

John 11:17-37

When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss. ²⁰ When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask.”

²³ Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.”

²⁴ “Yes,” Martha said, “he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day.”

²⁵ Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. ²⁶ Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?”

²⁷ “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.” ²⁸ Then she returned to Mary. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, “The Teacher is here and wants to see you.” ²⁹ So Mary immediately went to him.

³⁰ Jesus had stayed outside the village, at the place where Martha met him. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.”

³³ 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. ³⁴ “Where have you put him?” he asked them. They told him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Then Jesus wept. ³⁶ The people who were standing nearby said, “See how much he loved him!” ³⁷ But some said, “This man healed a blind man. Couldn’t he have kept Lazarus from dying?”

Background

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, people were mourning loudly with Mary and Martha (v33), expressing grief typical of Jewish mourning customs. Seeing their sorrow, Jesus “*was deeply troubled*.” Death is an enemy—the result of sin which Christ came to defeat. Jesus quietly wept, showing His true humanity. Verse 35 uses a different Greek word than the loud wailing in verses 31 and 33; it refers instead to quiet, gentle weeping.

“Jesus wept” is often cited in trivia as the shortest verse in the English Bible, but the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament is 1 Thessalonians 5:16, which uses fewer letters in Greek.

According to the Gospels, Jesus wept two other times: over unrepentant Jerusalem (Luke 19:41) and in Gethsemane, where He prayed in deep anguish (Luke 22:44). His weeping shows that expressing deep emotion is not weakness. God made us emotional beings.

Teaching Points

1. Believers react differently when a loved one dies.

Mary and Martha both said, *“If only you had been here, my brother would not have died,”* but Mary initially stayed inside and wept while Martha went out and met Jesus with a theological discussion.

Everyone grieves in their own way. Some may cry immediately, others may not, and that’s okay. The Lord didn’t rebuke either sister, teaching us that different reactions to loss are normal and acceptable.

2. There are different ways to comfort believers at the time of death.

People grieve differently. Jesus comforted Martha by answering her theological questions, assuring her He is *“the resurrection and the life”* (v25), and that believers need not fear death. This comforted her and strengthened her faith.

With Mary, it seems Jesus offered no words but simply wept quietly with her, showing that sometimes your compassionate presence and sharing the sorrow is enough to comfort.

Application

1. Don’t let your “if onlys” move you away from God.

When a loved one dies, invariably some “if only” thoughts will arise. “If only we’d gotten to the hospital sooner...” “If only he or she hadn’t taken that trip...” Things could have turned out differently. In Mary and Martha’s case it was, “if only Jesus had arrived sooner.” These types of doubts can either push us away from God or draw us closer.

Some people become bitter and angry, unable to forgive God, while others find comfort and peace by bringing their grief and questions to Him. Be ready for these “if only’s,” and choose to move closer to God, not away.