

Life Confronted By Death

HN/SS 2/10/05 am

Reading: John 11: 28-12:11, I Thessalonians 4

Study Text: John 11: 28-37

Sing Psalms: 23, 30:1-4, 30:5-8, 30:9-12

When studying a passage of Scripture like this one before us it is good to try to summarise what is being said and to give a title to the passage. This is what you would be asked to do in Bible school. So what title would you give this passage? The scene is full of action with a number of characters – Jesus, Martha, Mary and the Jews who were comforting the sisters. What do you think would be a good title?

Many Bibles now give headings or titles to such passages. One has ‘Jesus wept’ and another ‘Jesus comforts his sisters’. Jesus did indeed weep with them and there is no doubting Jesus love for these grieving people. *See how he loved him* the Jews said.

But the NKJV we have gives a very different title – ‘Jesus and death, the last enemy’. What a strange title – death the last enemy! The thinking behind this title must be much the same as that behind the title I have given – ‘life confronted by death’.

Jesus had just declared *I am the resurrection and the life* (11:25). Suddenly he finds himself in the middle of a crowd of mourners. They were weeping and wailing over the death of Lazarus four days previously. Jesus, who is ‘the life’, knew what he was going to do – he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. How would he respond to this outpouring of sorrow and grief?

The Sisters

What happens in this narrative? Martha, having confessed *I believe you are the Christ, the Son of God*, went back to the house to call Mary. Jesus it appears had told her to do so. Jesus remained outside the village, wanting to meet them in some degree of privacy. Their house in Bethany was full of mourners at this time and was no place for a private meeting.

Martha had managed to slip away unnoticed but the attempt to call Mary *secretly* (11:28) was not successful. Mary as we know was a different character to Martha and was probably in need of more comforting. *Mary rose up quickly and went out* but the Jews saw and followed her saying ‘*she is going to the tomb to weep there*’ (11:31).

When Mary came to Jesus what did she say? What did she do? Her words were exactly the same of those of her sister. *Lord if you had been here my brother would not have died* (11:32 *cf.* 11:21). As they sat with their sick brother they must have kept saying ‘if only Jesus was here, if only Jesus was here he would heal him’. When their brother died this hope also died. Hope turned to disappointment and grief, and to them saying ‘if only Jesus had been here’.

Martha however, was able to look forward and say *but even now I know*, even now I know that God can do something (11:22). She hoped against hope. Mary spoke no such words, but note her action.

Did she not express some hope in her actions? She *fell down at the feet* of Jesus, the one who loved her, the one she believed could have healed her brother. In the midst of her grief it seemed that death was the victor, yet she struggled to believe that Jesus could somehow help even in the face of death.

Lord to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life (6:68). This is what Peter confessed. Mary was expressing the same truth. How wonderful that in the midst of her grief she came to Jesus. She left the presence of her wailing friends to go to Jesus. She was clinging to him as her only hope. And her trust in Jesus was about to be rewarded – far beyond what she could imagine let alone ask of Jesus.

Is Jesus your hope – or is your trust in yourself, in your riches, in your friends? Do you go to him in times of difficulty, in times of sorrow? He invites you to come to him. He alone has the words of eternal life. Did Mary sit at home grieving with her friends?

So often we wallow in grief and self pity. ‘Oh I still miss Henry’ she says every time I see her – Henry died ten years ago. Mary went to Jesus and see what happened! Will you go to him believing that he is able; that with Jesus all things are possible?

The Jews

The Jews followed Mary and witnessed her devotion to Jesus, as well as his love for this family. She was not afraid to show her devotion to Jesus as she fell at his feet in this public place. Moreover, it was in the providence of God that the Jews did follow, for they would be there to witness a mighty work of God. These Jews from different places, including Jerusalem, would see Lazarus come out of the tomb. Many of them would believe in Jesus (11:45). This was the purpose of this miracle remember – that you may believe.

Jesus Wept

How did Jesus respond to Mary? He saw her weeping, and also the Jews with her weeping. It was an emotional scene. Was Jesus swept up in this emotion? Was it simply a matter of ‘*see how he loved him*’?

Jesus wept. The word in the original is different to that used for the weeping of Mary and the Jews. They were wailing and giving loud expression to their grief. Some were probably professional wailing women hired according to Jewish custom. The word used of Jesus however means ‘to shed tears’ in a quiet manner. This is the only use of this word as a verb in the whole New Testament.

Whilst Jesus’ weeping does reveal his humanity and show his sympathy for the sisters in the death of their brother, there is more to his weeping than this. He was not wailing in sorrow over the death of Lazarus like the rest, for he knew he would see Lazarus alive again soon. He was not weeping as the world does, as those who have no hope (I Thessalonians 4:13).

In fact Jesus tears were because of

- the unbelief that he was witnessing and
- the terrible effects of sin in this world.

Jesus had just declared that he was the resurrection and the life, that those who believe in him though they die yet they shall live (11:25). If people believed this they would not wail as the ungodly do. Just think – within a short while all the wailing would have stopped for Lazarus would be walking out of the tomb. Jesus came to put an end to grief and wailing. Do you believe this?

After Jesus had been crucified, after he died, he rose again in victory over death. He came into this world to give life and remove the tyranny of death. Do not be ignorant; do not be unbelieving, *lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus* (I Thessalonians 4:13).

Jesus wept as he saw the terrible effects of sin and death in this fallen world. This was not the way everything was created in the beginning. Adam disobeyed God, he sinned against God and death came into the world. *Through one man sin entered the world and death through sin* (Romans 5:12). And this is not the way it will be in the new heaven and the new earth. *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow nor crying* (Revelation 21:4). Jesus longed for them to believe that in him that great day was already here.

You have turned my mourning into dancing for me, you have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness (Psalm 30:11).

Jesus Groaned In Spirit

Before looking at what is meant here we must examine the word translated ‘groaned’. It is variously translated as ‘deeply moved’, ‘groaned’, ‘indignant’, and ‘outraged’. It literally means ‘in strength’ and was used to refer to the snorting of a horse. Heavy breathing or sighing accompanied this action. In other New Testament passages it is translated as ‘warned sternly’ or ‘charged strictly’ (Matthew 9:30, Mark1:43). So it seems to be stronger than ‘deeply moved’ or even ‘groaned’ but maybe not quite ‘outrage’.

What was Jesus indignant about? Why was he troubled or agitated? As with his shedding of tears, it was firstly because of the unbelief he was witnessing. When he saw them weeping *he groaned in his spirit and was troubled* (11:33). They were weeping as those who have no hope, as those who do not believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Secondly, Jesus had come face to face with his greatest enemy, the ruler of death. He saw the effects of death, and the power of death. He would again confront death, his own death in Gethsemane. In agony and anguish he would sweat like great drops of blood. Death is the domain of Satan. Jesus came to destroy Satan’s deadly grip on humanity. Well might he ‘snort’ as he faced this battle.

Moved with both sympathy and indignation Jesus said *where have you laid him?* (11:34). Jesus was moved in his spirit, he was stirred to go and conquer death. Death and the shadow it was casting over life would be removed for the moment with the raising of Lazarus. Death’s shadow would be removed forever in the raising of Jesus Christ, the Son of God from the dead – do you believe this?

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