

Jesus Wept

John 11:33-37

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“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” (Jn. 11:33).

It is not easy for us to know God. This is partly because God is so different from everything else in our experience. This is the primary meaning of God’s *holiness*: God is wholly other from us.

He says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). But our knowledge of God is also impaired by the effects of sin within us. We are prone to folly and rebellion, and our thoughts about God are therefore often warped.

Difficult though it is, it is of great importance that our thoughts about God are true. This is why the Bible is so valuable, since it is in the Bible that God reveals saving truth about himself. And this is why Jesus is so important to the Bible. Jesus is the fullest revelation of God that we have, “the image of the invisible God,” Paul says (Col. 1:15). Jesus is the divine Son who manifests the person of the Father: he said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn. 14:9).

Considering Jesus, then, is the best way to come to know God. For instance, some people in our overly-tolerant age do not think that God is really bothered by sin. But watching the violence with which Jesus cleansed the temple or listening to him speak about hell will correct this opinion. Some people think of God almost as a feeble bystander. But watching Jesus still the winds and the waves upon the lake or seeing him call dead Lazarus out from the grave will show us the truth about God’s mighty power. Still others think of God as an unfeeling tyrant. Ours is a cruel world, and in the midst of their suffering people can think that God simply doesn’t care. If you have been

tempted to think of God this way, I know of no other passage to show you otherwise than that in which Jesus weeps before Lazarus's tomb. John 11:35 may be the shortest verse in the English Bible. But for those who want to know the heart of God, the words "Jesus wept" are among the greatest.

God Cares

Lazarus was a member of a family that was greatly loved by Jesus. So when Jesus arrived at the scene of mourning for Lazarus's death, the sisters Martha and Mary brought their grief to him. Mary, especially, fell at Jesus' feet weeping. John records, "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" (Jn. 11:33).

Jesus' reaction shows us that God cares about our sorrows. He did not look on disinterestedly as Mary grieved, but his heart was pierced. The Greek word for "greatly troubled," *embrimaomai*, can be used for a horse snorting. This suggests that Jesus' emotional response was audible. William Barclay comments, "So deeply did Jesus enter into the wounded hearts and the sorrows of people that His heart was wrung with anguish."¹ In this he manifested God in the flesh, for the Old Testament tells us how God cares about his people. We often see this in the Psalms, where David says, "The LORD has heard the sound of my weeping" (Ps. 6:8), and "He does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (Ps. 9:12).

Does it matter that God cares about us? It matters very much, and should draw us to him. Many people struggle with truths about God they find hard to accept, especially his sovereignty and his wrath upon sin. But what a difference it makes when we realize that this sovereign, holy God cares about us. I have learned as a pastor that there are people who pay little attention to your teaching or even resent it, until they realize how much you care for them. This realization changes everything! The God who calls you to kneel at his Word is a God whose ears are attentive to our cry and who is close to those broken in heart (Ps. 34:15, 18). It is because they think that Jesus needs

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:113.

prompting to care about our griefs that some people wrongly pray to dead saints or to Mary. But how wrong this is! And how his groaning at this scene of sorrow in Bethany ought to draw us near to Jesus and to God the Father in prayer, realizing how much they care.

There are questions raised about what it was that aroused Jesus' emotions. This issue is complicated by the fact that word describing Jesus' feelings is generally used to express sternness and even anger. It is not just that Jesus was troubled but that he was indignant. Jesus was not merely saddened but outraged at the scene before him.

Some commentators argue that Jesus was appalled by the hypocritical mourning of the visitors from Jerusalem. After all, they represented people who hated Jesus and all that he stood for; what were they doing with Jesus' friends at a time like this? Some state that Jesus was unhappy with the unbelief implied by Mary's tears.

Our best guide in answering this question is Jesus himself. His words tell us what was on his mind. Jesus did not demand, "What are you doing here," or "What is wrong with you." Instead, he asked, "Where have you laid him?" (Jn. 11:34). This shows that it was the fact of Lazarus's death that burdened his soul. It is death itself that raises Jesus' anger. Herman Ridderbos writes that Jesus' emotion "is the revulsion of everything that is in him against the power of death."²

We often see Jesus depicted in artwork as almost passive and aloof. But as Jesus approaches the grave of his friend to wage warfare against death, he comes with a passionate zeal. He Jesus looks on death, he sees the wreckage caused by sin and he sees the fingerprints of his enemy, the devil. Benjamin Warfield helpfully notes:

Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus in a state, not of uncontrollable grief but of inexpressible anger... The emotion which tore his breast and clamoured for utterance was just rage... It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he had come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but... his soul is held by rage, and he advances to the tomb, in Calvin's words, "as a champion who prepares for conflict."³

² Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 402.

³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1950), 115-116.

This reminds us that even though Christians possess a glorious hope of resurrection, we are not therefore indifferent to the outrage that death is. Jesus was not unaffected by Lazarus's death. Christians should feel no differently: when we fight against death with our hands, with our prayers, and with our gospel witness, we are waging holy warfare under the banner of Christ.

God Feels

When Jesus asked to be shown Lazarus's grave, they told him, "Lord, come and see" (Jn. 11:34). Arriving at the tomb, "Jesus wept" (Jn. 11:35). Charles Spurgeon comments: "There is infinitely more in these two words than any sermonizer, or any student of the Word, will ever be able to bring out of them, even though he should apply the microscope of the utmost attentive consideration."⁴

One thing we should observe is how powerfully this verse contradicts a common mistake about God. When the ancient Greeks thought about God they described him with the word *apatheia*. It is the word from which we get "apathy." They meant that by definition it is not possible for God to feel emotion. God cannot feel love, anger, disappointment, hope or any other emotion. They reasoned that if God can be made to feel joy or sorrow, then someone else has had an effect on him. That person has therefore held power over God, and it is not possible for God to be in anyone's power. This being the case, "it must mean that God cannot have feelings. He must be lonely, isolated, compassionless."⁵

These two words, "Jesus wept," destroy this reasoning by showing us that God does feel. Some reply that Jesus wept in his human nature only, forgetting that the reason he became man was to reveal God to us. James Boice comments, "Jesus wept and thus revealed a God who enters into the anguish of his people and grieves with them in their afflictions."⁶

It is true that God feels in a way that is different from the way that we feel. For one thing, God's feelings are never mixed with sin as ours

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 35. (London: Banner of Truth, 1970), 338.

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:874.

⁶ *Ibid.*

are. Moreover, it is true that God's feelings do not indicate a change in God. The Bible states that in him "there is no variation or shadow due to change" (Ja. 1:17). So when we say that God feels, we do not mean that God has been surprised or that his nature has altered. What we mean is that things that happen on this earth are real and the God who is also real has feelings about them. It is true that by weeping, Jesus proves his true humanity. But, as God in the flesh, Jesus shows us that God feels with his people because "Jesus wept."

This also makes an important point about tears. Since Jesus possesses a true humanity – indeed, a perfect humanity – and since Jesus wept, we should not be ashamed to do likewise. Some Christians seem to think that by virtue of their salvation they have been lifted out of the human condition. But being a Christian makes us not less human but more human. And there are things in this world for which Christians should weep. Christians are not stoics, and the stiff upper lip is not a sign of grace.

Death is certainly a reason for tears. It is not wrong to weep over the death of a loved one. Jesus knew that he was about to raise Lazarus back to life, yet still he wept. Let this thought sanctify every mournful tear you have cried for a loved one who has died. J. C. Ryle said, "There is nothing unworthy of a child of God in tears. Even the Son of God could weep. It shows us, above all, that the Saviour in whom believers trust is a most tender and feeling Saviour... When we turn to Him in the hour of trouble, and pour out our hearts before Him, He knows what we go through, and can pity."⁷

The word used to describe Jesus' weeping is found only here in the New Testament; it describes not uncontrolled sobbing but rather states that tears poured down his face. And in a world like ours there is something wrong if Christ's people seldom shed tears. We are rightly busy trying to do good and advance the cause of Christ's kingdom. But here we see that tears are part of the way we represent his grace. Many Christians are zealous to share the gospel with sinners. But does the sin and the misery of sin lead us to weep for them and with them? Christians rightly rally against the sin of abortion. But do we shed tears for the babies, the mothers, and even the abortion doctors?

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:304.

We should. Christians are disturbed by the promotion of homosexuality in our society, but shouldn't we weep for the homosexuals themselves? Lazarus's grave spoke to Jesus of the whole ruinous complex of sin in our world and he wept. Jesus weeps for us in our sorrow. If we have his heart for the world we will weep for and with the world as well.

Years ago a Christian woman traveled to North Africa as a missionary among the Moslems in Tunisia. She persisted through years of difficult labor in that hardened land. Her approach was simply to show Christ's love to people and seek opportunities to tell them about Jesus. One young Moslem man who took English classes with her and every week as she taught him she spoke about Jesus. The man listened but remained unmoved. This went on for months, until the time drew near for him to go away to college. Just before he was leaving, he dropped by to say good bye and thank the Christian woman. They had tea, and she took this final opportunity to appeal to him about his salvation. But he once again politely refused to consider the gospel. After a while, he got up and said his farewell, walked out the door, and headed down the path. But then he stopped, and looking back he saw his teacher standing in the door with tears streaming down her face. Overwhelmed by her great love for him, he resisted no longer. Returning to her living room, he soon had his heart opened to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior.⁸

Could it be that Christ's love for the lost – a broken-hearted love that feels and weeps – is the missing ingredient in our witness of Christ's gospel? Weeping itself is not the answer. But possessing the heart of Jesus – a heart that is able to shed tears – is essential to our ministry of his grace to the world, to our neighbors, and to our own children.

God Loves

John notes that the Jewish onlookers were impressed by what they saw in Jesus. They exclaimed, "See how he loved him!" (Jn. 11:36). This is another reason why Jesus was angry at Lazarus's death, and why he wept at the tomb: because he loved him.

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:890.

Jesus' tears show us that God cares and God feels, and also that God loves. God loves his people. This is why he cared about Martha's and Mary's anguish: he loved them. And Jesus' love for Lazarus was not ended by death. As George Hutchinson writes, "Christ's love to his own will follow them even to their graves."⁹

When you love someone you rejoice at their joy and you grieve for their grief. Love always shares and participates in feelings. This should encourage us in our ministry to one another. But how much better is the ministry of God's love. Too many people – even Christians – are angry with God when troubles come. But God is not the problem behind our grief; God in his love is the answer to which we should turn. Jesus did not begin to love Martha and Mary when he grieved with them, and his love for Lazarus did not start with his tears. But it was when he grieved and wept that the people saw how much he loved them.

But even in a scene like this, there were some who criticized Jesus. You will find that even when your actions are most pure and loving, there will always be someone to malign you and impugn your motives. This is especially true of those who represent Jesus in this world. Some of those looking on said, "Could he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" (Jn. 11:37).

These Jews remembered the miracle of John 9, in which Jesus gave sight to the man born blind, which happened in Jerusalem. And their question raises an important matter: does Jesus' love only enable him to weep along with the others? Possessing the power that he earlier displayed, isn't there something more he could do?

Let us admit that if this account ended in John 11:37 with the words, "Jesus wept," then Jesus would not be much of a Savior. What if Jesus had wept at the tomb and then gone away? We might admire him and we might even love him. But we would not be able to trust our destiny into his hands.

But Jesus was not finished and he did not leave. This reminds us that we should do more than sympathize with the weak and afflicted, but

⁹ George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 233.

do what we can to help them in their need. But while our help eventually fails, Jesus' help does not. He had not arrived too late to help dead Lazarus. And his tears were not the end of his ministry but the beginning. He came to the tomb not merely to exercise his heart but to extend his saving power. In the most dramatic fashion possible, Jesus silenced his critics by raising Lazarus from the grave.

But even that was not his fullest answer to the criticism. For within days he would enter Jerusalem and do a greater work for his people. He had spoken of this in his parable of the good shepherd: "I am the good shepherd," he said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:11). And as he later said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13).

Years later, when the apostle John wrote his first epistle, he named the cross as the greatest proof of God's love: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:9-10). It is there at the cross that we can echo the words spoken of Jesus at Lazarus's tomb, only now saying, "See how he loved us!" and "See how he loved me!" And even then Jesus was not finished. For three days after he died he did something greater even than raising Lazarus from the grave. Jesus himself rose from the dead, our sin having been conquered by his blood and death now conquered by the resurrection life he gives to us.

This means that we have an even better reason to believe in Christ's love for us than Martha and Mary did. We have seen him shed for us not only his tears but also his own blood on the cross for our sins. If you have held yourself back from Jesus because you doubted God's love, let both the tears and the blood of Jesus show you the depth of his love. And let them draw you to him in saving faith.

Love's Conquest

It has now been almost two thousand years since Christ died and rose again, and people are dying and weeping still. But Jesus is not finished. Even now, ascended into heaven, he looks down with sympathetic eyes, sharing our sorrows, and upholding us by his love. Hebrews 4:15 cites this as a mighty reason to pray: "For we do not

have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,” since Jesus has lived and wept and died in this very world.

But the day is coming when Jesus’ victory will be complete. For when history has served its purpose by gathering all the purchased flock of Christ through faith in him, Jesus will return in power and glory. This is how the Bible ends, with a world made new in the final coming of its King: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore” (Rev. 21:3-4).

This is our salvation as the Bible tells it, and it is a complete salvation that meets our every need. God’s Word says that “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!” (Ps. 126:5). And every one of Christ’s redeemed will say to our caring, feeling, and loving God, “You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears” (Ps. 116:8).

Will you be there? That is the great question. The question is not whether or not you will weep or die in this world. We all will. But if you see in Jesus the loving eyes of God bent towards you, and if you believe on him for your salvation, then even death will lead you into life and the tears you shed now will all be wiped away by the loving hand of God.