

MAKING SENSE OUT OF SUFFERING

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
from Jerry Vines Ministries
2295 Towne Lake Parkway
Suite 116 #249
Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

One of the most common forms of confusion new Christians encounter is the subject of suffering. Many times, it is assumed that once a person turns their life over to Christ, it is anticipated that a more or less trouble-free future awaits them. While this might seem naïve to more mature believers, it nonetheless common to new believers.

And, to make things worse, there are some very popular preachers who draw tens of thousands to their conferences every year, conferences where a message of health, wealth, and happiness is what they claim is the destiny God promises every believer. Untold heartache, disillusion, and discouragement have been the result of many new believers, so much so, that they end up leaving the church and casting faith aside.

The significance of John chapter 11 is to correct such a skewed understanding of suffering. It's significance cannot be over-estimated. The entire chapter assists us to make sense out of suffering.

As we study this portion of Scripture, let us follow the outline below:

- I. Our Suffering is Undeniable (vv. 1-18)**
- II. Our Sorrow is Unavoidable (vv. 19-24)**
- III. Our Savior is Uncomprehensible (vv. 25-57)**

I. Our Suffering is Undeniable (vv. 1-18)

One of the saddest experiences to come into any life or home is the death of a loved one or friend. It is a time of sadness, not a time of gladness. In fact, it was in just such a moment that Jesus made one of the most startling statements which fell from His lips: "I am glad" (v. 15). This is not what we would expect during a time of grief. Nor did the disciples expect such.

Let us begin, then, and note the sickness in this story (vv. 1-3). Trouble had come to a family which was close to Jesus: "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha...now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus" (vv. 1-5). Located on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, Bethany was two miles southeast of Jerusalem. Interestingly, "Bethany" means "House of Affliction."

From the description we find concerning Bethany, it was a place where Jesus particularly loved to go. Why? There was a home there where He found refuge. Think of it: the one Isaiah predicted would be "despised and rejected" of men found refuge in the Lazarus household.

One of the most precious blessings of life is to have a home; a home where we can find rest, understanding, acceptance, peace, and love. A question for all of us to consider is, would Jesus feel such a reception in our home? Could your home be on Jesus' list were He in your neighborhood? Yet, even such a warm and inviting place Jesus experienced at the Lazarus household, that closeness to Jesus did not make their home immune to sickness: "Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying Lord behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (v.3).

Note especially here that sickness in the life of a Christian is not incompatible with the Lord's love for him. He loves us just as much when we are sick as when we are well. Nor should a Christian sense guilt because he does suffer sickness like some popular television personalities seem to say. Such celebrity

Reflection Connection

Reflect on a time when you experienced grief over the sickness or passing of a loved one? If you are comfortable, share this experience with the group and allow others time to participate.



Reflection Connection

We often think of Jesus so treating everyone equally, that no one could become “special” to Him even in social relationships. What do you think? Do you think you have a home in which Jesus could find refuge if He came to your side of town? What characteristics might He desire?

Reflection Connection

Imagine how Mary and Martha felt. Would you feel that God had abandoned you if, in your grief, He never showed up? Explain.

preachers who thrive on “health and wealth,” telling Christians it is wrong to be sick and if they are sick, it is because there is no faith. They will be judged severely by God for deceiving the poor, helpless sheep.

There is another truth to keep firmly in our mind. When Mary and Martha experienced their sickness, they knew exactly where to turn: *they took their trouble to Jesus* (vv. 3, 6). One can never go wrong in doing so. Their actions are an example for us. They acted in a time of sickness and sought the Lord out, making Him fully aware of their needs (cp. Psalm 46:1; Isa. 37:14).

Now, when they went to Jesus, they did not tell Him what to do. Instead, they just told Him the situation, leaving the decision to Him. This was a visible display of their full trust in Jesus. God knows better for us than we know for ourselves. And, while there is nothing wrong in our making requests—obviously we make requests when we pray—there is something special in simply leaving it up to the Lord to decide what is best.

Still another truth we learn as we consider how suffering is undeniable is that there is *purpose in suffering* (vv. 4, 15). Not a single thing comes into our lives that is not permitted by the Lord or possesses purpose from the Lord. In Scripture, suffering and glory are always connected (Luke 24:26). The way of the cross was the way of glory.

This truth is clearly revealed by Jesus Himself: “*When Jesus heard that, he said, this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby*” (v. 4). According to the Lord Jesus, Lazarus’ sickness had a connection to the glory of God. It possessed divine meaning. While this is not a message we may want to hear when we are in the midst of pain, such truth, in the end, gives every sphere of our life basic meaning, including our personal suffering. Someone wrote: “*The dealings of the Father’s hand must ever be looked at in light of the Father’s heart.*”

To demonstrate this truth, Jesus actually delayed His trip to Bethany upon hearing of Lazarus’ critical condition (vv. 6, 17). Imagine for a moment the confusion our Lord’s decision must have been to the family of Lazarus. They did not expect this; neither do we. Once again, our Lord had purpose in His delay (cp. Isaiah 30:18).

Two truths stand out concerning Jesus’ delay. *First, He sometimes delays because He has something better for us.* Jesus said to His disciples: “*And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent that ye may believe*” (v. 15). Jesus connected the temporal pain with the much greater purpose of creating faith. Thus, the delay was for a greater blessing to receive.

*They took
their trouble
to Jesus.*

Secondly, Jesus’ delays will always connect the dots between our basic good and God’s deserved glory. This establishes God’s presence in our lives during our most difficult moments. He never leaves His children alone!

One final truth as we consider how undeniable suffering is: Jesus spoke about the ultimate *result* of suffering—physical death—in terms of a *restful* image. For



Jesus, death was like sleep: “*These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep*” (v. 11).

The image of sleep when referring to death became a common term early Christians frequently used (cp. Matt. 9:24; Acts 7:60; 1 Thess. 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:6). Understand, however: *When Jesus used sleep as an image of death, He was not implying that the soul went into some kind of alternate existence that was completely unconscious.* Recall that even the disciples did not fully understand Jesus’ use of sleep at first (vv. 13-14).

Instead, not only was death to be seen as a time of rest and refreshment (i.e. sleep), it was time of awakening on another shore we call Heaven (cp. Rev. 14:7). While suffering is undeniable, God never leaves our side.

II. Our Sorrow is Unavoidable (vv. 19-24)

Suffering never fails to have sorrow following close on its heels. Sorrow is an unavoidable experience of life because suffering is an inevitable experience of life.

Before Jesus arrived at Bethany, Lazarus had died: “*Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead... Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already*” (vv. 14, 17). Mary and Martha were obviously heartbroken. They did not know what you and I know. Their sky was dark and dreary, a sense of doom hanging over them.

Mourners came to visit Mary and Martha. Included among the friends who came were professional mourners, a Jewish custom that no doubt seems strange to us. Another strange feature of the mourning process was, while our typical mourning period which includes a formal memorial service lasts from 2-3 days, the standard custom then called for a full seven days.

But differences between mourning then and now should not overshadow our deep connection with them: we feel with Mary and Martha the deep sadness which filled their little home in Bethany. That is because sorrow is universal and thus transcends every historical era.

It is true; however, that we respond to sorrow in varied ways. For example, Martha, being the practical, impatient working type, all but scolded Jesus when she saw Him. It was almost as if she said, “*Why did you tarry? What took you so long?*” (vv. 20-21).

On the other hand, consider the collected, calm and contented Mary who sits at Jesus’ feet in mourning just as she sat so often at His feet in ministry (v. 32).

But no matter the person, the truth for us to consider is, Jesus has a word for us in our particular need: “*Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live*” (v. 25). That stands as a powerful word for us, even in the deepest pit of our pain and suffering.

The fact is, death is not for believers! That sounds too fantastic to accept. But it is nonetheless true. Understand, however, Jesus is not here speaking of physical death. Instead He meant that one would not die eternally. In other words, for

Reflection Connection

Sometimes when we are hurting, it’s like God stops speaking. When this happens, what is the option the believer has? Be careful to explain.

Reflection Connection

We often hear “TV celebrity preachers” speaking as if it is not God’s will for any child of His to feel pain or face difficulty. What is insufficient about this message? Avoid this time turning into a gripe session about all “Television Evangelists.” Balance the discussion with positive remarks about good religious broadcasting.



Reflection Connection

Death is considered a curse we inherit from Adam's sin (and ours, Rom. 5:12). Yet, Jesus said that the person who believes in Him would never die. But, we all die! Is there tension between Paul and Jesus? Explain.

Reflection Connection

As the people looked on and saw Jesus weeping at Lazarus' tomb, what do you think went through their minds? Do you think Mary and/or Martha resented the fact that Jesus waited so long to come to them? Do you think they may have been angry at Jesus since He did not use His miraculous powers to save their brother?

the believer, when the physical body dies, the spiritual person lives on eternally with Christ.

Furthermore, since Jesus is the giver of life, He is life right now. In other words, life is not just in the future; eternal life begins when one believes on the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Our Savior is Uncomprehensible (vv. 25-57)

The story of Lazarus' death has thus far taught us the *undeniable reality of suffering*. No one can deny it; suffering is a part of our real existence. Nor does it matter if one is close to Jesus as was Lazarus, whom Jesus loved very much.

Secondly, we have been instructed that *with suffering inevitably comes sorrow*. Mary and Martha embody perfectly this lesson for us. Their sorrow and grief were deep and painful. And, even being the close friends of the Lord Jesus Himself did not spare them the pain due to suffering.

Finally, in making sense out of suffering, we see here in these final verses how *uncomprehensible is our Savior*. Notice Jesus as He proceeds to the burial tomb of His friend, Lazarus: "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see" (vv. 33-34).

When Jesus considered what sin had brought to His beloved friend, in their suffering agony, John says He "groaned in the spirit, and was troubled." Let us be clear here: it is not that suffering was placed upon Lazarus' household because Lazarus and his two sisters were such great sinners (cp. Luke 13:1-5). Instead, suffering is a universal result of Adam's sin in the Garden (Gen. 3:1-10).

It is this suffering and sorrow as a result of the fallen corrupt world that Jesus so groans about. Nothing speaks more of sin's consequences and suffering than the burial tomb. Thus, when Jesus stands before the huge stone, a stone similar to the one that would seal His own tomb in the near future, John records the most moving verse in all the New Testament: "Jesus wept" (v. 35).

John describes through this phrase His deep silent sobbing as he stood before Lazarus' lifeless corpse. Two other times the New Testament records Jesus' tears (Luke 19:41; Heb. 5:7). The sorrow caused by sin literally broke the Son of God's heart.

Our minds barely fathom the great care our Savior has for us. He weeps over our welfare. He sobs over our sickness. He groans over our grief. In the end, He would forfeit His life so that our life we could keep. That is our Savior!

As Jesus' heart focuses again on the tomb, He told them to remove the stone. However, the faith that had the power to save was not yet rooted in neither

The sorrow caused by sin literally broke the Son of God's heart.



Reflection Connection

Jesus instructed the mourners to remove the stone from the tomb. How involved do you think God desires us to be in the miracles He performs in our lives? Does our involvement take away from His glory? Why or why not?

Reflection Connection

Someone has said that suffering will either make you bitter or better. What do you think is meant by that? Think of a time in your own life when facing suffering made you better. Now, reflect upon a time when suffering may have made you bitter.

Mary nor Martha's heart: "Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days" (v. 39). Her void would soon be filled with living, thriving, saving faith.

Obviously, Jesus could have moved the stone as simply a preliminary part of the miracle. Yet, He draws out of us, through things we ourselves can do, a connection in participating in the work with Him. In addition, we learn through this, the many obstacles that must be overcome to see the greater work of God performed.

In our own lives, each of us has storms that need to be rolled away. And, while God could, in the twinkling of an eye, remove them for us, He instead bids us to roll the stone away. Stones like pride or the rock of any ugly spirit or the boulders of worldliness, unconcern, and selfishness. Are we prepared to roll those rocks aside and allow the spoken words of Jesus to raise the dead in our life?

Once the stone was removed, Jesus summoned Lazarus to arise (v. 43). Imagine standing there beside Mary and Martha when such words were uttered. Would you feel sorry for them? Would you be angry that this man would so disrupt the normal mourning process and pull such a crazy stunt as to speak to a dead man in a tomb?

Jesus had before simply asserted His authority as Sovereign (cp. Mark 5:4; Luke 7:14). Now upon His command as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, even the dead must obey His voice.

Lazarus dead became Lazarus alive! Stepping to the threshold of the tomb's entrance, Jesus then instructed the servants to remove the grave cloths (v. 44). What an incomprehensible Savior we have!

Lazarus became the talk of the town, resulting in Mary meeting and believing on Jesus (v. 45). The buzz soon reached the Pharisees (v. 46),

who circled the wagons to deal with such a verifiable miracle (v. 47). One of the most vocal of them whose name was Caiaphas counseled them to just ride out the storm and wait for an opportune time (vv. 49-52). Not even knowing it, Caiaphas's counsel sealed the eternal plan of redemption in place: "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death" (v. 53).

Jesus moved on from Bethany but things were never the same as before. His presence produced much anxiety wherever He traveled. And, He needed to be extremely cautious, lest He be taken before His appointed time (vv. 54-57). Jesus raising the dead, giving life to all who believe on Him is precisely why we say with so much excitement: Our Savior is incomprehensible!

He draws out of us, through things we ourselves can do, a connection in participating in the work with Him.



Wrap Up

It is hard to make sense out of suffering. Doing so has been in the minds of philosophers, on the pages of scribes, in the sacrifices of religions since history began. And no one to date has come close to making sense but Jesus Christ.

And, while it still remains hard for us, it is not impossible as our Lord teaches in John 11. We find that suffering is undeniable on the one hand and inevitably results in sorrow on the other. But amidst it all, we have a glorious Savior who bears our sorrow and takes upon Himself our pains. It is through this magnificent incomprehensible Savior, Jesus Christ, that we have life when believing on His name.

Golden Greek Nugget

John 11 gives us a special look into the private life of Jesus. Evidently, He had social relationships that were special to Him. Indicative of this are Mary and Martha's words: "Lord, the one you love is sick" (v.3). The term translated "love" here is the Greek word "phileo" which carried with it the idea of a warm, brotherly type of love. For example the city of Philadelphia is the city of "brotherly love." But if Jesus had such a special love for the Lazarus household, why did He wait so long to respond to their plea? (v.6) The answer is found here: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (v.5). John uses a different word for love than Mary and Martha used. The term for love John uses is "agapao" which is a love that surpasses the object's worth; it looks beyond the temporal. Thus, while Jesus loved Lazarus' household with an especially warm, brotherly affection, He sought the highest good possible for them. And, in this case, it would be Lazarus' rising from the dead!

