

The Greatest Comfort in Grief  
John 11:17-27

We have been going through this fascinating chapter about Jesus' power to resurrect dead Lazarus. And now we come to verse 17, which says, "**Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.**" Now when the message came to Jesus about Lazarus being dead he was probably already dead. Jesus waits another two day, and now this is the fourth day after he arrives. There is no thought or hope that he is just sick or low or whatever. He is dead and in the tomb and the mourning period has already begun. And you can see that in verses 18-19, "**Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.**" The timing is amazing when you really think about it. Lazarus would have been a young man, and his death would have attracted many people to come and console the family at this time. There would have been a huge crowd that would have gathered and witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus from the grave. But you can imagine as Jesus and the disciples enter Bethany how sullen the occasion this would have been. It would have been so heavy with sorrow and anguish and cries of pain.

And look at verse 20, "**So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.**" Martha is usually the one who is busy at various things that need to be done at the house and it is Mary who is usually at the feet of Jesus, but here you have the reverse order. It is Martha who does the right thing and comes out to meet Jesus during this heavy occasion.

But this passage reminds us of a couple of truths that we need to keep in mind. One is that we live in a fallen and broken world that is full of pain. And often we look at pain as something that is not suppose to be in our lives. But God has built our bodies to know and receive pain. Our bodies indicate when something is wrong - when some area of our body needs attention. We also know emotional pain or relational pain when there is something wrong with a particular relationship in our lives. God has built our humanity in such a way as to be able to receive pain. And we realize that God is an all purposeful God. He does everything for a reason. So as believers in Christ we realize that the pain we suffer is by divine appointment.

We also realize pain has a transformative affect in our lives. The Bible is full of passages that indicate that God uses the pain to transform our character and being. This is the purpose in the here and now. Romans 5:3-5 says, "**Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.**" Listen to 1 Peter 1:6-7, "**In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.**" And James says something similar in James 1:2-4, "**Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you**

**know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."**

So you get the idea that God ordains and uses pain. But for us as believers in the midst of sorrow and pain where do we turn? We turn not only to God but the God who is the God of all comfort. We turn to what he has revealed about himself and what he has promised. We realize that we were not meant for this world but for another. And the greatest comfort comes not in a pain free life but a life that is lived under his promises and passages like this that are so preparatory in our lives. So I want us to see two things tonight that I hope will help us as we live in this fallen world. I want us to see the anguish of Martha and the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

1. We see the anguish of Martha. V. 20-22.

This was an act of faith that Martha goes out to meet Jesus because we know in the text that Jesus loved this little family of three. And we know that God loves us. And we know in the midst of anguish and heart ache and pain that we are to turn to the God of all comfort, even when we do not feel like it. Sometimes it is an act of faith just to get out of bed and come out to church to meet with other believers and sing hymns of the faith and pray to our great God. And it is not that the anguish and heart ache are taken away because the anguish is real.

And you can here it expressed in verse 21, "**Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'**" Some commentators are really hard on Martha here and say that she is angry with Jesus for not coming sooner and she is taking her frustrations out on him. And I do not see that here, but just the expression of an anguish heart trying to make sense of all that has taken place and the reason behind all of it. We see this language of struggle used throughout the Psalms. David says in Psalm 13:1-2, "**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?**" So often in moments of pain we do feel forgotten in life. We are trying to make sense out of our grief and the purposes of God and the God who loves us and is for us. God invites us, not to ever be bitter and angry or have some adverse and settled state against God, but to bring our confusion and pain to the God of all care and comfort.

But there is also a sense that when we are hurting and in pain and suffering we lose hold of many of the truths of God's word and the glorious truth of who God is. And you see a couple of subtle tendencies of unbelief here in this statement that is made to Jesus. She says, "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" The meaning here is that God or Jesus (who is God) is somehow limited. He has to be present in order to act. There are some places where God is not present in the entirety of his being so he cannot act on our behalf. Remember very early in the gospel an official comes to Jesus because his son is sick. And Jesus tells in him chapter 4 to go, your son is well or your son has to been healed. Jesus being God is not confined to geography or limited by time and space as we are. He is the ever present God.

But the second one is the one that we struggle with so many times. And that is that we cannot understand why God allowed something to happen or didn't stop

something from happening. One of the most popular teachings around in the wider sphere of Christianity today is that it is always God's will to heal. And you can see that with the words of Martha, "**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.**" Some believers really struggle with this. They pray and pray and get others to pray, and they believe that it is God's will to heal this person, and then when they pass, where was God? Where was his faithfulness? And we have to know this: it is not always God's will to heal. Hebrews 9:27 says, "**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.**" Look at that word "appointed." And he is talking about the all people. And the meaning of appointed is that God's will is that you and I would die, and those whom we love would die at a particular time in which God has ordained - which he has willed, and there is nothing that can alter that.

And you can also see that in the text. Look back at verse 6, "**So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.**" God is sovereign and we are not. He also knows so much more of his plans and purposes than we could ever know. But look how she continues in verse 22, "**But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.**" This is a statement of faith in Jesus. But she is certainly looking for a resurrection. She is certainly not saying: "Jesus if you ask the Father he will resurrect my brother." And certainly Jesus has the power and the authority to do that, but she as we see in the verses that comes after is not looking for Jesus to cause him to rise from the grave, but maybe Jesus can cause some good to come out of this but he is certainly limited in what he can do. But Jesus is our limitless God and Saviour. We place limits of God because we have limits. God has none. He is unlimited and can do far more than we ask or think. And so often in the midst of our grief we miss that God has not stopped giving grace and accomplishing his purposes.

So in grief, as we struggle with so many questions, we have to intentionally remind ourselves of who God is. We have to have others come speak truth into our lives that we already know, and hearing those old, old truths has a way of giving clarity and confidence even in the midst of grief and heaviness. And this is where we come to our greatest hope.

2. We see the hope we have in Jesus. Vv. 23-26.

I believe that when people are suffering, especially the loss of a loved one we are hoping that some of our words can take away the pain and grief of the individual. And there are a couple things then we have to realize. One is that we realize that the pain of death is that it is so final. It is the termination of that life. We feel the separation that comes. People offer cliches trying to offer comfort that they are looking over you or they are always with you. But for the one going through the anguish they realize the truth that they cannot talk, enjoy and have the comfort of that person's presence any longer. All of the cliches vanish in the face of death. Death always shows how impotent and weak we are. It invades all of our lives and will invade them time and time again. Death is final. There is no going back.

And the second thing we have to realize is that if there is going to be any comfort that we can have or bring others then there has to be one who has power over death. There has to be one who not only controls the circumstances and timing of

death but ultimately can destroy death. To bring John Owen's famous statement that there has to be a death of death. And turning our minds and hearts on him and offering his promises and what he says about death is what will bring the greatest comfort to those who are suffering. There is really life after life, and life after death, and it is the fullest expression of life because of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished.

So look at what Jesus says here, **"Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.'"** That is a declarative statement of truth. Your brother - the one that you love and I love - will rise again. This is the comfort that Jesus can give and only he can give. None of us have the power of the resurrection. And this is the unique hope of those who are believers in Christ. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, **"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words."** What an encouragement! The light has dawned in the valley. The sting of death has been conquered by the power of Christ. For all those who die in Christ, we can say with certainty, "your brother will rise again!"

But look at how the narrative continues in this passage, **"Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.'"** This is one of the things that is amazing because so many think that the faithful Jews of the Old Testament had no faith in the resurrection, but they believed in the resurrection, along with the Pharisees of the gospels. She knew that Lazarus who had put his faith in God and the Messiah would rise one day, but certainly it was beyond the power of Jesus to do it at this point. It is amazing how often people doubt the power of Christ throughout the gospels and then they are so surprised.

But what Jesus is doing is something that he did with Nicodemus and with the woman at the well, and that is to patiently draw her to a greater faith and greater light to his personhood - to who he is and have confidence in him. And what we have is what is considered by many to be some of the most precious words to fall out of the mouth of our Lord and Saviour. Look at what he says here, **"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.'"** This is the fifth of seven "I AM" statements of Jesus thus far throughout this gospel. We realize that Jesus is the bread of life, the light of the world, he is the door and he is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. And we realize that this is a statement of deity. Jesus again is the all power, uncontainable, and unlimited God who is able to do what he promises and anything he wants to do. His promises comes to pass because he is able to bring them to pass.

And Jesus says that he, as the great "I AM" is "the resurrection and the life." And then he goes on right after that and promises any and all who believe in him, though they die will live eternally. And then he goes on in verse 26 and says those who believe in him will never die. Now what does he mean by all this? And the key is recognizing who Jesus is. Because this is an announcement of both deity and identity. He is revealing something about him. And here it is: he is not a resurrection but "the"

resurrection. He is not a life but “the” life. In other words he not only the source of resurrection and life but the resurrection and the life.

And it is amazing because he is only days away from entering Jerusalem for the final week before the crucifixion, and this is an announcement that because of his perfect life, and substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, and his resurrection, all those who have faith in Jesus will have resurrection and life. And the reason is because of our total identification with Jesus Christ. We are in Christ. The life that he lived we lived, and since death could not hold him it cannot hold those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. He is not just a teacher of the resurrection. He is not just announcing that Lazarus will rise one day but he is the divine author and source and reason for that resurrection.

So though we die, we shall live. Though the ones that we love in the Lord die they shall live. And look at verse 26 again, “**and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?**” Now what does he mean here? And the meaning flows through the last verse. After they have been given resurrection they will never die again. They will be given a life that cannot die. Listen to Revelation 20:6, “**Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.**” Why are you blessed if you share this resurrection - there is no death. You will live, reign and be with Jesus forever and ever. And this, as we talked about last time, such a quality of life that nothing here truly compares to the life that we shall have with Christ.

Now let me end with a couple of challenges. The first is right in the text. Look at the question that Jesus asks Martha, and the questions that he asks each of us: “**do you believe this?**” The “this” is who Jesus is and that the only hope of life eternal is found in him and him alone. It is so easy to trust in others things, but we are reminded by death that everything that we put our hope in will fail us. If your only hope is in the things of the here and now, how hopeless and frightened you must be, because at every turn everything can be taken away from you. Death always hangs over you and the ones that you love. But Christ gives an incredible and life altering promise through simple belief and trust in him. Have you put your trust in him? There is so much comfort here no matter what happens in your life.

And the other challenge is for those who would consider themselves believers, and the challenge is right in the text also, and it is: “**do you believe this?**” We can hear these truths so often that they stop being what they used to be and that is absolutely awesome, thrilling and exciting. They cause us to long for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. We can answer the question that Jesus asked with a yes, but it is a half hearted yes. And when things are taken away, we often come back to this promise as more of a consolation rather than a great and glorious hope that brings joy, courage and strength. No matter what has been taken away or what happens in our life, our best life is never behind us. It is always in front of us. Do you believe this?