
How many times have you been cruising along in life and suddenly it's as if you get knocked off your feet totally unsuspecting? Something happens that you were just not ready for and I am not talking about good, happy surprises but difficulty and pain. For most of us the first thing we do is wonder where God was at and why He was not there to protect us, prevent this from happening, or shelter us from the tragedy. I know for me, my first *reaction* is panic and fear and rarely do I *respond* by trusting and resting in the Lord. I tend to freak and act like someone who does not belong to the Creator of the universe—like this one slipped by Him. I act like either He is not sovereign over my life or that His plans for me are just plain bad.

Regardless, both of these are just *reactions* and are not grounded in truth. The truth is that He is sovereign over my life and I have entrusted myself to Him. The truth is that He is the *gate* that manages everything in my life and nothing can happen absent His consent. The truth is that He loves me and I am precious to Him. The truth is that all the paths that He chooses for me are good because He is “the” *good shepherd*. Now, if I choose to *always* believe this, then guess what? In times of trouble, I will *respond* in the Spirit and rest in His ownership of my life and not *react* by what I perceive is happening all around me. This I believe is the key lesson we learn from our text in Chapter 11 of John.

John 11:1-3

A man named Lazarus was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, Mary and Martha. This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick. So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, "Lord, your dear friend is very sick."

This is the first time John introduces us to friends of Jesus. So far all we know is that He hangs out with His followers and His immediate family thinks He is crazy. But Jesus did have friends; people who were very near and dear to His heart.

John 11:4-7

But when Jesus heard about it he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this." So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, he stayed where he was for the next two days.

Clearly Mary and Martha sent the messenger to Jesus because they were hoping that He would come and heal their brother. But even though Jesus deeply loved this family He stayed where He was for another two days. We are not told that He was busy doing anything particularly important; He just stayed. It's really strange and at a first glance not very "loving." They were deeply concerned for their brother and called on Jesus to help, but He just stays hanging out. But things are not always as we perceive them to be. Jesus had a plan; a plan to teach His loved ones to grow deeper in their faith.

He told His disciples that this sickness will not *end* in death but He never said it will not include death. And we must also keep in mind that throughout this text this notion of death is a layered notion speaking both of physical death and spiritual death (being bound by sin) and Jesus seems to walk in and out of both meanings. This is the same thing for the word "life" it applies both to eternal life now and forever as well as physical temporal life. These words have layers.

Jesus also said that Lazarus' sickness was for the glory of God so that the Son would receive glory from what was going to happen. This is an amazing statement and is very similar to what He told the disciples about the man who was born blind. This might be hard to accept, but there are times where sicknesses, even long lasting sicknesses, disabilities, and death, come directly from the hand of God. So often we get thrown for a loop when something "tragic" happens, but if you are a believer, you have to trust that God always has a plan. It may or may not be for your recovery, but it will be for His glory.

John 11:8-16

Finally, he said to his disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." But his disciples objected. "Rabbi," they said, "only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?" Jesus replied, "There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light."

Then he said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up." The disciples said, "Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!" They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died. So he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And for your sakes, I'm glad I wasn't there, for now you will really believe. Come, let's go see him." Thomas, nicknamed the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too—and die with Jesus."

Bethany, where Lazarus' lived, was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, which means if they were to go to Lazarus' aid they would once again be entering the legal jurisdiction of the priests who have been trying to kill Jesus. The disciples are understandably worried. They are like, "are you crazy, you can't go back there, not yet." They could not understand what He was thinking; the last time they were there they barely escaped being pummeled with rocks. I am sure that there was a little self-interest tied into their zeal to "protect" the Lord; the disciples were probably afraid they would also be killed. Besides, it must have been nice to be out of the center of controversy and conflict for just this brief moment and catch their breath.

Then Jesus says this weird statement about the day: "There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world. But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light." First of all, let me give you just a little historical reference. The Jews split up their day in 12-hour segments so we have to understand that there is nothing more to the first part of the statement than just that. It's like saying the Sun sets on the western horizon. Well we know it does not literally set for the earth rotates around the sun, but it is just how we talk about things.

But in the next part of the statement, I believe Jesus is saying that His steps are established according to the providence of God. He walks in the Father's light and so He does not worry; He just proceeds to fulfill all the works that the Father has established for Him. So having trusted Himself completely to the Father, He can go forward with confidence, even if that means traveling back to Jerusalem. Jesus contrasts this way of living (fully trusting oneself to the Father) with those who trust their own light, which is really darkness. They are the ones who have to worry and they are the ones who are going to stumble about. They don't know what they

are to do and where they are to go. They are constantly guessing and they have no covering of protection over their lives. They are truly exposed and at risk. But not those who walk in the Father's light—they are safe.

Thomas did not really listen to what Jesus just said, or at least did not understand it; he just jumps out there like a hero: if Jesus was going to put Himself in danger, then he will too. I am sure the other disciples who were probably afraid, tired, and just wanted to be safe for a while just rolled their eyes.

This little piece of the dialogue should give you a feel for how explosive these encounters with the religious leaders really were. We can read the story and it often it is nothing more than flat print on a page, but we need to try and get into the story and place ourselves right there in the middle of the drama and try to feel the intensity of the interpersonal conflict and the way emotions just fly back and forth. The times were dangerous and real lives were at risk. Now, Thomas' statement is pretty courageous but it reveals a pattern of unbelief that infects not only the disciples but all of us: we just don't take the Word of God as authoritative. Jesus just recently told them:

John 10:17-18

"For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father."

It's as if they listened to what He said and thought it was cool, but they did not accept it as real. It is clear that the disciples have not yet understood that every part

of Jesus' life was being directed by the Father and that nothing was random, nothing was arbitrary, and nothing could happen unless the Father permitted it. In truth, they should have been totally at peace going with Jesus wherever He wanted—they were walking with God. In the same way, we need to learn to trust the fact that Jesus is our *gate* and He is our *good shepherd*, so we can trust Him where He leads us—even if from our perspective it is into the midst of a dangerous or uncomfortable situation. We have to let the Word of God be our ultimate *authority* in our life. I have said this over and over because I believe for most of us this is still a serious problem. We take the parts we like—that which fits into our mode of living—but we tend to still pass over the parts that require us to give up ourselves and trust wholly in Him. This is something God wants to remedy.

Jesus then tells them that Lazarus is asleep (He uses an idiom that was very familiar to the Greeks who called their burying places dormitories or houses for those who sleep). But the disciples were just not tracking with Him for it is clear their self-interest was first priority; “if he is sleeping he will get better” we don't need to go. Let's just stay here where it is safe. Finally, Jesus had to say that Lazarus was dead. Jesus also points out that there is a purpose in all of this: so that they might have another opportunity to believe that He is the I Am. They have heard Him say it and to some extent I am sure they believe it; but it still has not moved from “belief” to faith. They are not yet willing to actively believe this truth. By active, I mean they have not been willing to lay down their logic, their emotions, and their fears, and trust that Jesus is God in the flesh. The reality, the truth, is that Jesus is their Lord and they can be at rest for real. He has all things under control and their lives are in His hands. He is the *gate* over all that happens in their life and He is going to demonstrate this truth so they once again have a tangible reason to trust in the intangible Word of God.

John 11:17-27

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again." "Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?" "Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God."

So Jesus finally arrived at Bethany and Lazarus had already been dead for 4-days. Just so you know it was Jewish custom to bury their dead on the same day they die. Can you imagine the disappointment of Mary and Martha? They had specifically sent messengers to ask Jesus to come and help their brother and He did not come and now their brother rotting in a grave and all they can do is mourn. I am sure their feelings were deeply hurt and they did not understand why He did not come. They probably felt abandoned, rejected, and so alone.

When they were told that Jesus had arrived, Mary just stayed in the house, which would have been totally unusual for Mary. ***Luke*** conveys for us a story in

Chapter 10 of a time when Jesus went to their house for dinner and Martha was all busy making preparations for the meal, cooking and cleaning, and Mary was just sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to Him talk. She was totally into the relationship while Martha was into being responsible. So I am sure that because of the way Mary was emotionally wired, and her obvious bond of affection for Jesus, that her pain ran deep and she was angry, shaken up, and unsure. I am sure her heart was broken over the fact that her brother died, but even more so over the fact that her Messiah chose not to act on her behalf.

But Martha rushes out to see Jesus and instantly *reacts*: “Lord, if only you would have been here.” She reacts to the pain of her circumstances and in effect puts the blame on Jesus. I doubt she even really understood what she said. On the one hand she says that she believes, and has always believed, that Jesus is the Messiah, but then she places Him in a itty bitty box of human reason, “if only.” This phrase does not make any sense. If Jesus came from God, is the Son of God, the Messiah (all as she proclaimed to believe), then did he really need to be there to prevent Lazarus from dying? It is clear that Martha’s perspective was all off and she was seeing with eyes of the flesh and not eyes of true faith. Besides, we know from **John 4:43-54** that Jesus healed a Government official’s son who was sick and about to die with just a word while Jesus was in one town and the boy in another. So Jesus did not have to be there. But Martha’s response is so natural, so human, and how we tend to react to difficulties in our life. Our view of God is often so small, so constrained, and so limited. However, if God is God, and if you belong to Him, then there is no “if only.” All things unfold according to the plan and intention of the Father.

Notice that even though she has put Jesus into a box, she still has a measure of faith and expresses hope and expectation that He will do something now that He is

there: “But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.” This was her way of saying: “please do something.” It is interesting that when she looks through eyes of flesh she *reacts* to her situation and what she says makes no spiritual sense; but when she understands who she is dealing with, God in the flesh, she *responds* based on His power, His ability, and His ultimate authority. From “if only” to “I know.”

Jesus told her that Lazarus will rise again and He meant now, but Martha once again bounces back into a *reactive* mode: ““Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

I hate to admit it, but truth be told, this is how I often *react* as God has had me live through some very difficult, dark, painful, and intense situations. On the one hand there is my *New Creation* which is, by faith, believing in God’s sovereignty over my life and believes that He loves me and all that He allows in my life is an expression of His love. But, on the other hand, there is my *Old Nature* which is full of doubt, fear, and which is constantly telling me to panic and freak out because I am exposed, alone, and everything is out of control. This is a back and forth struggle that is so annoying; and it can happen from one moment to the next.

I am at rest, I am at peace, I know He has my life in His hands and I can even worship Him for who He is; **ahhhhh, what am I going to do! How am I going to take care of this mess! This is impossible! What if this happens, what if that happens; what am I going to do?** Jesus I love you, Jesus I know you care, Jesus thank you for being so intimately involved in my life, thank you for choosing me and letting be your son. Thank you for caring for me over these past 8 years and teaching me so much about who you are. Thank you for the promises you made me and I am holding on waiting for you to fulfill your Word to me. **What are you**

doing, I am tired of suffering, I am tired of going through this! Can't you just give me a break?

That is often the way it goes in the mind of Steve. I go from *reacting* in my flesh to *responding* based on the nature and character of Christ. The one is totally of my *Old Nature* and demonstrates spiritual immaturity and the other is of the *New Creation* and demonstrates the faith that resides deep within my soul. This is where Martha is and we see her going back and forth between faith and her physical reality. Are you beginning to get a feel for why this tragedy needed to happen in the first place? In His love for Mary, Martha, and the disciples, Jesus needed to teach them not to rely at all on what they can see, but to live only by the fact that Jesus is their God. Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die."

You see most of the Jews (with the exception of the Sadducees) believed in resurrection; literally that those who died would be resurrected, some to life and others to death (heaven or hell). This is where Martha is connecting with Jesus (of course, I believe this truth; it will happen at the end of time). But Jesus wanted her to understand the depth of this truth and the layers of its meaning. Since He is the resurrection, the eternal life of a believer starts here and now. He imparts the supernatural and the eternal into our being—in our *New Creation*—thus, many of the truths that we thought were reserved for the afterlife are intended to be experienced now. Further, those who die in Christ never really die, but they are alive and their spirits are in His hands (physically and spiritually). And, although this may come across as if it is a theology lesson for Martha, that is not the focus of this conversation. The focus is on the "who" not the "what." Jesus said, "I am life from the dead." I am the source of your life, I am the sustainer of your life, and

your life is found only in me; therefore, trust me and rest. Trust me with your brother! Trust me with the plans I have for you! Trust me with your now! I Am that I Am!

John 11:28-32

Then she returned to Mary. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, "The Teacher is here and wants to see you." So Mary immediately went to him. Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. When the people who were at the house consoling Mary saw her leave so hastily, they assumed she was going to Lazarus's grave to weep. So they followed her there. When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died."

So Martha went and called her sister to go see Jesus. Notice that she refers to Jesus as the teacher. Don't pass by this too quickly. Do you know that traditionally a Rabbi would never speak to a woman in public much less teach her. It just was not done. But Jesus as usual did not follow convention or human constructs of right and wrong; He followed His Father and so we find that not only was He in close personal relationship with Mary and Martha, He also taught them.

Now let's catch back up with Mary. She is at her house kind of throwing a little fit—"He did not come to help me when I asked so why should I go out to Him." But now she gets up and goes because He called her. I am sure that her heart softened and picked up a bit when she heard that He wanted to see her. This whole thing with her brother made her feel uncared for and her feelings were hurt. But instead of going out to see Jesus and say something she stays home and pouts. That

is how we often deal with each other (and with God) when our feelings are hurt. We tend to kind of “punish” the one who hurt us by withdrawing even though our heart is really just dying for the person to call out to us and let us know that we are important to them. Oh the ways of our emotions and the “me.” Sometimes they really are in the way of our experiencing all that we can in relationships.

Mary comes out and she just falls at Jesus’ feet. I love it. Sure she says the “if only” thing and those words make no sense in light of who Jesus is and who she believes He is; but still she is at His feet which is an incredible act of adoration and worship. This was not a *reaction* but a *response*. Her head may have been saying one thing (“if only”), but her heart and everything else within her body was responding to His presence. Her Messiah had called for her, He had come to see her, and her rightful place is once again at His feet worshiping Him. This is beautiful! I love this about Mary!

John 11:33, 37

When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled... But some said, "This man healed a blind man. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?"

I want to stop there for a moment and let’s consider why Jesus would be angered and troubled. My first *reaction* was to think that maybe Jesus was mad because of their unbelief. And I am sure it was not just Mary and Martha who were struggling here, but also the disciples (remember, He said this was an opportunity to further their faith). Then we even have some in the crowd make the snide comment: "This man healed a blind man. Couldn't he have kept Lazarus from dying?" You can just

hear the tone and the sarcasm. I would be, “excuse me, did you really just say that. You are a total moron. Do you know who you are talking to?” But when I look at my natural *reaction*, I have to consider that Jesus’ *response* was likely driven by entirely different motivations. My ways are not His ways that is for sure. He does not *react* according to human reason, but He *responds* according to the heart and compassions of the Father.

Besides, it makes no sense to conclude that Jesus was angry and troubled by their unbelief; that was the whole reason this event happened in the first place—so that they might believe. It was an intentional faith training opportunity. No! I think that Jesus was angry and troubled because of what sin had unleashed on those whom He loved. He created the world and His heart must break every time He stops and considers what sin and death has unleashed on humanity. I am sure He was so mad that His loved ones even had to feel this kind of pain, loss, and disappointment—that was never His desire. He knew what He was going to do, He knew that Lazarus would live, but still it hurt to see them hurt. He loved them dearly and although He was in the midst of working His plan of eternal redemption to restore all whom He loves to an eternal existence unhindered and unaffected by sin and death, for now they still suffered.

Jesus said that He is the resurrection and the life. As such, we, as believers, get to experience this reality, in part, in the *New Creation*. Death no longer has us under its bounds and sin no longer can involuntarily control us. We have been set free from its demands. But our redemptive experience won’t be complete until we get our new bodies; bodies which will be entirely unaffected by sin and death. But until that time, it is so comforting to know that when we hurt, He hurts with us.

John 11:34-36

"Where have you put him?" he asked them. They told him, "Lord, come and see." Then Jesus wept. The people who were standing nearby said, "See how much he loved him!"

Yes, Jesus cried over their pain. This reminds me of an incredible verse that God spoke to me out of *Jeremiah*. In context, He was speaking to those remaining Israelites that were not taken away into Babylonian captivity, but in my life He was letting me know that the past 7+ years of living hell have been necessary to allow me to further experience Him. But watching me writhe in pain and anguish was not something He enjoyed. He knew the end result of my suffering would be worth it; but I believe He truly hurt each and every time I hurt for He told me:

Jeremiah 42:10

...For I am sorry for all the punishment I have had to bring upon you.

The "punishment" the discipline, the correction, the instruction, the tearing away of my flesh, teaching me to choose the Spirit, however you want to say it, was incredibly painful. I have cried more in the past 7+ years than I could have ever imagined and I have shed more tears than I even thought was possible for one lifetime. And I know that each and every one of those tears was precious to the Lord and did not escape His notice.

Psalm 56:8

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.

So I am glad that my Messiah, my Savior, my Lord loves me so much that He even feels with me. Knowing this has helped me survive this difficult journey. See also: *Deuteronomy 32:36; Judges 2:18; Psalm 106:45; Hosea 11:8; Amos 7:3.*

John 11:38-45

Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb, a cave with a stone rolled across its entrance. "Roll the stone aside," Jesus told them. But Martha, the dead man's sister, protested, "Lord, he has been dead for four days. The smell will be terrible." Jesus responded, "Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?"

So they rolled the stone aside. Then Jesus looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me." Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound in grave clothes, his face wrapped in a head cloth. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him go!" Many of the people who were with Mary believed in Jesus when they saw this happen.

The unthinkable happened—Lazarus lives. Can you imagine, however, how he must have smelled? 4 days had passed since he died. Just take a piece of meat and

leave it on the counter for 4-days and see what happens; it will not be pretty. This guy stunk and had already started decomposing. In fact, our bodies start to decompose within seconds after we die. The bacteria that lives in our bodies and is kept at bay while we are alive "eats" us as soon as we die (not to mention all the insects and bugs that come after the tasty meal). I was reading that the effects of decomposition are not usually too noticeable the first day and into the second day, but after that it gets bad real fast. But Jesus wanted to make His point; He wanted everyone to see the glory of God. He waited just long enough so that everyone would know that the impossible had taken place. As He said in His prayer, He wanted His loved ones to believe that He was sent by the Father. He wanted them to believe that He was God in the flesh and nothing was too difficult for Him—nothing!

Notice also that Jesus was going to do His work regardless of whether they actually believed or not. He was doing what His Father told Him to do. So His comment to Martha ("Didn't I tell you that you would see God's glory if you believe?") was less about that moment as it was about the rest of her life. He was not requiring something of her before He would do the miracle. It was not all contingent upon Martha. Rather, He was telling her that if she were to believe that Jesus is God, she would see His glory abound in and through her life and all around her all the time.

Has God made any promises to you; promises that you know are from God? If so, He is not only able but will do all that He has said. Don't let facts (as you know them), don't let time, don't let rot, and don't let smell convince you otherwise. In other words, don't *react* to your circumstances which today may seem impossible. But *respond* based on "who" it is that made the promise. If we can get this truth buried deep within our beings, we will be able to live in the rest Jesus said should

be ours and literally be without worry. I believe this is to be our experience when we believe. While we wait for Him to fulfill His Word in our life, we can focus our time and our energy on experiencing all that He wants us to experience, in its fullness. Even if that time of waiting is filled with sorrow and sadness. This is truly a more excellent way to live. Instead of living by “if this,” “if that,” “if you,” we can live resting in His plan for our lives, His promise for our lives, and His ultimate provision for our lives.

Remember, if God is sovereign (as the Bible says He is), if He is your *good shepherd*, and the *gate* keeper over your life, then don't get so hung up on timing and don't keep placing God into an itty bitty box that is ruled and controlled by your circumstances. Let God be God! Trust yourself to Him and He will help you endure until the time that you are able to enjoy. Besides, during the time that He keeps you waiting, He wants to teach you a whole lot about Himself so that you will be able to truly enjoy the time of rescue and release that He will bring into your lives. For Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, this is now a time to enjoy. The intangible God became very tangible to them and Lazarus lives.

Let's pray.