

Hope and Grief

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[0 : 00] Well, allow me to welcome you again. Those of you that I don't know, those of you who are visiting, especially like to welcome you.

And I really hope and pray, as we've prayed a lot, that being here you feel seen in your grief, that you feel known and understood to some degree, that you, if nothing else, that you know that you're not alone in it.

What I want to do now is to spend a little while reflecting on God's Word together before we hear from some members of our community as they share some of their experiences of grief.

You know, Laura and I have spent time praying and thinking about this gathering, and part of that, as I think many of you have done, has involved thinking about our own experiences of grief.

And one of the places in Scripture that I find myself gravitating to again and again in my own times of grief and as I attempt to grieve alongside and come alongside others in grief is this story in John chapter 11.

[1 : 15] It's the story of Jesus and Martha and Mary at the tomb of Lazarus. I just find myself coming back to it again and again and again because it shows us something profound about grief.

And it actually, I think, shows us something about why we would have a time like this set aside on a Sunday evening where we would intentionally create a space to be sad together, to weep together. For those who don't know the story, Lazarus is one of Jesus' best friends. And after a prolonged illness, we're not sure exactly what, but after some form of prolonged illness, he eventually passes away.

And several days after his death, Jesus finally, and I emphasize that word, finally arrives at the tomb. They've been waiting and hoping that he would come sooner.

And both of Lazarus' sisters come out to meet him. We have Martha and then after her, Mary. One of the interesting things about this story is that they each say the exact same thing to Jesus.

[2 : 24] They say, Lord, if you had only been here, my brother would not have died. If you had been here, my brother would not have died. And they're basically asking what I think everyone asks in the face of grief and tragedy.

It's probably the kinds of questions that some of us are asking right now as we sit here this evening, as we think about our own experiences of death or loss or infertility or miscarriage or unwanted singleness or any of the other things that we bring with us into this room.

And we ask questions like, where is God in all of this? Questions like, how could God let this happen? Why did it have to be this way? Especially when I look at the lives of the people around me, why me?

Why this? Why now? All forms of the question, Lord, if you had only been here, maybe this wouldn't have happened. And I want us to see how Jesus responds to these sisters and to us when we come to Him with our grief and our anger and our pain and all of our questions.

To Martha, Jesus offers what we might think of as a theological response. He says, your brother will rise again. Martha.

[3 : 46] And Martha says, well, I know that He will rise again and the resurrection on the last day. And Jesus goes on, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live. Then you can imagine Jesus looking at her intently, fixing her with His gaze.

Do you believe this? She replies, yes, Lord. I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.

And she's right. You know, believing in Christ, believing in Jesus, means believing in the resurrection. It means believing in the renewal of all things.

As some of our own writers have said, to believe in the resurrection is to believe that everything sad will come untrue. To believe in the resurrection is to believe that heaven is not just some future bliss out there that will somehow justify all of this.

[4 : 49] It's to believe that heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even this agony into glory. It's to believe, as the Scripture says, that those who sow weeping will go out with songs of joy.

To believe in Jesus is to believe in resurrection, which is to believe in renewal, which is to believe in all of those things that one day Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes. It's to believe all of those things are true.

Now, the story could have ended here, but it doesn't. And praise Jesus, it doesn't. Martha sends for her sister Mary, saying, the teacher is here and is calling for you.

Mary comes and falls at Jesus' feet and says, the exact same thing as Martha. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And yet, with Mary, Jesus does not offer a theological response.

When Jesus sees Mary weeping, and then he sees all the people around him weeping, it says that he's deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

[6 : 01] But that's a bit of a sanitized translation. I think the reality of this actually makes us a bit nervous. What it actually says in the Greek is that Jesus was shaking with rage.

He's shaking with rage. Then it says that Jesus wept. Here's a being who has all the power in the universe.

He knows that he's about to raise Lazarus from the grave. And yet, he sits down next to Mary, and he weeps. And the story begs the question, why?

Does he not believe what he's just told Martha? Does he not believe his own theology? Has he forgotten that he's the Son of God? Does he not know that he has the power with a mere word to raise Lazarus to life again, to wipe the illness away?

Why does Jesus weep? The only answer, the only possible answer, is that Jesus weeps because he is perfect.

[7 : 16] It's because he's perfect. Because this is what a perfect human being does in the face of grief and loss.

A lot of people think that maturity means being strong. That if you're spiritually mature in particular, it means keeping yourself together in the midst of tragedy.

It means being even keel, not getting all emotional. A lot of people think that if you cry, that it means you're weak, because that's what weak people do.

It means that you can't handle life. If you're a Christian, it means that you must have a weak faith. Your theology must be shaky if you're this rocked by tragedy.

Don't you believe in the resurrection? Don't you believe in renewal? Don't you believe in the new creation? It's all going to work out in the end. It's all going to be okay. Why are you crying?

[8 : 12] Why are you weeping? Jesus is the most mature, most perfect, most powerful being there is. Jesus is the one who raised the mountains.

He's the one who filled the oceans. He's the one who flung the stars into the sky. And yet, in the face of this loss, He weeps. So, what can we learn from this as we sit in our own grief?

You know, in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul writes to Christians, Grieve, but don't grieve as those without hope. And I think that Paul is warning us that when it comes to our grief, there are two potential dangers that He wants us to be aware of.

One is to not grieve. That's one great danger. To give in to all of the ideas that we inherit, maybe from our families.

Maybe we grow up in families where you're not allowed to express negative emotions, you're not allowed to cry, it makes people uncomfortable, so you're told, if you're going to cry, do it in private. Maybe we've inherited these ideas that it means we're weak, or we can't hack it in life, or that our faith is shaky.

[9 : 37] And so, we try to push forward and be strong and not ever deal with the emotions. And the thing is, that'll get us by for a while, but down the road, that will always come back to bite us, one way or another.

Because you can't get away from those feelings. They don't just go away. They don't evaporate. They stay in us for years and years and years and years. We can carry them. The other mistake

Paul is saying we might make in our grief is to grieve, but to grieve without hope.

To allow our grief to overwhelm us, to uproot us, to so overtake us that we become hardened and cynical and dead on the inside.

And certainly, that has happened to many, many people. But Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to grieve, but without losing hope.

Jesus is a perfect human being. He's the strongest, most mature human ever to have lived, and he wept. Which means the strongest, most mature people, the people who are most like Jesus, are the ones who can enter into grief.

[10:51] The ones who can grieve honestly. The ones who are able to weep, not just in the midst of their own grief, but the ones who are able to weep with those who weep. As Jesus weeps with Mary.

The strongest, most mature people are those who don't suppress their emotions, or numb themselves, but willingly enter into and inhabit grief when they need to.

And that's really what it is. It's something that must be inhabited for as long as it takes. Now, why would this be the case?

Why is spiritual maturity connected with a willingness to weep and grieve? And the reason is quite simple. It's because you can't think your feelings.

You have to feel your feelings. If you've ever been to a counselor worth their salt, hopefully they told you that at some point along the way. You have to feel your feelings. You can't think your way out of them.

[11:51] So we can know all the right theology in our heads. If we were to give you an exam, you would probably do really well. But knowing and feeling are two very different things.

You can't think your way out of grief, even with all the right theological answers. The only way to deal with feelings is to feel them. So then we ask, well, what good are our beliefs then?

Well, believing in the promise of the resurrection is exactly what enables us to grieve, but without losing hope. The author of Hebrews says that our resurrection hope is a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul.

And that's exactly what we need when we are grieving, when we are trembling with rage. We need a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls because the job of an anchor is to do one thing.

It is to keep you rooted firmly in place so that no matter how strong the wind blows, no matter how hard the currents pull against you, no matter what, no matter how bad the storm of grief gets, you stay rooted firmly in place.

[13:04] You don't get swept away. A lot of people make the mistake of thinking that if we really believe in Jesus and the resurrection that we wouldn't weep in the face of tragedy.

But the truth is actually the opposite. It's precisely our belief in Jesus and the resurrection that sets us free to grieve and to weep and to tremble with rage.

Because those beliefs anchor us in the midst of that storm so that after we've allowed ourselves to feel what we need to feel, we'll find ourselves firmly rooted in the truth.

I'll close with one final story. Horatio Spofford is someone who lived in Chicago with his family when the great Chicago fire of 1871 tore through the city.

And not only was he financially ruined, but the fire actually claimed the life of his four-year-old son. Not long after, he decided to take his family to Europe for some time away and to help D.L. Moody, actually, the great evangelist, with his next campaign.

[14:11] And he had some business to tie up before he could leave, so he sent his wife and his four daughters ahead, planning to come as soon as he could on the next ship.

So his wife and daughters boarded a French steamship, and several days later, Spofford received the news that the ship had gone down. It was the worst disaster in naval history before the Titanic, which happened 40 years or so later.

All of his daughters were lost. Only his wife survived. Spofford boarded the next ship, and soon in that crossing, he came to the place in the water where the ship had sunk and his daughters had been lost.

And I don't pretend to know what he was thinking or feeling as he looked into that dark water, but I do know that he believed in Jesus. I do know that his soul was anchored by the hope of the resurrection, and I do know that he was a man mature enough to know how to weep and how to shake with rage.

Because it was there in that place that he wrote these words, Lord, we pray as we as we are gathered here tonight, some of us are here questioning whether you exist.

[15 : 59] Some of us are here because we're angry at you. Some of us are here maybe feeling as though we've given up hope. We've prayed ourselves numb. Lord, some of us are here with hope.

Some of us are here simply to grieve with those whom we love. Whatever our reason here, Lord, we know that you're a God who's able to do in us what we cannot do for ourselves. We pray that as we sing, as we pray, as we listen to story and testimony, as we come around your table, that you would meet us the way that you met him, that you would weep with us the way Jesus wept with Mary, that we would feel the comfort of your presence and your compassion and your love. Pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.