

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

August 29, 2021 | Raising Lazarus from the Dead

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

-How have you responded to sorrow in the past?

-Read John 11:1–44.

-Pray that God would open your heart to the work Christ has done and help you apply the lessons from John 11 to your life.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Jesus helps us through the sorrow we encounter in life.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

When you encounter sorrow in life, depend upon Jesus for help.

☒ MEDITATE

“Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (John 11:44).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

Q: *Why is sorrow a part of life?*

Q: *Is there any limit to what can cause us sorrow?*

“And they lived happily ever after.” So conclude the fairytales we heard as children. There is something satisfying about this line. We like to believe we can live happily ever after. But as adults, we understand that sorrow always catches up to us eventually. This week’s passage centers on the sorrow of two sisters after the death of their brother. In their sorrow, they seek Jesus, and in Him they find a more satisfying answer than they ever dared to dream.

Q: *How is Jesus’s ministry to those enduring sorrow carried on?*

Q: *How do people avoid sorrow?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many people attempt to avoid sorrow by creating barriers. If they avoid relationships, they can mitigate the opportunity for sorrow to arise. If they do not allow themselves hope, they will not be disappointed when something falls through. But living this way is devoid of meaning. When we create barriers to protect ourselves from sorrow, we end up sacrificing joy. This passage offers a different solution. It encourages us to approach Jesus with our sorrow instead of avoiding it. Part of Jesus’s mission is to bring an end to sorrow. One day, He will do so decisively. While on earth, He ministered to those enduring sorrow. His church also seeks to minister to those enduring sorrow until Jesus returns. If you are enduring sorrow, this passage shows that you can turn to Jesus, and He will meet you where you are.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+In John 11:1–44, Jesus responded to the sorrow stemming from the death of Lazarus. He placed sorrow within the larger framework of what God is doing in the world. He also responded to those enduring sorrow in the unique way they needed. Finally, we see an allusion to how Jesus will one day decisively end all the sorrow we feel.

1. SORROW PRODUCES FAITH.
2. JESUS MEETS OUR INTELLECTUAL RESPONSE TO SORROW.
3. JESUS MEETS OUR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO SORROW.
4. JESUS CHALLENGES OUR SKEPTICISM.
5. JESUS UNBINDS US FROM THE TRUE SOURCE OF EVERY SORROW.

GOING DEEPER

+This section examines each section of John 11:1–44 to understand how Jesus responds to our sorrows.

1. TRIALS PRODUCE FAITH.

■ JOHN 11:1–16

🔗: *Why did the disciples discourage Jesus from visiting Bethany?*

🔗: *How did He respond to their objection?*

Lazarus, along with Martha and Mary, lived in Bethany. Bethany is in the middle of Judea, a short distance from Jerusalem. Jesus’s frequent altercations with the Jewish leaders in Judea made Him a targeted individual in the area. In the previous passage (John 10:22–42), Jesus evaded an attempt to stone Him. The disciples evidently believed they were “laying low” until the outrage against Him subsided. Jesus’s decision to delay two days before journeying to Bethany likely reinforced their assumption. It was tragic that Lazarus was ill, but Jesus could not risk getting involved. Or so they thought.

Much to their dismay, Jesus announced His intention to visit Bethany two days after hearing Lazarus was ill. The disciples believed this visit was suicide. It was unlikely tempers had cooled so quickly. They tried to dissuade Him from going, but He refused to listen. With only a short time for His earthly ministry, Jesus would not allow His opposition to deter Him from ministering to those in need, including His friends who suffered the sorrow of their loved one’s death. Just as daylight is limited to twelve hours, Jesus’s opportunity for ministry was limited. Despite the danger, He would not remain hidden while the time for His ministry was at hand. He would carry out His mission despite great personal risk.

Q: *What does Jesus's refusal to evade danger show us during times of sorrow?*

Q: *How does Jesus's death on the cross for our sins speak to us when we are suffering?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus did not neglect His ministry, even when it was perilous for Him. In fact, His ultimate mission demanded He put Himself directly into danger and suffer on our behalf. When you endure sorrows, know you serve a Savior who is familiar with sorrow. Nothing you endure is unknown to Him. The Son of God, who existed from eternity past in continual fellowship with the Father, was abandoned by the Father at the cross. The sins of the world were poured out on Him, and He endured the full measure of God's wrath on our behalf. Our Savior knows sorrow, and He is the answer to enduring our own. Prepare yourself for times of sorrow by reflecting often on how your Savior suffered for you.

Q: *What did Jesus conclude concerning Lazarus's illness?*

Q: *Why did Jesus delay going to Bethany?*

Jesus's response on hearing of Lazarus's illness may appear convoluted or even in error to us. He said the illness would not lead to death. But just a few verses later, He openly acknowledged that Lazarus was dead. Jesus's remarks cannot be understood apart from the conclusion of the story. While Lazarus did indeed succumb to this illness, Jesus raised him from the dead. So, we understand that Jesus meant death would not be the end of Lazarus's struggle with this illness even though death was part of it. Jesus also said Lazarus's illness and the sorrow produced by his death served a purpose. This is counterintuitive to the way we—and Jesus's contemporaries—view illness, suffering, and death. We think of illness and suffering as having no objective. We can sometimes explain illnesses scientifically, but illness, death, and the resulting sorrow have no role within a naturalistic worldview. They simply happen. Not so for Jesus. Jesus saw a two-fold purpose in Lazarus's illness. He saw Lazarus's illness and death as an opportunity to glorify Himself (11:4) and to produce belief in the lives of His followers (11:15).

Q: *Do you find Jesus's view of Lazarus's illness and death offensive?*

Q: *How does your sorrow provide an opportunity for spiritual growth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Some people may be offended by Jesus's remarks concerning Lazarus. Who would use a man's death and the sorrow of his loved ones as an opportunity for self-promotion? Such a response ignores Jesus's role in the worldwide drama unfolded in the gospel. Jesus suffered and died for our sake, but His sorrow leads to our forgiveness. Jesus's sorrow gives meaning to all our sorrow. Just as Jesus's sorrow served a purpose, our sorrow can serve a purpose as well. That purpose is to strengthen our faith in the gospel. Even in our sorrow, we can know we are not alone. Jesus suffered on the cross to give us hope beyond sorrow.

2. JESUS MEETS OUR INTELLECTUAL RESPONSE TO SORROW.

■ JOHN 11:17–27

Q: *What did Martha say when she met Jesus?*

Q: *What was Martha searching for in her interaction with Jesus?*

People respond differently to sorrow. Some people, as we will see with Mary, respond with emotion. Others, like Martha, respond intellectually. The key to understanding Martha's response to her brother's death is seeing that Jesus met her where she was. Martha needed to understand her brother's death against the background of Jesus's ministry. She knew Jesus could have saved her brother if He were there, but He was not. Now she was unsure of how Jesus's life-giving power would play out. On hearing Jesus declare that her brother would rise again, she understood that her brother would be resurrected on the last day. At least, she thought she understood what Jesus intended, and she affirmed her belief in Jesus as the Messiah. But she only partly understood what Jesus was saying. Nevertheless, Jesus responded to her intellectually, and His response met her need.

Q: *Why is it important to respond to people looking for intellectual answers for their sorrow?*

Q: *Will you be able to answer every question someone asks concerning sorrow?*

APPLICATION POINT – Human beings are complex creatures. We respond to suffering in a variety of ways, and there is no guarantee we will respond the same way every time. Sometimes people want answers, like Martha did. When people are seeking answers to why they are suffering, we have to be careful to meet them with sincerity and honesty. We must admit that we cannot fully understand the entirety of God’s plan and how their suffering fits within it. We must do better than serve up trite affirmations of God’s benevolence. The best thing we can do is to set suffering within the context of the gospel. Times of sorrow are often times when a door is open for the gospel.

3. JESUS MEETS OUR EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO SORROW.

☞ **JOHN 11:28–36**

Q: *How would you compare Mary’s need to Martha’s?*

Q: *How did Jesus respond differently to Mary?*

After meeting Martha intellectually, Jesus turned His attention to Mary. Mary’s response was much different than Martha’s, and her needs could not be met intellectually. Mary responded to the loss of her brother with emotion. When Jesus arrived, Mary had been weeping for several days. When she heard Jesus had arrived, she did not rise to meet Him along the way as Martha did. Instead, she remained in the house. After hearing Jesus was asking for her, Mary went to Him and fell on His feet. She had previously fallen on Jesus’s feet, anointed Him with oil, and wiped His feet with her hair (John 11:2). But this time, she merely stated that Lazarus would not have died if Jesus had been present. Jesus did not attempt to meet Mary intellectually. He did not challenge the implications of her charge against Him. Instead, He wept with her. Just as He had met Martha’s intellectual need, Jesus met Mary’s emotional need.

Q: *What would be the danger of responding to a Mary in the same way you would a Martha?*

Q: *How can you meet someone where they are emotionally?*

APPLICATION POINT – Although we may understand Mary’s response to sorrow more than Martha’s, most of us have a tendency to respond to others as if they were Marthas. We want to provide answers, but people in the midst of sorrow often need emotional support more than they need answers. Emotional support is much harder to define. If you can do so authentically, it would certainly include weeping with others. Oftentimes, emotional support means offering a listening ear or simply being present. A few years ago, a family in our church lost a young child through an accident on their farm. The father alternated working day and night shifts. A few months after the loss of her son, the mother admitted to some of the ladies in the church that the nights without her husband were nearly more than she could bear, but she knew her husband could not feasibly alter his work schedule. My wife, along with several other ladies, offered to visit with her during the evenings when she was alone. Through their emotional support, they were able to help this family through the toughest time in their lives. Oftentimes, emotional support will simply mean meeting the needs that present themselves.

4. JESUS CHALLENGES OUR SKEPTICISM.

■ JOHN 11:37-42

Q: *What examples of skepticism arise within this passage?*

Q: *What is the main problem with skepticism of Jesus?*

The death of Lazarus led some people to be skeptical of Jesus’s character and ministry. Many of them, including Martha and Mary, believed if Jesus had been present, He could have prevented Lazarus’s death. Perhaps they had misinterpreted the various signs, leading them to expect so much from Jesus. Or perhaps Jesus was not the

man they believed Him to be. Maybe His fear of the Jewish elites kept Him from intervening in Lazarus's death.

The most remarkable skepticism came from Martha. Jesus had just told her Lazarus would rise from the dead, but when Jesus instructed the attendants to open his tomb, Martha responded with disbelief. In her mind, opening the tomb would only succeed in releasing the smell of her brother's decomposing body. Her brother was dead, and her mind was closed to any alternative. Jesus could do nothing to change that now.

The skepticism in this passage stems from unbelief. The crowd questioned Jesus's goodness. Martha's faith was limited. Although she believed Jesus was the Messiah, her vision of the Messiah's role did not include anything remotely close to what was about to happen. Jesus did not argue with the skepticism He encountered. He did not even acknowledge the skeptics. Instead, He prayed and raised the dead. In an instant, the question of whether He could have saved Lazarus from death proved irrelevant. Jesus showed the skeptics that He could do far more than they ever dared dream. They thought Jesus had failed to live up to their expectations. Instead, their expectations failed to live up to Him.

❓: *How can we incorporate Jesus's response when dealing with skeptics in our time?*

❓: *How does Jesus surpass the expectations of modern skeptics?*

APPLICATION – Jesus provides us with a feasible approach to combat skepticism in our time. The first thing we need to do is pray that the skeptic would believe. The skeptic will never relent unless God works within his heart. After prayer, we need to point to the resurrection. Of course, unlike Jesus, we will not be raising anyone from the dead! Instead, we can point to Jesus's own resurrection. The resurrection is the key point in Christian apologetics. If the resurrection is true, then all other arguments begin to fall into place. Apart from the resurrection, the movement following Jesus is hard to explain adequately. Why would a sect from a group of people wholly committed to monotheism begin proclaiming an executed criminal to be God? There is much more to unearth than this, but this basic question begs for an answer.

5. JESUS UNBINDS US FROM THE TRUE SOURCE OF EVERY SORROW.

■ **JOHN 11:43–44**

Q: *What evidence demonstrates that Lazarus had risen from the dead?*

Q: *What did Jesus instruct the onlookers to do for Lazarus?*

At the command of Jesus, the dead man rose from his tomb. He still wore the burial cloths used to prepare his body for the tomb. Jesus commanded him to be unbound from these clothes. Often in John's Gospel, actions such as these carry a deeper meaning than the actions themselves reveal. In this case, Lazarus was unbound from the symbols of death. Jesus, through His own death and resurrection, has unbound us from sin and death, which are the true sources of all our sorrow.

This grand story is clearly seen in Isaiah 25:8. The prophet anticipated a day when God will put an end to death and remove the reproach covering His people. In doing so, God will wipe away every tear from the faces of His people. Again, at the dawn of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:4), we see that God will eradicate death and wipe away every tear from the eyes of His people. The language of wiping away every tear evokes deep emotion. One pictures a father cradling the face of his son or daughter in his hands and gently wiping away every tear along with every sorrow and uncertainty. Jesus's ministry among those mourning the death of Lazarus hints at this day when God will put an end to all our sorrows.

Q: *What hope do we have that God will one day end all our sorrows?*

Q: *How does Lazarus encourage us to look forward to a time when Jesus will decisively end all our sorrow?*

APPLICATION – We do not know how long Lazarus remained alive after Jesus raised him from the dead. With nothing leading us to conclude otherwise, we may assume Lazarus eventually died again and remained dead. His story reminds us to anticipate the day when God will intervene to end death and sorrow forever. At that time, the dead who rise will not fall again. The tears in our eyes will be wiped away by a loving Father. All the pain and sorrow we endure will become a memory so distant it barely darkens the horizon before slipping forever out of our sight. We long for the day when sin and death will be no more, and we find ourselves face to face with our loving heavenly Father.

NEXT STEPS

For now, sorrow is a part of life, and it is the duty of those within the church to come to the aide of those enduring sorrow. We need to do so with the sensitivity and grace Jesus did in John 11. For those in need of an emotional response, Jesus responds with empathy. For those in need of an intellectual response, Jesus challenges their intellect. For the skeptical, Jesus confronts their skepticism through prayer. Rather than responding to sorrow generically, take a cue from Jesus and meet people where they are in their sorrow.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

-God, make me an instrument in your hands when others need to hear from You.

-Jesus, you have dealt decisively with sorrow and sin in your death and resurrection. May I praise your name forevermore.

-Jesus, help me follow your example when ministering to those experiencing sorrow.

-God, keep my heart turned toward the day when I will meet you face to face, and you wipe every tear from my eyes.