

## “Jesus Wept”

### The Thirty-Seventh in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

*Text: John 11:28-44, Psalm 118:14-29*

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Humanity’s greatest enemy is death. Yet, God has promised that death will not have the last word. At the end of the age, God will raise the dead, judge all men and women, and then usher in a new heaven and earth where all traces of the curse and human sin are vanquished. But until that day, the curse remains, and those whom we love still die. So when Jesus’ friend Lazarus tastes death, those following Jesus look to him for comfort and guidance, as well as for some word of hope in anticipation of the great day of final victory over death at the end of the age. But at a burial ground in Bethany—a small village just outside of Jerusalem—Jesus does something beyond all human imagination. After weeping at the sight of Lazarus’ tomb, Jesus performs his seventh and greatest miraculous sign yet. He raises his friend from the dead, giving everyone present at the tomb the unmistakable proof that he is God incarnate, and that he is Lord over death and the grave. But he is also giving everyone a glimpse of what will happen in just a few short days when he dies on a Roman cross and is then raised from the dead on the third day. It is our Lord’s own bodily resurrection from the dead which is the guarantee of the great resurrection on the last day.

As we continue our series on the Gospel of John, we come to John’s account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (chapter 11). In verses 28-44, we see the emotions of Jesus on full display when Jesus rages against death, and then raises his dear friend Lazarus from the dead. If we thought that Jesus’ initial reaction to the news of Lazarus’ death was cold and indifferent, in this section of John’s account we will discover that we were greatly mistaken. Jesus was not unemotional about the death of his friend—as it seemed. Jesus knew that his hour was not yet—although his hour is drawing near. He also knew that there was still much for him to teach his disciples before they make their final trip to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, in which Jesus brings his messianic mission to its glorious climax as he reveals himself to be the true Passover lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

In this section of John, the disciple recounts Jesus’ great of compassion for Lazarus’ family, and he himself openly weeps at the sight of the tomb of his friend. But these are not just tears of sadness as the English word “weep” conveys. Jesus cries tears of both anger and anguish, as he witnesses what Adam’s fall and the curse have done to the human race. When we see Jesus weeping at the death of a close friend, we learn much about our Lord’s true human nature and the profound human emotions which Jesus truly felt. We also learn much about grief, and the Christian attitude toward death, which is grounded in the reality of human sin and the curse, and the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the body.

As I mentioned several weeks ago, John’s Gospel is difficult to preach since there are a number of lengthy discourses which are best treated as a single block of material. But since we don’t have the time to go through these discourses in the detail they deserve, I have chosen to break these discourses down into smaller units. The problem with doing so that it is easy to lose sight of the powerful drama and overall thrust of the narrative. Apart from the rich and profound theological implications of this passage, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus is very compelling in its own right. The inherent drama of the narrative is especially important to recapture before we take up our text—one of the most moving and dramatic in all the Bible.

Recall that Jesus had initially been out in the wilderness, east of the Jordan River, because the Jews in

Jerusalem were plotting to kill him (we saw that at the end of John 10). While still in the wilderness, word came to Jesus from his friends Martha and Mary of Bethany, that their brother Lazarus (also a dear friend of Jesus) had taken ill and was in danger of dying. The family requested that Jesus come and minister to Lazarus, but after announcing that Lazarus' illness will not end in death, Jesus decides to stay two additional days in the wilderness. Jesus' disciples mistakenly assumed that if Lazarus got enough rest, he would eventually recover. But then, quite unexpectedly, Jesus announced that Lazarus was dead, and that he was going to Bethany.

This horrible news took the disciples by complete surprise because the disciples knew that if Jesus went back to Jerusalem, he would be in great danger. If Jesus had intended to go to Bethany (and Jerusalem) all along, why did he wait two full days before going back? If Jesus arrived in Jerusalem earlier, perhaps he might have healed his friend. The disciples were saddened at the news of Lazarus' death, and probably confused by the unexpected change in outcome—Lazarus dying *after* Jesus told them his illness would not lead to death.

They knew that the Old Testament foretold of the general resurrection at the end of the age, they knew that the resurrection was tied to the messianic age, and Jesus had told them on several occasions that YHWH had given him the power and authority to raise the dead. Furthermore, they had already witnessed Jesus raise two people from the dead (Jarius' daughter, and the son of the widow of Nain). They should have understood that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, but that thought seems never to have occurred to them. This is understandable, in that dead people usually stay dead.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, the traditional mourning period is already well underway in Martha and Mary's home. Lazarus has been buried four days and decomposition is well underway. Many of Lazarus's friends have come from nearby Jerusalem to sit *shivah* with Lazarus' family. The scene is one of grief as Lazarus was obviously well-loved and well-known. No doubt, everyone expected Jesus to come and pay his respects to the family, but those closest to Jesus were also worried that the Jewish authorities might use this occasion as an excuse to arrest Jesus and put him to death.

We read in verses 17-27 that when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, Martha ran out of the house to meet him. As we saw last time, the dialogue between Jesus and Martha is quite remarkable. We read in verse 21 that upon seeing him, "*Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.'*" Martha never doubts that Jesus could have healed her brother. She also knows Jesus well enough to know that YHWH always hears Jesus' prayers and answers them—this is something only someone who knew Jesus well and who had watched him closely could have known.

Jesus gives her news which is so wonderful that Martha simply cannot process it. In verse 23, "*Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'*" Martha's response demonstrates that her sympathies lay with the Pharisees when it came to the matter of the resurrection. "*Martha said to [Jesus], 'I know that [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'*" Given the fact that Lazarus has already been buried for four days, it was beyond all human expectation that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead, *now*. In response to her remarkable grasp of these things (it is obvious that throughout the time she has known Jesus, she has been listening carefully, and she believes in him and his teaching), "*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?'*" Jesus uses the "I Am" formula (YHWH's self-designation), and goes on to say in no uncertain terms that he is the one who raises the dead and gives eternal life. In effect, Jesus is saying "what YHWH does, I do." Jesus is

making a claim to deity and revealing to Martha that in his own person and work, everything promised throughout the Old Testament would be fulfilled—including the resurrection of the dead.

If we had witnessed this encounter, I am sure we would have seen Martha immediately blurt out her answer to Jesus' question. "[Martha] *said to him, 'Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.'*" This is one of the clearest and best professions of faith we find anywhere in the gospels. As a number of scholars have pointed out, there are loud echoes in Martha's answer from Psalm 118 (especially verse 26—"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"), which is why I chose this Psalm as our Old Testament lesson.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 118 is the final Hallel Psalm in the psalter, and is a song of praise associated with the Israel's exodus from Egypt. It was sung by the crowds when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (an event which was coming soon with the Passover just over a week away—and which is recounted in John 12). This Psalm was also sung by Jesus and the disciples after he instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We will find it again on the lips of Jesus, when in John 11: 41-42, Jesus prays before raising Lazarus from the dead.

Martha's profession of faith is utterly remarkable especially coming so close before the Passover, and John's focus now shifts to the other grieving sister, Mary. In verse 28, we are told that "*when she [Martha] had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, 'the Teacher is here and is calling for you.' And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him.*" Jesus has come to pay his respects to the grieving family, and after speaking with Martha it was only right and proper that Jesus speak with Mary. Jesus had asked Martha to get Mary, she does, and Jesus seeks to speak to Mary privately, away from the throng of mourners who filled the house.

But Jesus would not get a private meeting with Mary. According to John 11:30-31, "*now Jesus had not yet come into the village [Bethany], but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 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.*" Seeking to console Mary when she approaches the tomb, instead Mary and the other mourners encounter Jesus, who has come to see Mary. "*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.'*" The very sight of Jesus moves Mary to fall at his feet. She too confesses her belief that if only Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died. We must not take this as a complaint, i.e., "Jesus, why were you not here?" but as profession of her confidence in him, "if only you had been here." She is glad to see Jesus, and no doubt, he was glad to see her.

The entire mood of the scene now changes completely, from the seeming indifference of Jesus' foreknowledge of Lazarus' death, to his need to remain two more days east of the Jordan, to his need to instruct his disciples about the fact that little light remained concerning his messianic mission, to his need to fulfill his mission through his obedience to YHWH, all of which now gives way to the flood of emotion when Jesus sees his dear friends weeping, and when he catches sight of Lazarus' tomb where his dear friend is now buried—or better "entombed," since whenever they could, the Jews put dead bodies in a stone tomb which was usually a small cave with shelves.

Not only was it customary for the mourners to sit "shivah" with the family, but Jewish families were expected to hire to flute players (who were to play a somber funeral dirge) and professional mourners

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<sup>1</sup> Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 468.

(woman who would wail loudly), who led the mourners in wailing. The sad dirge and loud wailing were repeated at key moments in the mourning process, as, for example, when the grieving family and friends would go to the tomb periodically to bring more spices.

Again, we can envision the scene. At Martha's urging, Mary goes to meet Jesus. The mourners in her home (friends and family) see her leave the home and they follow her. The crowd unexpectedly encounters Jesus near the place where Lazarus had been buried. The sight of Mary and Martha weeping for their dead brother, coupled with the sight of Lazarus' many friends and family weeping at the loss of the one whom they loved, plus the cries of human wailing and the sound of mournful instruments, moved Jesus deeply. In verse 34, John tells us, "*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.*" The ESV translation, "deeply moved" does not go far enough, and requires a bit of explanation.

The Greek word is used elsewhere of the snorting of horses,<sup>2</sup> and is translated in the KJV as "murmured" in Mark 14:5. But as B. B. Warfield points out, in context, the phrase surely indicates, "that Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus, in a state, not of uncontrollable grief, but of irrepressible grief."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the emphasis is not on Jesus' sorrow (which he certainly felt) but upon his anger at the spectacle he was witnessing. We may put it this way—Jesus was angry, outraged, and indignant within himself. Jesus controlled his feelings (which were real and powerful) and at no point does he lose control of them, as sinful humans are apt to do. But make no mistake about it, Jesus is angry at what he sees. He is not mad at the individuals he sees mourning. He is not mad at Mary or Martha for not understanding that he will raise their brother. Rather, he is outraged by death, and by the spectacle of what death has done to those he loved. Mary and Martha are heart-broken and weeping. Lazarus has been in the grave for four days and now in a state of decomposition. Jesus is furious at what the curse has done to the human race. He remains in complete control, but he feels great anger at the effect's of Adam's sin. Jesus hates death. He hates what death does to us. He hates the despair it generates.

As we read in verse 34, "*And [Jesus] said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.'*" Upon seeing the tomb, we read in verse 35 (the shortest verse in all the Bible), that "*Jesus wept.*" Again, our English translations do not do this justice. The Greek text says "Jesus raged in himself." Those present saw Jesus openly weeping at the sight of the tomb of his friend. What those present did not see was Jesus' internal rage and hatred of death.<sup>4</sup> Although, John directs us to the events as they transpire, he also gives us a glimpse of what Jesus experiences upon seeing the tomb. Jesus sees with his own eyes why he has come to earth (leaving all heavenly glory behind). He knows that he alone can overcome sin, death, and the curse. With the sight of the mourners, the tomb, the wailing, the entire spectacle of death and its impact upon our fallen race, Jesus now sees firsthand the reason for his incarnation. He knows why he must take way the curse by bearing that curse for us and in our place upon the cross when (in just a few days), he too must experience what his friend Lazarus has experienced. And so Jesus weeps outwardly, while inwardly raging at death.

Those watching Jesus, could not help but notice the depths of Jesus' sorrow and grief at the sight of the

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<sup>2</sup> Carson, The Gospel According to John, 415.

<sup>3</sup> Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," 115.

<sup>4</sup> Warfield, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord," 115.

tomb. According to verse 36, “*So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’*” Others, however, recall what had happened when, during the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus had healed a man who had been born blind. These people asked the same question the disciples had asked. “*But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?’*” Given Jesus’ great sorrow at the death of his friend, they thought to themselves, “if only Jesus had been here sooner . . .”

This is not necessarily a sign that these are unbelievers questioning Jesus’ power, but we should take this as an indication of how what Jesus does next is so shocking as to be beyond all human expectation. Lazarus is dead. He has been dead for four days. And without being too gross, the smell of death was obviously in the air near his tomb. No one expected Jesus to raise this man from the dead. But they do lament the fact that Jesus arrived in Bethany too late to do anything about his death. Death is the one thing, it seems, that Jesus could do nothing about. He could heal a blind man, but raise the dead? But for those who went to Lazarus’ tomb that day to mourn, they will witness an event which no one expected, and which turns their sorrow first into shock, and then into joy. Jesus gives those present a glimpse of his return on the last day when all the dead are raised and all the tombs are emptied.

In verse 38, John tells us, “*then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.*” The next wave of emotion had come over Jesus, and now he will act, performing his seventh miraculous sign and the certainly the most dramatic to date. According to verse 39 “*Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’*” This catches everyone by surprise. These stones were large and required several men to move them. Why would Jesus want to open the tomb. For one thing, this might render everyone present ceremonially unclean. Why would Jesus risk that? As proof that Martha did not grasp the fact that when Jesus told her that her brother would rise from the dead he was referring to the immediate present, and not to the general resurrection at the end of the age, we read that, “*Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’*”

Anyone who has ever smelled human decay knows how terrible death is. Anyone who has touched the dead and knows the awfulness of the human body at room temperature, knows why death is not the intended outcome of human existence. The gruesome reality of death tells us why not a person present at the tomb would expect what was coming next, even though all the signs were present that Jesus was going to fulfill his promise of verse 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.*” In verse 40, we read that “*Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’*” This is what Jesus meant when he told Martha in verses 25-26, that he is the resurrection and the life. His promise to Martha was not about the general resurrection at the end of the age, but that he was going to raise Lazarus *now, today*. Those present were about to see the glory of God revealed in a manner beyond all human comprehension.

The family agreed with Jesus’ request. “*So they took away the stone.*” Imagine the expectation and tension present, given Jesus’ visible reaction to the sight of the tomb. Imagine the smell, and the sight of the remains now visible inside. Martha was right—whatever Jesus asked of the Father, he granted. “*And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.’*” These words assume that Jesus has already asked that his Father raise Lazarus, and he explains this to those present so that they will understand what they are about to witness. These words also echo verses 21-22 of Psalm 118, but also the prayer of Elijah in 1 Kings 18:37. “*Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts.*”

B. B. Warfield's description of Jesus' emotions at this moment (from his wonderful essay, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord") is worth citing in full. Says Warfield, "it is death that is the object of [Jesus'] wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he has come into the world to destroy. Tears of sympathy may fill his eyes, but this is incidental. His soul is held by rage: and he advances to the tomb...`as a champion who prepares for conflict.` The raising of Lazarus thus becomes, not an isolated marvel, but—as indeed it is presented throughout the whole [account]...a decisive instance and open symbol of Jesus' conquest of death and hell. What John does for us in this particular statement is to uncover to us the heart of Jesus, as he wins for us our salvation. Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe [death], 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." This is what we mean when we say "Jesus wept."

The unthinkable was about to become a reality. "*When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.'*" We can imagine the stunned silence among the onlookers as Jesus gives a command to a dead man in a tomb. Those present are about to see the fulfillment of Jesus' words from John 5:28-29: "*Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*" The hour has come. The Father will give him everything for which he asks. Lazarus was now alive, having been raised from the dead. "*The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'*" Imagine the shock and joy among the onlookers at the sight of a dead man, now very much alive, hopping and stumbling out of his tomb, still bound by his grave clothes.

What, then, do we take with us from this passage? Although there is no right way or wrong way to grieve, when Jesus grieves he sanctifies the grieving process. Jesus openly wept at Lazarus tomb—everyone saw him and the people marveled at the extent of Jesus' sorrow. This does not mean we have to grieve as Jesus did, but it does mean that we certainly can. We need not become stoics in the face of death, nor must we force ourselves to feel emotions which may not be there. Grief and sorrow is certainly sanctified by Jesus. More importantly, there is no doubt that Jesus hated death and the curse, especially when he sees what death has done to Lazarus and to his family. Death is not natural to human existence. It is a consequence of Adam's fall into sin. When someone we know and loves dies, we are free to mourn, but we also mourn as those who know that those who we have buried are in the presence of the Lord, and that they will be raised in imperishable bodies on the last day, to live forever.

When we read that "*Jesus wept,*" we must not leave matters there—with the image of Jesus' crying tears of sadness. We also consider that Jesus inwardly raged against death—he hates it. What a comfort to know that the one who hates death so much, is the same one, who, on the last day, will command each us (our remains, to be more precise), to "come out" of our graves and we will! This is why we grieve as people with hope. When Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, we get our first glimpse of what will happen to all of us on that great and glorious day when Jesus returns and calls us by name to leave our graves. Yet, unlike Lazarus who was restored to life but not glorified—so he had to die yet again a second time—we will be raised at the resurrection at the end of the age in incorruptible bodies perfectly suited for an eternity in the presence of the glory of God.

Yes, Jesus wept. But he also hates death. He knows what death is, and what it has done to our race. And in the end, he will do something about it! He will defeat it on the cross and in the grave, and on the last day Jesus will summon all those who are his to rise to everlasting glory. Amen!