resurrection is not something that awaits us at the end of time. Jesus is saying that in his person as Messiah, he is bringing the end of time to the middle of time. He is bringing the life of eternity into the middle of time, to use NT Wright's phrase. So that here and now we can begin to experience what we will have fully there and then. This is the secret of the Christian life. The Christian life is not, "I accept Jesus and then wait until I die to begin to enjoy eternal life." What we have read through the book of John and what is most clearly expressed here is that the Christian life is "I accept and welcome Jesus into my life and right now I



begin to experience in me, in my current situation, in my current body and with all the current hassles, I begin to experience the resurrection life that I will enjoy fully when Christ raises me from the dead on the last day.”

All of this comes through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't say, “I offer resurrection and life as a gift to you.” He says, “I am resurrection and life. When you attach yourself to me, when you open the door and welcome Christ into your being, you are welcoming into your being resurrection power and true life.”

This is the fifth of the “I Am” statements that John records of Jesus. We've seen back in John 6 Jesus saying, “I am the bread of life.” In chapter 8, “I am the light of the world.” Last week in chapter 10, “I am the gate.” “I am the good shepherd.” And now in chapter 11, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Jesus always points us to the future. Here is the idea. And I've borrowed this from Peter Kreeft and his wonderful book Love is Stronger than Death. Kreeft says that we think that someone dies because death sort of runs them over from the past. Death creeps up on us gradually over the course of our lives. But that's not what Jesus says is the reason a Christian dies. The reason a Christian dies is they get overwhelmed by life approaching us from in front of us. For the Christian it's not that we give up life, or life seeps out of our bodies, it's that we get overwhelmed by life, resurrection life, real life. This real life approaches us from the future and kills off our body of death.

Christians are destroyed not by a want of life, or a deficit of life, but an excess of life, an abundance of life. Instead of life receding back, life comes over the top of us like a wave. That's the resurrection. And the enjoyment of that kind of life begins right now.

Well, how do we react now in the present moment to the death of a loved one? We read in v. 28, *And after she said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village but was still at the place Martha had met him. When the Jews that 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. When 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." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"*

People have different ways of coping with death. The secular world attempts to relieve the pain of death by denying that there is something horrible about it. There are many current books that are written about the "American way of death" that want us as Americans to accept the idea that death is perfectly natural. This teaching denies what is most fundamental about death, and that is that death in the Bible is portrayed as our enemy.

There are children's books written now that are designed to present to children the idea that death is a part of the natural process, that it is all part of the wheel of life. Peter Kreeft, in the book I mentioned to you, Love is Stronger than Death, says that he has a neighbor who has a son who is seven. This son had a little cousin three years old who suddenly died. This seven year old asked his mother, "Where is my cousin now?" She was not a Christian and did not believe in any form of life after death. She believed in being honest with your children. She had just read one of these books about talking with your kids regarding the naturalness of death. This wisdom made sense to her. So mom replied, "Your cousin has gone back to the earth where we all have come from. All of nature is a cycle. Death is a natural part of that cycle. When you see the earth put forth new flowers next spring, you can know that your cousin's life is fertilizing these flowers."

She was so naïve that she was truly shocked when her son went screaming out of the room and through tears shouted back to her, "I don't want to be turned into fertilizer." This seven year old boy understood more about death than all of the wisdom being presented by secular children's counselors.

In every culture, at every time, death has been presented as an enemy, as an intruder. In the Bible we find that the beginning, the origin of the human race, a man and woman together in paradise. And then when that man and woman sin, the door is open for this enemy intruder to invade the human race. Death comes. In Greek mythology, it is the opening of Pandora's Box, or a bird dropping the magic berry of

immortality and losing it forever. Somewhere in the deep recesses of human memory is this theme of paradise lost and death as an unnatural intruder.

How does Jesus relate to the death of a loved one? We see in v. 33, *When Jesus saw her [that is Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.*

Nicholas Wolterstorff in that book that I mentioned earlier, Lament for a Son, writes:

One the way back from burying my son I thought about tears. Our culture says that men must be strong and that the strength of a man in sorrow is to be seen in his tearless face. Tears are for women. Tears are signs of weakness and women are permitted to be weak. Of course, it's better if they, too, are strong. But why celebrate stoic tearlessness? Why insist on never outwarding the inward when that inward is bleeding? Does enduring while crying not require as much strength as never crying? Must we always mask our suffering? May we not sometimes allow people to see and enter it? I mean, may men not do this? And why is it so important to act strong? I've been graced with the strength to endure, but I've been assaulted and in this assault wounded, grievously wounded. Am I to pretend otherwise? Wounds are ugly, I know. They repel. But must they always be swabbed? I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see.

It is OK to weep. Jesus wept.

It is OK to grieve. A person does not have to rush around smiling, if you don't feel like smiling.

What is amazing when we read the statement, "Jesus wept" is to recognize that this is not just an expression of the human Jesus, as if the deity that was joined to humanity in the person of Christ was unmoved by the grief all around him. Jesus is, according to the book of John, God incarnate. What Jesus does and says and feels, God does, says and feels.

When Jesus stood by the tomb of Lazarus, I believe that what's called to mind was the billions of graves that God has stood next to, the billions of times God has watched a mother bury her child, or a wife bury her husband, or a man die alone on a battlefield or a child die in a car accident, or killed by a drunken driver. The weeping at the grave of Lazarus was the expression of the brokenhearted God, who has watched the great enemy, death, attack people that he loves.

But there is something more that the Lord feels at death than just grief. He feels anger. The New International Version's translation in v. 33 that says, "He was deeply moved in spirit," is terribly weak here. The Greek word "embrimaomai" refers to the snorting of horses. It is a just anger, or outrage, or indignation. What Jesus is feeling is outrage, anger, rage, at the unnaturalness of death. His emotional response to the death of a loved one is a mixture of deep sorrow mingled with rage.

Wolterstorff says:

What do you say to someone who is suffering? Some people are gifted with words of wisdom. For such, one is profoundly grateful. There were many such for us. But not all are gifted in that way. Some blurted out strange inept things. That's OK too. Your words don't have to be wise. The heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken. And if you can't think of anything at all to say, just say, "I can't think of anything to say, but I want you to know that we are with you in your grief."

Wolterstorff goes on and he says this, and this is such great counsel:

When you visit someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one, please: don't say, "It's really not so bad." Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief, but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench. Your tears joined together with mine are salve for my wounds.

Jesus didn't say anything when he saw the tears of Mary. He wept with her. What a wonderful comforter he is.

But Jesus doesn't just weep. He does the unthinkable, and we'll close here starting with v. 37: *But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"* For them, death was irreversible. *Jesus, once more deeply moved [angry and grieving], came to the tomb. It was a cave with a*

*stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "By this time there is a bad odor, for he's been there four days."*

Jews popularly believed that the soul remained near the body for three days. And then when the body began to decompose at the end of three days, the soul left, recognizing it could not enter the body again. In Martha's worldview, her brother's body had begun to decompose. Death is irreversible.

*Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. [apparently, there was no smell] I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called 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. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."*

Death does not have the final word. We have in this passage the good news of the gospel overcoming the bad news of death. The bad news of death is not overcome by some watered down Christian teaching that says, "You know the essence of Christianity is to be nice to your neighbor. God is nice; you be nice too." The bad news of death is overcome by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which

the resuscitation of Lazarus pointed to. Jesus dealt a death blow to death, by himself breaking the power of death through his resurrection from the dead.

Death does not have the final word. Life has the final word. Or better, Christ has the final word. Come out, Lazarus. Come alive, Lazarus. Separation doesn't have the final word. Meeting again has the final word. Connecting again, embracing again. That's why I think Jesus involves others in unwrapping Lazarus from his grave clothes. He's giving Lazarus back to his loved ones and he's giving his loved ones back to Lazarus.

Jesus says several times in this text, "Do you believe this?"

Verse 25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

V. 40, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Jesus leaves us with a question. Do you believe that the person who trusts in Christ even if he or she dies will live? Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead? Do you believe that death does not have the last word with your loved ones, but that Christ does? Let's pray.

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### **When a Loved One Dies**

**Rich Nathan**

**June 21-22, 2003**

**John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series**

**John 11**



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