

Believe and Never Die (John 11:1-44)
Matthew Williams

The humanity of our Lord Jesus is a precious gift. The passage before us is a remarkable window into the truth of Heb 2:17, “Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”

Only God can save. But he does not deliver us from afar. Shattering the prison walls of our slavery to sin and death is an inside job. As the prophet Isaiah says, he draws near to bear our griefs and carries our sorrows. He rescues us by becoming one of us to work a salvation we could not work for ourselves, culminating in his death on the cross.

There, in a climactic sense, he atoned for the iniquity of all who look to him for salvation. But Scripture does not separate the atoning merit of his death from the atoning merit of his life. Jesus did not begin carrying our griefs and sorrows the moment the nails pierced his hands, as if the previous 33 years were nothing more than a warm-up for the real work of redemption.

No. From the moment he took his first breath until the day his eyes closed in death he bore our curse and shared our suffering. His death on the cross was an experience of suffering like no other. But he began his atoning work from the moment of conception, experiencing the full range of human emotions as he lived and loved in a broken world.

The Gospel of John in a wonderful way shatters our paltry notions of Jesus identity by reminding us he is not a mere man. He is the all-glorious God. At the same time, chapters like Jn 11 guard us from dehumanizing the Savior. The love, compassion, grief, and holy anger our Lord demonstrates in the course of raising Lazarus from the dead remind us of the parallel fullness of Jesus’ humanity. He’s not just the Son of God. He’s the Son of God *incarnate*. He’s the Word *made flesh*.

Reflecting on the humanity of Jesus, B.B. Warfield writes, *“He subjected himself to the conditions of our human life that he might save us from the evil that curses human life in its sinful manifestation. When we observe him exhibiting the movements of his human emotions, we are gazing on the very process of our salvation; every manifestation of the truth of our Lord’s humanity is an exhibition of the reality of our redemption. In his*

sorrows he was bearing our sorrows, and having passed through a human life like ours, he remains forever able to be touched with a feeling of our infirmities.” Only as such, as one who is fully God and fully man, is Jesus able to bridge the gap between God and man and give us life.

Jn 11 is all about experiencing resurrection life in Jesus. It's a real story, not a pretend story. Lazarus really walked out of a real tomb after being really dead for four days. Jesus raised him from death to life. But the point of the story isn't what happened to Lazarus. It's what Lazarus and Martha and Mary and the Jews' collective experience tells us about Jesus. It's a spiritual invitation, a gracious word from our Maker to join them in believing in Jesus that we too might experience resurrection life. **To believe in Jesus is to experience resurrection life, both now and forever.**

Though the circumstances of our lives are different, the nature of the Savior's work in Jn 11 remains the nature of his saving work today. He redeems our suffering for his glory and our good. He summons our faith as he shares our sorrows. And he defeats our foe by the word of his power. That's how Jesus gives resurrection life to all who believe in him. Consider each one of those actions in turn.

1) JESUS REDEEMS OUR SUFFERING FOR HIS GLORY AND OUR GOOD

Jn 11 begins by introducing us to a new family – a man named Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha – who lived in a village just outside Jerusalem called Bethany. V. 3 tells us Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus. Mary and Martha refer to him as “he whom you love.” In v. 5, John says Jesus “loved” the entire family. He's not an unfeeling specimen of masculinity, like some sort of super soldier in the Avengers. He's a real man who had real friends, men and women alike, particular people whom he dearly loved.

One day, Lazarus becomes sick, which is no small thing when medical care is primitive at best. Many people who got sick died. V. 3, “So the sister sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’” They don't say exactly what they want Jesus to do. They don't need to. They're already on familiar terms. They clearly want Jesus to come and heal Lazarus just like he healed the blind man in Jn 9.

The solution seems straightforward enough. We almost expect v. 4 to read, “When Jesus heard it, he journeyed to Bethany to see Lazarus.” But that's not what

happens. V. 4, "When Jesus heard it he said, 'This illness does not lead to death...'" Knowing the rest of the story, we know Lazarus' illness will lead him through the valley of the shadow. It's a monstrous intrusion about to cause overwhelming grief, but it won't get the final word. So Jesus promises upfront that his illness won't ultimately lead to death.

So what will it accomplish? V. 4, "...it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Christian, if you are suffering with bodily illness, it might feel random. It might feel aimless. It may feel like the next saga in a spectacular run of bad luck. The Savior begs to differ. Your illness, no less than Lazarus, has a guaranteed purpose and a guaranteed result. It exists for the glory of God.

It is not an aberration in his sovereign plan. It may be in yours. But it is not in his. He will exalt his name through your illness. How? By proving the strength of his power, revealing the depth of his love, and displaying the height of his wisdom. You may not see how. You may never fully understand. But of this you can rest assured. There is nothing, absolutely, happening in your life or world or body that God will not use to magnify his glory in the earth.

And because there is no greater cause and no greater glory, you could not ask for a bigger or better purpose for your illness. Does that take the pain away? No. Does that make it easy to endure? No. But it does mean, no matter what the doctor says or how your body responds, your physical body is never a pointless prop. It is an instrument of worship that will ultimately serve to make much of Jesus. Do not despise it. Do not desecrate it. Even when ravaged by sickness, it is a chosen means of glorifying God.

Now here's the critical connection. Magnifying his glory through our suffering isn't just a good thing God does for himself. "At least if I draw the short stick I can know God is benefiting from my pain." No. Glorifying his name through your suffering is the kindest thing God could possibly do for you.

Notice the connection between vv. 5-6. "Now 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." Are you saying, Jesus, that you deliberately and intentionally delayed your response to their request *because* you loved them? Yes. Why would



the Lord do that, friend? For the same reason he chooses to not respond to our prayers on the timetable that makes sense to us.

Fast-forward 48 hours to v. 14, "Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe." What governed the timing of the Lord's journey to Bethany? Why on earth would he choose to wait knowing full well that as he waited, Lazarus would die and his sisters would be filled with sorrow? What gave Jesus the audacity to say, "I'm *not sorry* I failed to show up. I'm *glad* I waited. And I'm not talking about gladness for my sake, though I will be glorified. I'm talking about gladness for your sake."

Speaking of our future salvation, the Apostle Peter writes, "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pe 1:6-7). Jesus says the exact same thing in v. 15. "I am glad that I was not there, so *that* you may believe."

There is something immeasurably better in this life than physical health. It's the exceedingly great, soul-satisfying pleasure of relationship with God through faith in Jesus. He created you for himself, friend. And there is no greater joy in this life than the joy of coming to know him as we learn to trust him. Heb 11:6, "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

Many times, the most unloving thing God could do for us is give us exactly what we want. "God, I don't want to grow in trusting you. I don't want to grow in knowing you. I don't want to discover the joy of leaning the weight of my life on you when every other foundation has crumbled. I don't want Jesus. I just want a body that works, a husband that listens, kids that are following you, and a little money in the bank, ok? If you want to 'strengthen' my faith along the way, have at it. But you better deliver in the end or I'm not gonna to be happy."

Most of us don't consciously talk to God like that, but isn't that what our grumbling in the midst of suffering often reveals? It exposes our idolatry. Saying, "God, I'll trust you if you give me what I want," is no different than saying, "God, I'll worship you if you'll first join me in worshipping something else."

Jesus loves us too much to play along, which is one of the main reasons he leads us through experiences of suffering. It's a loving act of formative discipline. The very situations we take and throw back in his face as "signs" that he doesn't love us are his divinely chosen means of deepening our relationship with him, strengthening our trust in him, teaching us that we really can believe his promises and stand on his word, all for the sake of his glory and our good.

Jesus knows a sturdy faith in him is more precious than gold (and everything else we tend to hold dear in this life) because it's the secret to everlasting joy, both now and forever. And he specializes in strengthening our faith through situations that make no sense to us. He redeems our suffering for his glory and our good.

2) JESUS SUMMONS OUR FAITH AS HE SHARES OUR SORROWS

When Martha learns Jesus is on the way to Bethany, she runs to meet him. When she finally sees him, she cries out (v. 21), "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her posture toward the Lord is two-fold. She laments the gap between what she wanted Jesus to do and what he chose to do, pouring out her sorrow to the Lord. Yet even her lament springs from a root of faith in Jesus, woven deep into the fabric of her grief. "Lord, if you HAD been here, my brother would not have died." It's an implicit declaration of confidence in Jesus' power to heal, isn't it?

Genuine faith in Jesus often increases the grief that floods our soul in the midst of suffering. Why? Because it widens the perceived gap between the blessing we believe he could have wrought and the suffering he chose to permit. Yet Martha doesn't despair. Nor does she charge Jesus with unkindness or injustice. V. 22, "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."

Despite the perplexing anguish of the Lord's delay, she doesn't stop believing in Jesus. Her faith isn't a signs faith. "Because you didn't heal him, I'm not sure I trust you anymore." No. It's the genuine article. It's grounded in who Jesus is, not what he's done for her lately. "Even now, Lord, you're the one who intercedes for me before the Father. Even now, your power is undiminished. You're still my only hope, Jesus. I trust you."

When Martha expresses her hope for a general resurrection of the just at the end of the age (a hope shared by saints throughout the Old Testament), Jesus takes her further up and further in. V. 25, Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

The Savior isn’t contradicting himself. He’s saying two things are true for all who believe in him. First, he promises life in a future physical sense. When the Lord returns to earth to make all things new, you will receive a resurrected body, Christian. Physical life after death is your eternal inheritance.

Second, he promises life in the present *and* future spiritual sense. If your faith is in Jesus, Christian, you get to experience abundant life in him right now, a taste of heaven on earth. Right now, you get to experience the joy of living under the favor of God, of knowing him, loving him, and serving him.

But neither experience of resurrection life comes our way automatically, friends. Resurrection life, both present and future, is the exclusive reward of faith in Jesus. Notice Jesus doesn’t say, “Do you believe?” in the sense of, “Do you have some sort of generic confidence that everything will work out in the end?” No. He’s not inviting Martha to embrace the power of positivity or to send good vibes into the universe.

He says, “Do you believe *this*?” Do you believe the specific words I have just spoken to you, that resurrection life is found in me and me alone? Do you believe the gospel, the good news that if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved?

Martha replies to his invitation with a poignant declaration of faith. “Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God.” In the very moment when sorrow threatens to overwhelm her soul, Jesus summons her faith and Martha responds by affirming her trust in the Lord.

But that’s not the only way our Lord cares for this family. When her sister Mary falls at his feet weeping, she says the same thing Martha said. V. 32, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Except in Mary’s case, there’s no concurrent voice of confidence in his present or future power to save. Faith is present in her lament no less than Martha’s. But the dominant emotion for Mary is overwhelming sorrow.

Look how Jesus responds in v. 33. He doesn’t admonish her to be vocal about her faith. There’s no patronizing, “I know it’s hard to be a finite creature who can’t see



how this will work out for your good. If only you knew what I knew." Nor is he unmoved because of the miracle he's about to perform. "Mary, perk up and watch this!"

No. The suffering that grieved her heart grieved his too. And he doesn't just enter into or sympathize with her plight. He shares her sorrow. "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." And a few moments later, tears begin rolling down his own face.

Grief is the fruit of holy love. It's also a humble act of protest. Godly sorrow says, "Things are not supposed to be this way." Parents should not have to bury their children. Marriages are not supposed to end in divorce. Sex should not be weaponized through abuse. A human being should not be murdered in the womb or derided because of the color of their skin. As Christians, we arguably have more cause for grief than anyone else. Knowing the goodness of God's original creation compounds our sorrow in the face of all that has gone wrong.

Grief is part of what it means to be a godly man. I'm not talking about having a soft side, guys, or letting a tear fall now and then. Jesus was the manliest man that ever lived. If he wept, we should weep too. Grief is not beneath the dignity of God. It is a precious expression of our Lord's humanity, and a powerful reminder that we are never alone in our suffering. The emotional life of our Lord stands as a witness. Whenever you taste the brokenness of this fallen world on the path of obedience to Jesus and sorrow floods your heart, remember: the Lord who loves you weeps with you.

Jesus is moved by compassion. He's also moved by righteous anger. When John says in v. 33 and again in v. 38 that Jesus is "deeply moved," he's not talking about some kind of extreme grief bordering on despair. Jesus isn't spiraling out of control or at his wits end emotionally. The underlying word has a strong element of inward fury, of being vehemently and strongly against something. In John Calvin's words, it's a combination of sorrow and anger over the "violent tyranny" of death.

B.B. Warfield observes, "It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he came into the world to destroy...Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites on our behalf. He has not only saved us from the evils which oppress us; he has felt

for and with us in our oppression, and under the impulse of these feelings has wrought out our redemption.”

How do we know that? Because the Savior who weeps with us doesn't stop with sharing our sorrows. He continues to the tomb. He confronts the source of our sorrow head on. He says, (v. 39), “Take away the stone.”

3) JESUS DEFEATS OUR FOES BY THE WORD OF HIS POWER

Can you relate to the question the Jews ask in v. 39? “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” It's not cynicism as much as it is confusion. Jesus, you healed him. Why not Lazarus? It wasn't due to a lack of power. That much would soon become abundantly clear. Jesus was compelled by love.

Remember, for the sake of their joy, he was more committed to strengthening their faith than sparing their suffering. He knew there was something they needed immeasurably more than a comfortable life. They needed to know and trust Jesus. Experiencing resurrection life for themselves depended on it!

But the first steps of his plan make no sense to type A Martha. When Jesus says, “Take away the stone,” Martha says, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” On multiple levels, that doesn't seem like a very good plan, Jesus. The Lord's ways haven't changed. There will be times in your life, Christian, when doing what Jesus commands us to do in his word will make no sense. How can this possibly be a good thing, Lord? Surely, you made a mistake.

In those moments, friend, you need to cling to the truth of v. 40. “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” Don't miss the connection. If you want to “see” the glory of God, if you want your soul to be thrilled with an experience of his saving power in your life, what must you do? It will not happen automatically. God WILL glorify his name. But you will not “see” his glory or experience his power unless you are willing to trust him, unless you are willing to believe his word and obey him accordingly.

It was profoundly uncomfortable. It was completely countercultural. It made no sense even to the woman who earlier confessed, “But even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” They still obeyed. Jesus didn't need

them to obey in order for him to be able to raise Lazarus from the dead. But remember, the miracle itself wasn't the goal. Eventually, Lazarus would die again. Teaching them to trust Jesus. Teaching them to walk by faith. That was the goal for therein lay their eternal good and God's eternal glory.

Imagine the moment. I'm sure it smelled horribly, just like Martha predicted. Then Jesus quietly prays. He wasn't a rogue agent. He wasn't a circus ringmaster looking to wow the crowd. He was an obedient Son. A dependent Son. He thanks the Father for hearing him. He expresses his desire for all around him to believe that he's not just a miracle worker. The signs point to something far more important. He's the Sent One. The Messiah. God in human flesh.

Then he stops. He doesn't pray the same prayer over and over. He doesn't perform a magic ritual. There's no smoke and mirrors. He simply speaks into the darkness, "Λάζαρε, δεῦρο ἔξω." "Lazarus, come out!" It wasn't the first-time creation heard that voice. Long ago, the same voice spoke into another darkness, "Let there be light." The same voice that made something out of nothing now spoke to what was dead and made it alive. His cold heart began to beat. Collapsed lungs filled with air. He sat up, arose, and shuffled out of the cave into the light. No hesitation. No fanfare. Jesus spoke. And Lazarus came to life.

What happens when you speak, friend? When Jesus speaks, stars appear. When Jesus speaks, dead men walk out of tombs. When Jesus speaks from the cross, "It is finished," temple curtains tear in two from top to bottom, opening a way for forgiven sinners to boldly approach our Holy God. When Jesus speaks, spiritually cold hearts awaken to trust and obey the Lord who died to set them free. And a day of judgment is coming when Jesus will speak to every man and woman who has ever lived, and they will be summoned from the grave by the sheer power of his voice.

But here's the best news of all. You don't have to wait until that day to hear his voice for yourself. Jesus hasn't stopped speaking, friends. When you open your Bible and read, through the illuminating work of the Spirit, we still hear his voice. Not in a mystical behind-the-words-of-the-page sense. But with the same clarity, the same precision, and the same life-giving power that spoke to Lazarus.

Lazarus' physical death is a picture of our own spiritual death. In the same way that he was utterly powerless to raise his body to physical life, so too we are utterly



powerless to raise our souls to spiritual life. But Jesus is more than able. Jesus is more than willing. He has already defeated your spiritual enemies of sin and Satan at the cross. All he requires is that you stop trying to save yourself and start trusting him to rescue you and bring you home to God. He is worthy of your trust for he defeats our foes by the word of his power.

CONCLUSION

Jesus gave resurrection life to Lazarus in a physical sense. He gave resurrection life on the same day to many more in a spiritual sense. V. 45 tells us, "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him..." Ultimately, that was Jesus' goal – strengthening their faith in Jesus that they might experience resurrection life in Jesus.

Jesus offers the same life to you today, friend, if you're willing to join them in believing him. A life that endures. A life that lasts. A life no sorrow can steal and death itself cannot destroy. Only Jesus can give to you.

How does he do it? By redeeming our suffering for his glory and our good. By summoning our faith as he shares our sorrows. And by defeating our foes by the word of his power, a power he ultimately displayed at the cross where he triumphed over sin and death for all who believe in him.

So today, if you hear his voice, don't harden your heart. Submit to Jesus. Surrender your life to Jesus. Trust in Jesus, that you might experience resurrection life, both now and forever.