



DEATH, LIFE, AND THE GLADNESS OF GOD.

“... 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.’”

JOHN 11:4

WHY SO LONG IN JOHN?

- To give the book its due.
- There’s a beauty that is grown in us when we sit in one book for a long period of time.
→ The themes and message of this book will stick with you decades to come.
- To get a clear glimpse of who Jesus is so that our love for him would grow.

In the book of John, Jesus makes seven “I am” statements. The two we’ll study tonight are bolded:

- I am the bread of life (6:35)
- I am the light of the world (8:12)
- I am the door (10:7)
- I am the good shepherd (10:11)
- **I am the resurrection and the life (11:25)**
- I am the way, and the truth, and the life (14:6)
- I am the true vine (15:1, 5)

FIVE KEY QUESTIONS:

1. What surprises Jesus?
2. What makes Jesus glad?
3. What is more important than life and death?
4. What makes Jesus sad?
5. What in the world just happened? And why?

BIG IDEA:

Death, life, and
the glory of our glad God.

1. What surprises Jesus?

Another way to ask this question is to say, “Is Jesus surprised by our suffering?” Can something happen without Jesus pre-knowledge or outside of his plan? Do we serve a reactionary God, one who is like us, unsure of what comes next or unsure about the troubles that lie around the corner? Does God hold his breath every time you get in the car to drive home? Or worse, does he not care or not know that you are driving? Is he asleep?

Well, there’ve been more than a few pastors who have said so. Most recently, in response to a tragedy in his church when a 2-year-old girl died unexpectedly, Bill Johnson, the pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, CA said in a video posted to YouTube and Bethel’s social media platforms: “The reason Jesus raised the dead is because not everyone dies in God’s timing. Jesus could tell, and He would interrupt that funeral, He would interrupt that process that some would just call the sovereignty of God. And He’d raise the little girl, he’d raise the adult person from the dead.”¹

Now, I don’t want to be unnecessarily harsh. I have a 2-year-old baby at home. I do not blame those parents or that church for praying that Olive would be resurrected. Nor am I denying miracles. One of the greatest truths in all of the Bible is that God has sovereignly planned that your prayers would change things! The need, the prayer, and the miracle are all perfectly planned in the hands of God!

However, I want to state this plainly: the precedent that people die outside of God’s timing is not true according to the Bible. What Bill Johnson says, that people in Bible or since have died outside of God’s timing in a surprise disruption to his plan and that Jesus was out looking for these types of mistakes just

¹Bill Johnson, excerpt from *A Message from Pastor Bill Johnson*, retrieved from <https://youtu.be/lcD-rxfaphg>.

simply is not true. It is misleading, dangerous, and heartbreaking to teach Christians something so blatantly false. It may sound good, but it is devastating. There are NO blind spots in his sovereignty, no limits to his providence.

The **doctrine of providence** teaches that God ordered, governs, and directs all things in his creation. But the reality is that there is a lot of evil in this world. You don't have to look too far in your own life to see the devastating consequences of sin and its heinousness. And in an attempt to explain for ourselves why these things happen, we have a tendency to say in our hearts, "God didn't know. If he had, he never would have allowed it to happen. And there's no way that he could be involved somehow in the pain or the heartbreak." Too often, we treat God like he's our dog. He's our best friend, well intentioned, but not always present. Strong, yes, but only when we want him to be.

But there's a grave danger in removing God's presence and activity when evil rears its ugly head. Think for a moment about what type of faith that logic breeds. As Derek Thomas writes in his book, *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home*, "[This teaching] is asserting that there are circumstances in life over which God has no control. You may be driving along the highway when, suddenly, you cross into a 'black hole' where God's providence has been withdrawn. You are on your own. You must face whatever evil is coming at you – a sudden urge to sleep, a drunken driver heading toward you, a deer caught in the headlights of your car, a mechanical fault that causes your car to veer off the road. If it is true that there are such black holes in which there can be no assurance of God's providential care, then there can be no assurance in God's love, no hope of security. It is a miserable, depressing thought."²

So how does Jesus react in John 11 to the pretty shocking news of his good friend's sickness? Is he surprised? Does he rush to act to keep God's plan from being thwarted? Or does he even know what's about to happen, because he does say, "This illness does not lead to death..." but Lazarus does eventually die? Has God's plan somehow been disrupted by sickness and death? If that were true, we would expect quick action from a somewhat shocked Jesus! But what does he do?

Jesus has an oddly calm reaction. It's as if he isn't shocked in the way others are. I mean look at all the other actions of people in these first 16 verses. Mary and Martha were nervous enough about the illness to send word about it to Jesus (v. 3) and Thomas was so shocked that he was willing to go die with him (v. 16). Yet Jesus isn't shocked and he isn't in a hurry. In fact, his actions reveal that he was in control the whole time:

→ First, his initial response reveals his knowledge of the illness and its purpose.

- v.4 - "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."

→ Second, his stay debunks the myth that he would rush to reverse something out of the plan.

- 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."
 - Also debunks the myth that Jesus doesn't love us if he doesn't act immediately.

→ Third, his supernatural knowledge from afar debunks the myth that he could be caught by surprise.

- vv. 11-14 - "[Jesus] said to them 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.' The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.' Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus has died... But let us go to him.'"
- v. 17 - "Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days."
 - Jesus knew the doubts people had of his sovereignty. He knew people would doubt his knowledge and control 2,000 years in the future. So what does he do? He waits for it to be absolutely obvious to everyone that Lazarus died and his patience stands as a clear sign that he didn't die outside of God's timing or knowledge. He was intimately aware of what was taking place just a few towns over. **But why?** That brings us to the answer for our second question:

² Derek W.H. Thomas, *How the Gospel Brings Us All the Way Home*, (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011), ???.

2. What makes Jesus glad?

Something curious happens in this passage. Jesus' friend has just died, and he says, "... for your sake I am glad that I was not there..." How could he possibly be glad when his friend just died?

→ This illness will lead to Jesus' getting the glory (the fame), and this always makes him glad. (v. 4)

→ Lazarus' death is an event that causes the disciples' belief to deepen, and this makes him glad. (v. 15)

There's an important distinction that needs to be made here. The Bible does NOT say that Lazarus' death is what makes Jesus glad. He is not a sadistic God who takes joy in people's pain. In fact, neither sin nor the effects of sin on this life ever make God glad. We'll see that in this story in a bit.

Q: Why do these two questions and answers matter to us tonight? Why do they matter to you?

A: Many of you have walked through severe pain in your life. We operate on a college campus. Sexual assault is one of a dark stain on colleges right now. Some of you have experienced that horrendous sin. Depression and anxiety are the most common reasons for on-campus counseling sessions. Those are the result of sin's effects on life. Some of you have had friends and family who are walking through sicknesses, cancer, and some of you have known the bitter taste of death.

Jesus is not glad about those things. His control and knowledge of those events doesn't mean that finds pleasure in them. He hates sin. He is not glad when sinful humans make sinful decisions, and he is not glad when we experience the consequences or effects they carry. And often, we ask the question, "Well, if he doesn't like it, then why doesn't stop it?" And before I answer that, I want to encourage you by telling you that 99 times he stops sin and we don't know it because we didn't experience it. But secondly, God allows humans the freedom to live and move and operate. And a consequence of letting humans move freely is that we sin.

But God is good. Jesus is good to take what the enemy meant for evil and turn it for good! He can take the days of your greatest trauma and teach you more about his love than you could have ever understood before. Think of Joseph who was beaten up by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape and thrown into prison. At the end of his life, he said, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today," (Gen. 50:20).

What makes God glad is receiving fame for taking your broken situation and transforming it into something good. What makes God glad is that when you feel his love, you believe, and when others see his love, they believe. That's what makes God glad. And that brings us to the next question and answer...

3. What is more important than life and death?

Maybe you are hearing that explanation about God's love turning a broken situation for good, and you think, "I get that for a lot of things, but we're talking about death. That's the end of someone's life. Can't transform someone who doesn't exist anymore." Well yes, if you think that life on earth is the most important thing. If life on earth is the most important thing, then God allowing us to feel pain or experience sorrow is surely bad. But the Bible teaches that there is something that is more important than life and death here on earth; it's hope, security, and life for eternity to come where there is no more sickness, pain, mourning, or death.

This hopeful joy in the life to come is something about Christians that has confounded the non-Christian culture for as long as time has existed. Consider this letter written 1,800 years ago about Christians:

"Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life... And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they, rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.”³ – **Letter to Diognetus, 2nd Century A.D**

This Bible explains the Christian’s cause for joy in Hebrews 10:34.

Hebrews 10:34 – “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that **you yourselves had a better possession** and an abiding one.”

An abiding possession. A joy that is fully and totally felt for eternity. A joy that is experienced long after physical death. A joy that doesn’t compare to physical pain or sorrow. This is what Jesus tells to Mary and Martha when they are struggling with their brothers’ death. Jesus doesn’t rebuke them. He doesn’t yell at them, but he does teach them by pointing them to the future.

John 11:25-26 – “Jesus said to her, ‘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. Do you believe this?’”

What’s more important than life and death? Eternity. Though Christians die physically, they do not die the death that matters: spiritual death. For us, our eternity is secure. A rich and abundant life with Christ... But this brings us to our fourth question. If Christ knows our future is secure...

4. What makes Jesus sad?

There’s another aspect to this passage. Jesus is talking to a bunch of believers, he’s surrounded by people to believe in him, who run to him when times are hard, and even give these rich statements about him life, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (v. 27) He’s glad!

And yet, he is also “deeply moved” (vv. 33 & 38). When you think “deeply moved,” think emotional to the point of silent tears as verse 35 tell us. This is a picture of Jesus that we don’t often see or imagine. You are standing here with Jesus, God, but also a man, and he is crying with deep emotion. But why? What makes Jesus sad? I’m going to give you two answers:

→ Jesus was sad because his own followers couldn’t see with an eternal perspective.

Prior to Jesus display of emotion, Mary makes a statement that reveals where her hope was placed. She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (v. 32) This statement may have been true, sure. She had belief in his ability to heal a sick person and knew that he could raise the dead. But it’s more than that-it’s a statement that reveals that she was thinking with a temporary lens, one that placed more an emphasis on life here on earth than life eternal. This makes Jesus sad.

But look at how he responds. He doesn’t scold her. Jesus knows that a grieving family member is in no place to be rebuked for something they say in their grief. Instead, he is “deeply moved and greatly troubled.”

→ Jesus was sad because the effects of sin grieve him.

Jesus knew he had the power to resurrect Lazarus. He knew his plan was to do that. He is God. But he is also man, a man who feels the weight of death and sickness. And to know that his friend was dead saddened him. It saddens Jesus to see his children struggle through pain as a result of sin.

And all this leads us to our final question...

³ Letter to Diognetus, Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010522_diogneto_en.html.

5. What in the world just happened? And why?

This story takes a crazy turn at the end. Just listen again to what takes place. [READ vv. 38-44]... Jesus, after all of this, decides to raise Lazarus from the dead. His friend who died four days ago, the one whose death caused everyone to be sad. Jesus raised Lazarus to life!

Do I believe it actually happened? Yes. I do. But the question is why? Why raise Lazarus to life especially if he was just going to die again in the future? Jesus did not go around raising everyone up from the dead, but when he did, he did it for a specific purpose. Lazarus' death is for a purpose and Lazarus' resurrection is for a purpose.

Is it, like Bill Johnson said, because Jesus was correcting something that happened outside his plan? **No.**

Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus provides a glimpse at his power and authority to raise the dead, yes. More than that, though, Jesus was giving us a glimpse of his ultimate glory and how it'll be when he comes again and we get to see it in full! When Jesus comes again at the end of time and he restores all things, he'll even restore the bodies of all who've died, except this time our bodies won't run out on us. At the end, the bodies of all believers will be raised, renovated, and able freely pursue our true purpose to glorify Jesus! This story is a glimpse at that glory.

AIM FOR THE HEART.

1. To the one who is experiencing heartbreak right now, Jesus sees you, hears you, and knows. (Ex. 2:24)
2. To the one who's running low on hope, look at life with an eternal perspective.
3. To the one who has experienced a glimpse of the life to come, keep believing.
4. To the one on the sides watching this whole thing take place, believe in Jesus and experience life.