

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF END TIME – SAINTS TRIUMPHANT

Lord, If You Had Been Here...

John 11:32-44 (NIV)

³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

Mary and Martha, good friends of Jesus, reached out to him because their brother, another friend of Jesus, was very sick. They believed in Jesus, believed that Jesus cared about them and would have compassion on them, believed that Jesus could do something about this situation. If he would come, then their brother would be healed.

Jesus got this news and declared, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." (John 11:4) And Jesus stayed where he was and did not immediately go to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He delayed and Lazarus died. Jesus could have been there that day, but he waited until Lazarus was dead and in the tomb for 4 days.

When Jesus finally arrived, Mary and Martha both confessed to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (verses 21 & 32) They believed that Jesus could take away a terminal illness. Even many of those mourning over the death of Lazarus believed that Jesus could have taken care of this. Some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" (verse 37) So, why did he delay and let Lazarus die?

Have you asked God a similar question? Your loved one is diagnosed with cancer. There are treatments, but the cancer is very far along. We bring this sickness to God. We pray because we are so powerless over the situation and because we believe Jesus will answer us because he has removed our sins. He has promised to hear and answer our prayers. So, we come to him with boldness and confidence. We pray at home, pray here in worship, add our prayers to the email prayer chain, praying seemingly without ceasing. For some, God grants the healing. For others, he doesn't. The cancer spread. Remission never came. It's like he delayed answering our prayers. Our loved one died.

"Lord, if you had been here, my loved one would not have died." So, where are you, Lord? Are you really powerful enough to take away disease? Why did you make me go through this? Do you even love me? Doubts about God's love for you have arisen because he could have acted but he didn't. How do we go about answering these questions of doubt?

We don't always know the answer as to why God delays and doesn't answer us immediately when we call on him. Maybe we are a bit too trained and ready to give logical, rational responses to people. We'll say, "God works all things for your good." "God has a plan." "God has relieved them of their suffering." "Rejoice! They are in heaven now!" These are biblical answers, but sometimes we say them without really considering a proper emotional response to the person who is grieving and doubting.

Jesus emotionally responded to the death of Lazarus. "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." (verse 33) That phrase "deeply moved" is mentioned of Jesus twice. We might think that Jesus is personally touched by the grief of his friend's death. It's true that Jesus was, as evidenced by the simple verse: "Jesus wept." (verse 35) He is sad. However, the deeply moved is more like emotions being churned up in an angry way. Jesus is not just sad that his friend died, but he is also angry. He's not angry at God the Father or himself for allowing death. He's angry because he did not create us to die. We were never meant to experience the pain and grief and separation and sadness of losing a loved one to death. No, we brought death into the world. The wages of sin is death. Death is a consequence specifically of sin. Every death and all the associated pain remind us of this truth. Jesus is angry at death as it harms his people.

But Jesus is not just here to shake his fist at death or to weep. No, in his anger, he was deeply moved to act regarding death in such a way that would grow people's faith in him. They already believed that he had total power over the most terminal of illnesses. Now he wanted to show them more, to show them that he can and will do something with our enemy called death.

Jesus approached the tomb and asked the stone to be taken away. Martha objected because Lazarus was rotting and decaying, smelled really bad at this point. Jesus responded to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" (verse 40) So, they did as Jesus said. Then they heard his prayer: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." (verses 41b-42) He then commands Lazarus, the dead man, to come on out. And Lazarus does, completely alive, completely restored. Jesus delayed and let Lazarus die to show people that he had total control not just over sickness, but over death itself.

Death is our enemy, and Jesus came to conquer death. He has already conquered one death for us: our spiritual death. We came into this world physically alive but spiritual dead in our trespasses and sins. Yet God made us alive; it is by grace you have been saved. Jesus lived his life perfectly under God's law for us as our substitute, and then he gave his life to death in order to pay the debt that every single one of our sins caused. The wage of death was paid in full by Jesus. He demands no repayment, not a single work or act. Instead, he gives us life, spiritual life as a new believer, a new creation - just as in baptism we are washed clean of our sins and a new person rises, covered in Jesus' perfection. This is the first resurrection that we heard about in Revelation 20.

Having been brought from spiritual death to life by the message of what Jesus has done to take away our sins and conquer death, we know that we will be delivered from our physical death to live and reign with God forever. We will enjoy that mountaintop banquet of heaven as described by Isaiah. The second death, eternal damnation to hell, has no power over us. We are bound for heaven because God the Holy Spirit has made us spiritually alive through the faith he has given us.

That's not the only death Jesus conquers for us. Jesus brought Lazarus physically back from death to life. So also all of us, after we have died and all believers who have already died, will be raised physically on the Last Day with bodies that are perfected - the perishable made imperishable, the mortal made immortal. You could call this a second resurrection or, as we say in our creeds, the resurrection of the dead. On that day, death will be completely destroyed and we will be saints triumphant.

Jesus delayed in healing Lazarus in order to raise him from the dead and thus deepen the faith of his believers showing not only does he have power over sickness, but over death itself. Instead of the more apologetic answers to someone who questions why God delayed in answering their prayers and let their loved one die, we can weep with them and we can answer with what our God has actually done to death. God saw that we brought death into the world. In response, he didn't only weep, but he came into our world with flesh and blood to die and rise again to vanquish death. His mission was accomplished when he rose on the third day. He is the preview of what is to come for us: a life where death is completely destroyed. We can comfort those who mourn with a God who actually does something with death, as he did with Lazarus, as he did with himself, as he will do for us.

If you need more, though, of how you can be a Christian friend to someone who is troubled and grieving over the death of their loved one, wondering why God delayed, then come to the Sunday morning Bible study of Job which starts next Sunday. Job's grief, in a way, echoes Mary and Martha's statement. We could paraphrase it as: "Lord, if you had been here, my children would not have died, this grief would not have come upon me." Job believed that God could have prevented this. He desperately sought comfort from his friends. Instead, he found judgment and bad theology. As we read through the book of Job, we'll ask how we can better listen to our hurting brothers and sisters in Christ and how we can respond to them with the powerful, compassionate, and merciful actions of our God.

Jesus may delay in answering our prayers, even while he has the power to instantly heal. He does this to increase our faith, pushing us to trust in him more and see how much more powerful he really is and how powerfully he delivers. Through this account, we saw that God doesn't just heal terminal illnesses; he terminates death itself. On the Last Day when Jesus returns, all death will be destroyed forever. Until that day, we get to share a powerful God who doesn't just heal sicknesses, but a God who conquered death for us. By this message, God will grow his kingdom and increase the brothers and sisters in Christ who will enjoy heaven with us. Amen.