

# The God Who Weeps

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning again. My name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent, and if this is your first time joining us, I just want to say welcome. We're so glad you joined us for worship this morning. I would love to meet you after the service and hear your story and get to know you more. Our passage this morning, the gospel reading from the lectionary comes from John chapter 11, and it's a passage that causes us in this season of Lent to think about the reality of suffering and death in our lives. When I was in college, I experienced what was perhaps one of the most painful seasons of my life. I was dating a girl at the time, and I was, I probably would have told you that I was in love with her. I was pretty sure we were going to get married, and, you know, we were dating for several months. But after dating for several years, for some time, our relationship ended when, to my great surprise and sadness, we actually broke up. And I still remember the pain of that time. It was the greatest pain I'd ever felt.

I still remember what it felt like. I remember it felt like someone had cut me open with a knife and had just filleted me wide open. And I can still recall the pain and the emotions of that season of my life. It didn't just last for a day or a week, but it lasted for months and almost a full year.

And in that season of pain and difficulty, I remember asking the Lord, God, where are you? Where are you in this? Why would you allow this to happen? Do you even care? And are you even present?

Maybe this is a question that some of you have asked before in different seasons of life. Maybe it's a question that you're asking in this season of your life right now. God, where are you? Where are you in these circumstances of pain? Where are you in these circumstances of suffering? And if you've ever asked that question, I want you to know that you are in good company with every Christian who has ever lived across time and space. And you are also in good company with the people in this story here in John chapter 11, because it is the question that they are asking as well. Martha and Mary and Lazarus were siblings who were friends of Jesus. And we're told at the beginning of this passage that their brother Lazarus became sick. And we're not told what sort of illness we had, but as the story progresses and goes on, we learn that he eventually succumbs to this illness and passes away. And as they're grieving the loss of their brother, Martha and Mary ask Jesus a question, it's the same question that I asked in my season of pain, and it's the question that a lot of us would ask. And twice, Martha and Mary both tell Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. If you had been here, this wouldn't have happened. Now, this is a statement, but underneath this is an implicit question. Underneath this statement is the question, so then where were you?

We sent word to you. We told you that Lazarus was sick. You could have come. Why didn't you? Where were you? It's this admission of this common experience that all of us have whenever we face suffering, whether we're Christians or not, whether we're religious or not, whether we're believers in God or not. Some of us do believe in God. We believe that he's real. We believe that he's loving, that he's powerful, that he's good.

[ 3 : 34 ] And so, because we believe that, we know that it is possible for God to prevent pain in our lives, to prevent it from happening. But sometimes he doesn't. And so, we wonder if God is absent, if he's abandoned us, if he's withheld his love from us. Others of us perhaps may not be, maybe consider ourselves Christian believers, or we may not consider ourselves to be people of faith.

And yet, others of us, this is a challenge for us as well. And before we really dive into our text here in John 11, I just want to acknowledge that there might be some of us who may not be able to even hear a sermon about how God could be present in our suffering because we're already convinced intellectually that he couldn't. We may not even be able to hear how God could be present in our suffering because we're already convinced intellectually that he's not. Perhaps you've come to the

conclusion that because there's so much pain and suffering in the world, therefore, there couldn't possibly be a loving and good God. Perhaps this is an issue that has caused you to question your faith. Perhaps this is an issue that has even led you to reject belief in God or Christianity. Even if this isn't you, you probably know someone, perhaps have a family or friend for whom this is true. And so, before we look more at our passage, I just want to address this briefly because I think it's an important issue for us to address. And even though we couldn't possibly fully address the problem of suffering in one sermon, I think it's important for us to consider where is God in the face of suffering from the perspective of someone who's not a Christian.

And here's what I would like you to at least consider. I'd like you to at least consider that if you say there's so much suffering and pain in the world, therefore, God doesn't exist or probably doesn't exist, that you're not actually done dealing with a problem. You're not actually done dealing with a problem. You actually have to still find a better way of thinking about suffering, and you also have to find a practical way to get through it. You still have to find a better way of thinking about it, and you still have to find a practical way to get through it. So, what are some of our possible other options? Well, in his book, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, pastor and author Tim Keller gives a framework, an overview of ways different philosophies and religions and different people have thought about suffering across the centuries. Now, this is not a comprehensive list by any stretch, but it represents some of the major ways that human beings throughout time and space have thought about this issue of suffering. And so, I just want to cover a few of them and just look at them real briefly. And the first is the moralistic view. And this is a view that you might find in Hinduism or other religions like that. And it's the view that suffering is the result of sin or wrongdoing. It's the idea of karma. So, if you're suffering, if you're going through difficulty, it's the result of something that you did in your past life. And so, therefore, to get through suffering, you have to repent and change your ways so that you won't experience it in the next life. It's a moralistic view. Another way to approach pain and suffering is its self-transcendent view. You might find this in a philosophy like Buddhism. Buddhism, for example, would teach that suffering is not necessarily a result of past sins, but of unfulfilled desires, that desire is at the core of why suffering exists in the world. And so, therefore, the way to deal with suffering is actually to transcend the self. The way to deal with suffering is actually to remove our attachment from the material world, to remove our attachment to people and things like money and food and power, and therefore to detach from our own human desires. So, the goal in Buddhism, for example, would be nirvana. Nirvana means to be extinguished. The goal is to extinguish our desire and, therefore, to deal with the problem of suffering. There's a fatalistic view, ancient Greek-Roman mythology, some streams of Islam, that life circumstances are predetermined either by the will of God or by forces of fate or by nature of biology. And so, because everything is predetermined, so is our pain and suffering. And so, the best thing that we can do is just submit to it and endure it. We don't have the ability to complain or question the gods or God or the forces of fate, but we just have to face it and endure it and submit to it. Finally, here's the secular view, a fourth view. In the secular view, suffering and death are just part of a natural process. They're just part of the natural evolutionary process, and therefore, suffering and pain are non-moral in the sense that they're not related to good and evil. They're just part of how things are. They're just a natural part of the fabric of the material world. No one has probably, perhaps, articulated this more clearly or with more precision and directness than Richard Dawkins, who's a British biologist. And Richard Dawkins, a British biologist from Oxford, puts it this way. He says, in a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt and other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is at the bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA just is. DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is, and we dance to its music. Now, that's a pretty direct summary of the secular view, but what Dawkins is saying is that suffering and pain are just part of a natural part of the way things are. So, you have the moralistic view, which says that suffering is a result of sin, therefore you have to repent and change your ways. You have the self-transcendent view, which says that suffering is a result of desire, so you have to get rid of your desire, get rid of your attachment to the material world. You have the fatalistic view, which says that everything's predetermined, including our own pain and suffering, and so therefore, to get through it, we just have to endure it and submit to it. Finally, the secular view, which says it's just part of a natural process, and therefore, it's really not a problem in the sense of its being related to good and evil. Now, here's what I'd like to put forth. Consider the nuance, consider the ways in which

Christianity might talk about suffering in ways that would be different than these ways of thinking about suffering. So, counter to the moralistic view, which teaches that suffering is always just, the Bible teaches that suffering is very often unfair and unjust. Bad things often happen to good people. We see in Proverbs that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Counter to the self-transcendent view, the way forward in suffering is not to eliminate our desire. Actually, biblically, desire is a good thing. God has given us desire, especially for love, and therefore, if we were to eliminate desire, we would be eliminating our capacity for love, which is what life is primarily about.

[ 11 : 09 ] And so, therefore, Christianity says that desire is not primarily the main problem. Counter to fatalism, the Bible teaches that human beings have agency. It's perfectly okay, therefore, to question God, to complain, to acknowledge that suffering is a problem, that it's difficult.

We see this all over the Psalms. The psalmists are constantly complaining and questioning God about the existence of difficulty in their life. And counter to the secular view, Scripture would say suffering is not natural. It's not part of the way things are, not part of the way things should be. We see pain and suffering and death as an enemy intruder. It's an enemy in God's good creation. It's not part of how God originally intended the world to be. And this affirms our deepest intuitions whenever we face suffering that this is not the way it should be. Now, if you want to think more about this, I really recommend Keller's book to you. It's called *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*.

But here's the point. Here's the takeaway. If you dismiss belief in God, if you say there's so much evil and suffering in the world, therefore God doesn't exist, you're not actually done dealing with the problem. You actually have to come up with a better way to think about it, and you actually have to find a better way to get through it. And what I would put forward, what I would at least ask you to consider, is that to say suffering exists, therefore God doesn't, is a bit too simplistic, and it's not very practical. And that the Christian view of suffering actually might be more nuanced, it might be more robust, it might be more explanatory, and it might be more practical than maybe you've considered before.

And that leads us back to our story here in John 11, because I think what's here in John 11 actually gives us something practical, it gives us something that helps us answer our question, where is God in the face of suffering? And I think in this passage, in John 11, there are at least three answers to this question. There's at least three answers to the question, where is God in the face of suffering? And I want to show them to you from our story here.

[ 13 : 34 ] So first of all, throughout this passage, we see Jesus interacting, we see the dynamics of his relationship with Martha and Mary and Lazarus. If you look at verse 5, verse 5 says, Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. It's evident from the story, Jesus had a close relationship with them. He was good friends with them. Such a close relationship that actually in verse 3, when Martha and Mary send word to Jesus, they say, Lord, the one you love is sick. The one you love.

They didn't even have to say Lazarus' name. They said the one you love, and he would know who that is. It shows a deep personal relationship of affection and love. In verse 36, when Jesus gets to Lazarus' tomb, those who are standing nearby say, see how he loved him. See how Jesus loved Lazarus.

And friends, don't you see that the same thing is true for us? The same thing that is true about Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is true for us, and that is that the presence of pain is not evidence of God's absence. The presence of pain is not evidence of the absence of God's love. Just because we experience suffering does not mean that God has stopped loving us. In fact, God's word tells us the opposite. We see the opposite here in John 11, Jesus' love for Martha and Mary and Lazarus, but we also see it throughout Scripture, perhaps most clearly in Romans chapter 8.

Romans chapter 8, Paul says, So where is God? Where is God in the face of suffering? Well, first of all, he's loving.

He's there. He's present. His love hasn't stopped. The presence of our pain is not evidence of the absence of God's love. And this is a short point. It's a simple point, but it's a point that we can't miss. It's a point that can't be overstated. Not even death can separate us from the love of Christ.

[ 16 : 18 ] So where is God? Well, he's loving. But what else is he doing? Where else is he in this story? Well, when Jesus finally comes to Bethany, he has a conversation with Martha outside the village.

Martha runs out to meet him, and Mary initially stays in the house, but then eventually Mary comes out to meet him. And what we see in verse 32 is this. Now, when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And 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. And he said, Where have you laid him? They said to him, Lord, come and see.

And then it says in verse 35, Jesus wept. Jesus wept. This is one of the most moving accounts, I think, in all of Scripture, because we see the humanity of Jesus and the divinity of Jesus coming together in a profound and unique way. As he sees Mary weeping and those around her weeping, it says that he is deeply and greatly moved in his spirit and troubled. And the word here in Greek, even goes beyond that, the word here actually means angry and indignant, even outraged. That's the picture that we get here of Jesus, that he is so deeply moved in his spirit with indignation and even anger. Jesus looked at those who he loved, who were grieving, who were in pain. He thought about his friend Lazarus, who he loved, who had recently died. He looked at the effects of sin and death that had ravaged the good creation that he had made. And from the depths of his being, he is outraged. He's indignant. He's angry over the fallen world. And then in the shortest verse in the entire Bible, we have perhaps two of the most profound words in the entire Bible. Jesus wept. Jesus wept. Do you want to know how God feels about your suffering? Do you want to know how God feels about pain? Do you want to know how God feels about death? Look at Jesus. He's deeply moved. He's outraged. He's indignant. He's full of emotion. And he weeps. God weeps. Where is God in the face of suffering? He's weeping. He's weeping. We worship and serve and follow a God who is not aloof from human suffering, but who weeps over the creation that he loves, who weeps over the people that he loves.

[ 19 : 33 ] In Jesus Christ, God has actually entered into our suffering. And in the same way that he wept with Martha and Mary, he weeps with you. He feels your pain. He is righteously angry and indignant over the suffering that you face, over the fallen effects of sin that you endure even right now.

And friends, you just got to know, you won't find this anywhere other than Jesus. You won't find this in a different philosophy or framework or religion, but you'll only find it in Jesus. And this is something I really do not want us to miss, especially if we come into the room this morning hurting, grieving. Because Jesus not only weeps over suffering and death, but also experienced it himself, our own suffering can become a means of entering into communion with God.

Our own suffering can become a participation, a fellowship with the suffering of God. This is what Paul says in Colossians chapter 1 verse 24. Paul says that we participate in Christ's afflictions. This is not about meriting salvation. This is not that we add something to the atonement of what Christ did on the cross. It's about fellowship with Jesus. It's about being united in Jesus. As Christians, we believe the gospel is about union with Christ, that it's about being united to Jesus in his life, in his death, in his resurrection. But do you not also see that to be united to Christ is also to be united to his tears, is also to be united to his suffering, that your suffering is a communion, is a participation in a suffering God, that your indignation over suffering and death is a participation in the God who is righteously indignant and angry about sin and death's effects of his fallen world. I can't put it better than Tish Harrison Warren, who writes these words in her book,

Prayer in the Night, which I commend to you. She says, the church has always proclaimed that if we want to see what God is like, we look at Jesus, a man acquainted with sorrow, no stranger to grief, a peasant craftsman who knew suffering big and small, and dies as a criminal, mostly alone. [ 22 : 15 ] He met with fractured relationships and the death of friends, with an oppressive empire, the indignity of poverty and the terror of violence. One night he sweat blood, asking the Father to spare him from agony, weeping in the lonely darkness while his friends fell asleep, and soon after he was tortured to death. God did not keep bad things from happening to God himself. To look to Jesus is to know that our creator has felt pain, has known trouble, and is well acquainted with sorrow. But our hope in suffering is not merely to gaze on the biography of an ancient man frozen in the pages of the Bible.

The story of the gospel is not a mere mantra or relic of history. It is alive and ongoing. The work of Jesus continues even now in our everyday lives. So in hardship, we do not look to Jesus solely as one who has been there before once upon a time in the distant past. We find that he is here with us

in the present tense. He participates in our suffering. Even as mysteriously in our suffering, we participate in the fullness of Christ's life.

Make no mistake, this does not mean that we look forward to suffering or wish it for ourselves or for others. But what it does mean is that when pain inevitably comes into our lives, and it will, that we know that the same Jesus who wept with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb is weeping alongside us, that he participates in our suffering even as we participate in his, that our tears are mingled with the tears of the God who weeps. And this, brothers and sisters, is the basis of our calling to also share in the sufferings of one another as the body of Christ. Just as Christ shares in our suffering and we share in his, so also we share in one another's sufferings as brothers and sisters who are united to him. That is part of our calling as the church to, as Romans chapter 12 says, to mourn with those who mourn, to weep with those who weep. And in this way, God is present, he is real, he is tangible in the face of suffering through his body, the church, through his people who show up for one another with meals, with hospital visits, with groceries, but most of all with our presence and our tears and our prayers. We don't just show up for one another when we're grieving and hurting just out of pity. We do it because it is our calling. As those who are united to Jesus, the God who weeps, as we participate in the sufferings of Christ, he is present with us. So where is God in the face of suffering? Well, he's loving. And he's also weeping. But what else is he doing? What else is he doing?

Jesus tells Martha in verse 25, he says, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die, and whoever believes by believing in me will never die. And this is the central hope of the Christian faith, that those who believe in Christ not only participate in his suffering, but they also participate in his glory. They also participate in the glory of his resurrection. He's saying to Martha, I'm not just the God who loves you and who weeps with you and who's with you in your suffering. I am also the God who conquered death itself so that one day your suffering will end. If you believe in me, if you trust in me, death does not get the final word for you. Death is not the end for you. You will have eternal life in me. In fact, even though you die, it will be as if you never actually taste death because you will live. But Jesus doesn't just tell this to Martha. He shows it to us in verses 38 through 44. Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone lay against it. And Jesus said, take away the stone. 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. Jesus said to her, did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?

So they took away the stone. 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 say this on account of the people standing around that they might believe that you sent me. And when he had said these things, he cried out in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. And the man who died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips and his face wrapped with a cloth. And Jesus said to him, unbind him and let him go.

[ 27 : 54 ] This might be a familiar story for some of us, but don't let the familiarity of the story keep you from seeing the wonder of this moment. Jesus Christ, by the power of his word, raises a man from death to life. And this is not just a one-time event. This is a preview of what he will do for every person who believes and trusts in him to be the resurrection and the life.

Where is God in the face of suffering? He's resurrecting. He's resurrecting. And this radically changes how we think about life in this world, that life in this world is inevitably and sometimes unbearingly painful. And some of you know that right now more than others. Some of you have experienced this in the past year. But for the believer in Christ, that pain always coexists with a deep-seated hope that because of the resurrection, that pain and suffering do not get the last word. There's a scene in the last book of the Lord of the Rings, Return of the King, after the great battle has been fought, after the ring has been destroyed, Sam and Frodo wake up in Gondor and they're not quite sure where they are. They're not quite sure if they're dreaming or if what's happening is real. They realize that Gandalf is in the room where they have been sleeping. And so once they realize they're conscious, they start talking to Gandalf who's with them in the room.

And eventually in the conversation, Sam asks Gandalf this beautiful question. And Sam says, is now the time when everything sad is going to come untrue?

is now the time when everything sad is going to come untrue? And for those who've trusted in Christ to be the resurrection and the life, that is our hope. That everything sad will eventually become untrue. That death doesn't get the last word. That sickness, cancer, disease doesn't get the last word.

Heartache doesn't get the last word. Jesus does. Because he is the resurrection and the life. And the question that Jesus asked Martha, he asked you and I this morning. It's a very simple question, but it is a very important question. He asked Martha and he asked us, do you believe this?

[ 30 : 32 ] Do you believe this? Maybe you've been interested in Jesus for some time. Maybe you've been open to considering what he has to say. Maybe you've gone to church your whole life. But perhaps you've never actually trusted to be the resurrection and the life for you. Maybe you've never actually trusted Jesus to be your only hope for life at the moment of your death.

And friends, I want to invite you to consider trusting in Christ for that today. Maybe today, maybe this morning is the first time that you would ever do that in your life. Jesus says, whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live. Believe in him for this. Trust in him for this.

So where is God? Where is God in the face of suffering? He's loving. The presence of our pain is not evidence of the absence of God's love. Nothing in all creation can separate us from his love. And he's weeping. Christ is the God who weeps. He participates in our suffering even as we participate in his. And as we participate in one another's suffering, as we weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn, Christ is present there. God is present there through us. And he's resurrecting. Those who believe in him not only participate in his suffering, but they also participate in his glory. They participate in the glory of his resurrection. And in the places of pain and suffering in my life, including the example and story that I shared at the beginning, in the places of pain and suffering in my life, these things have been an incredible source of comfort. These things have been a balm for my soul. These things are some of the most profound things that we could ever know about Jesus. They're some of the most profound things that could ever shape us as a church and ever be true of us as a church. And these things are some of the greatest things that we have to tell the world. Let's pray together.

Lord, thank you that this story is in the Bible. Because it teaches us an answer for one of our greatest questions. God, where are you?

[ 33 : 26 ] Lord, thank you that you're there. We thank you that you're here. That you are, that you're not just the resurrection and the life. You're not just the God who promises us eternal life at the end of the age, but that you're also the God who weeps with us right now.

Lord, would we experience fellowship with you in our sufferings in a way that leads us to taste the coming glory and joy of the resurrection.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.