

"Lord If You Had Been There"

John 11:17-36

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It was kind of a normal Saturday. I had a zoom meeting in the morning and then Nancy and I attended a beautiful wedding here at the church in the afternoon, Josh and Glo's. We were back home for just a short time when I received a text from my cousin. She was forwarding a prayer request from my niece: "Please pray. My dad is missing. He may be in the lake." And sure enough, within a couple of hours it was confirmed. My brother Randy had drowned, apparently after a medical incident incapacitated him. It was the most shocking news I had ever received. My brother, just a year younger than me was dead. He had conducted a funeral service less than three hours before he died. How could he no longer be alive??

Well, a month had gone by since that day. Because of the grace of God, the promises in His Word and the encouragement of others, including many in this room, I am doing okay. My grief is permeated with hope. And this experience has also helped me to understand our text today better.

We are in John 11:17-36. If you have your Bible, you can turn there. As I read this passage, I can now better relate to how Martha and Mary felt when they said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Today we will see how Jesus comforted and encouraged these two women. And let's pause and pray that we would be comforted and encouraged as well.

John 11 begins with Lazarus being very sick. He and his two sisters, Mary and Marha, are close friends of Jesus. (Incidentally there are six different Marys mentioned in the New Testament. Lazarus's sister is known as Mary of Bethany.) We are not sure how this friendship started, but Lazarus and his sisters would host Jesus and His disciples in their home when they traveled from Galilee and Jerusalem for various religious feasts. Bethany, the town they lived in was just a couple of miles from the temple in Jerusalem.

Mary and Matha had sent word to Jesus about Lazarus' illness. Jesus, however, for His reasons, decided not to go to Bethany until after Lazarus had died. **John 11:17 Now when Jesus came** (to

Bethany), **He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.** Martha then meets Him and says to Jesus, **John 11:21b "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."** Folks, that statement reflects a lot of confidence and a lot of disappointment with Jesus. When Jesus encounters her sister Mary, she says the same thing, **John 11:32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."**

I suspect the two of them had discussed this and perhaps shared their thoughts with others. Jesus was a wonderful man and could do wonderful things. But what good did that do? Their brother is dead. He had been dead for four days. I suspect they conclude that Jesus doesn't really care about them or their brother. Why else had He not come?

Yet, despite her disappointment, Martha still believes. She says to Jesus, **John 11:22 "But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."** Yet, this confidence in His power is certainly dampened by doubts about His love. In response, **John 11:23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."** Yes, that is exactly what will happen in a few hours, but it is beyond what Martha can grasp.

John 11:24 (She) said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Like most in Israel, she believed righteous, godly Jews would be raised back to life at the end of the age. She assumed her brother would be one of them. But that would be a long time in the future. And it was not a lot of comfort to Marhta at this point.

John 11: 25, 26 Jesus said to her, "Do you believe this?" Jesus explains that **"I am the resurrections 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.** He tells Martha and all of us that He, through His death and resurrection, brings victory over death to all who trust in Him. Now Jesus know He is going to bring Lazarus out of his tomb,

back to life in maybe a few hours. Apparently, Jesus knows Martha is not ready to hear that. She does, however, affirm her confidence in Jesus, **John 11:27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the son of God, who is coming into the world.”**

After this conversation with Martha, Jesus then encounters her sister, Mary. Martha goes and tells her sister, **John 11:28b, 29 “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when Mary heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.** But not just Mary. **John 11:31 When the Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”**

Like her sister, Mary is disappointed. She is confident that if Jesus would have come earlier, her brother would still be alive. But Jesus had not come. And like Martha, Mary feels He has let her down. That only increases her grief. **John 11: 33-36 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 he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”**

John 11:35, Jesus wept, is a favorite of many who want to memorize a Bible verse, because it is the shortest one in the book. But it raises an interesting question: Why did Jesus weep? Some, like folks there that day, think it is obvious. “Jesus is grieving the death of His friend.”

However, Jesus knows what is going to happen very shortly. His friend, Lazarus, will no longer be dead. He is going to bring him back to life. Why would He be in tears?

I think verse 33 helps us understand what happens here. **John 11:33b he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.** Interestingly the NLT may capture the Greek term better than other translation when it says **John 11:33b a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled.**

So, part of the reason Jesus weeps is because He is angry. Some suggest the anger is over the unbelief of the people mourning, but I don’t think that is what is happening. I believe Jesus is angry at death and all that it does. He sees His friend Mary hurt and devastated because her brother had died. He knows, like the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:26 that death is an enemy, not a friend. It is only because of sin and rebellion against God that death exists in this world.

Jesus knows He has come to defeat death and the devil, but it makes Him angry to see how the devil is using death to torment His dear friend. So, Jesus weeps. He weeps with Mary because He cares about her and because he hates what death is doing to her.

In one sense, the most important verses in this passage are **John 11:25, 26 “I am the resurrection and the life.”** I read those at the beginning of almost every funeral because they reflect the heart of Christian hope in the face of death. However, that is not the topic today.

Instead, we will focus on verses 21 and 32, words spoken by Lazarus’ sisters, Martha and Mary “Lord, if you have been here, my brother would not have died.” We focus on this because sometime these are words many of us speak or at least think. They are the words that came to my mind when I learned my brother had died. My precise words were, “Lord, why did you let that happen?” But it is essentially the same thing Martha and Mary said.

In other situations, you might say, “God, you don’t love me. If you did, my life would not be like this.” Or maybe, “I cannot believe in God anymore. If there was a God, my wife would not be dead.” These words, these attitudes, may not be good responses when trouble or tragedy strikes, but they are common and very understandable for us as human beings.

Troubles and tragedies tend to bring distress and despair to our lives. Often situations seem to be more than we can handle. And we cannot help but wonder, if God is all powerful and really cares about me as the Bible says, why is He letting this happen? Where is He when I need Him?” Yet, those troubles and tragedies keep happening.

As I said, a month ago my brother Randy died very suddenly. A couple of weeks ago June Hill's cousin, as well as her husband and their son were killed in a car accident near Princeton, MN. Last month one of my cousins, Gloria, was found dead in her apartment. Apparently, she had fallen, broken her neck and died two days earlier. And some folks right here in our Chisholm Baptist Church family are facing big challenges. Currently, four individuals are undergoing treatment for cancer. They may be thinking "Lord, if you had been here, I would not have cancer."

Folks, if you maybe not today, but at some point in your life have asked or will ask, "Lord, why did you let this happen?" or exclaimed, "God, if you cared, things would not be like this." The Lord does have an answer for you. And the answer He give is really the same response as He had for Martha and Mary.

First, to Martha and to all of us He speaks truth. Jesus could have told Martha that He would bring Lazarus back to life within a few hours. But He doesn't tell her, even though that would have comforted her. Instead, He says to her **John 11:25, 26 "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.**

Folks, Jesus wants Martha to have an eternal perspective. He wants her to realize the truth that even though her brother has died, ultimately death will not prevail. And the truth is that ultimately not just Lazarus, but also Martha and every single believer in Jesus Christ will defeat death. We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

And that should change our perspective on pretty much everything in life, but especially on the really difficult things we encounter. Those trusting in Jesus have the promises that **Romans 8:28 in all things God works for the good** (the ultimate good, the eternal good) **of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

The Lord promises that in whatever He ordains, in whatever occurs, He will ultimately use these things for His glory and our eternal good. How? I

don't know. You don't know. But that is the promise. The promise God makes to us.

He also tells us, through the Apostle Paul, **2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.** He is saying, don't focus on your current circumstances which are temporary, but focus on the eternal glory, which is, yes, eternal.

So, when your brother dies, or you find out you need to have chemotherapy, or you get laid off from your job, or you learn your husband is having an affair, or you face any one of a thousand other situations that can be so discouraging, just remember that it is nothing but a light and momentary affliction. And you can say, "Praise God. I know things are going to be okay, because I am trusting the Lord to work it all out for my good."

But, no, often you cannot say that. Things seldom work that way. We are human. These types of things are painful, and pain hurts. We grieve. And our grief prevents us seeing God's promises clearly. Grief keeps us focused on our current situation and makes it hard to see good things that are ahead. And the Lord knows that. He understands.

And so, number 2, because He loves us, the Lord gives not only the truth, but also His tears. He chooses to share our grief. That is what He did for Mary, Lazarus' sister. He weeps with her. He lets her know He cares. His tears communicate compassion and sympathy. It is a way for Him to provide comfort.

And folks, that is what the Lord does for us as well. He comforts us in our grief. **2 Corinthians 1:3,4a Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.**

How does the Lord comfort us? Sometimes it is directly through His spirit, the Holy Spirit. His presence in our lives assures us we are not alone. **Psalms 34:18 says The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.**

Other times the comfort comes through promises God gives us through His word, the Bible. **Isaiah 41:10 So do not fear, for I am with you do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.** Or we have these wonderful spoken by Jesus in **Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gently and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**”

Yet sometimes the most significant way the Lord lets us know He cares and that He shares our grief is through His people, through fellow believers in Jesus Christ. The Church is the body of Christ, and often we function, in a figurative way, as the hands and feet of Jesus. Or sometimes as the tears of Jesus, when we Romans 12:15b Weep with those who weep. Over the past weeks, since my brother’s death, the Lord has comforted me through many of you in this room. You have shared my grief. For some it has been just little prayer and care emojis and those are appreciated. Others have sent beautiful cards or written encouraging texts or Facebook messages. When we have had conversation, in person or on the phone, many of you have asked, “Pastor Dan, how are you doing?”

And there have been a lot of hugs in recent weeks. And some of you, these are special ones, have shed tears. You were not exactly “weeping *with* me, “ since I usually was not crying, but you were weeping *for* me and for my brother’s family. You were weeping for those 14 grandchildren who adored my brother and are going to miss him so much. And your tears did bring me comfort. They showed that you truly did care.

There is a Swedish proverb, I didn’t even know that we Swedes even had proverbs, but this is a good one. “Shared joy is double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.” That is so true. Last Saturday when I told my brother Tim that we would be baptizing at least 20 people at the lake on Sunday, that made him happy. And I actually felt happier sharing that good news.

But, when we share sorrow, it makes us less sorrowful. When I told a friend the news that my

brother Randy had died, she gave me a tearful hug and said, “I am so sorry, Dan.” At that moment, in a very real way, my grief became less heavy. Folks, when we weep with those who weep it hurts. But the pain we feel will often seem insignificant compared to the privilege of being used by the Lord to show others that *He* shares their grief.

When the trials of the life hit, the death of a loved one or another difficult situation that may be less traumatic, but just as painful, it is easy to think or say “Lord, why is this happening to me?” or maybe even, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.”

In these situations, the Lord’s response is to encourage us with truth that helps us keep perspective and comfort us with tears that remind us that He shares our grief. Now, in our text, Martha received truth from Jesus, while Mary got the tears. Yes, He could have wept with Martha, and He could have told Mary that He was the resurrection and the life. But He knew what each of them needed at that particular time. I suspect Martha was a little farther down the road in her grief process. She was ready for some truth, while Mary just needs to see Jesus’ tears.

And folks, we need to keep that I mind. An important lesson for us today is that just as the Lord comforts us when we are grieving, we should seek to comfort and encourage others who are going through hard times.

In most cases, the first step is to let that person who is hurting know we care, to weep with the one who is weeping. To share our tears. You can start by asking the Lord to give you compassion that can get passed your own concerns so that you feel love and sympathy for someone who is hurting.

And then, after you show that person you care, ask the Lord for wisdom, so you can discern when someone is ready to hear the truth. In this very messed up world people do need more than a hug from us. They need truth. They need the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They need to trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

And it they are doing that they need to recognize the implications of the gospel for the difficult situation they are facing. But they may not be

quite ready to hear that truth. What they may need at the moment is a friend who really cares about them, who will weep with them, who will reflect the love of Jesus into their messy situation. But at some point, they will be ready to hear the truth, and you need to be ready to share it with them.

“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” You may feel that way at times. Someone you know may feel that way right now. May the truth and tears of Jesus comfort you when you are hurting. May the Lord give you the grace and wisdom to generously share that truth and tears with hurting people you know.