

The Lord Comforts Mary and Martha

John 11:17-37

John 11:17-27 - So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. ¹⁹ And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.

²⁰ Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. ²¹ Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

²⁴ Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. ²⁶ And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

²⁷ She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." ²⁹ As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹ Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, "She is going to the tomb to weep there."

³² Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³ Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. ³⁴ And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see."

³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" ³⁷ And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?"

Background Notes

When Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus had already been dead for four days. Lazarus must have died shortly after the messenger was sent to Jesus. It would have taken a day for the messenger to go from Bethany to the east side of Jordan, where the Lord was staying. The Lord delayed for two days (v6), and then it took another day of uphill travel to get to Bethany - a total of four days. So by then there was no doubt that Lazarus was really dead.

A number of Jews had come to console Mary and Martha, and they would have been weeping and mourning along with the sisters. The word for "weep" that is used in reference in Mary and these friends (v31, 33) is a Greek word that means a loud expression of grief, especially used in mourning and lamenting for the dead.

When I was in Jerusalem a few years ago, I heard loud weeping coming from a house. I asked our guide what was the cause of that loud continuous crying and wailing. He said that there had been a death in the family. So that kind of weeping and mourning continues in the Holy Land right up to the present day.

When the Lord saw them weeping, *“He groaned in the spirit, and was troubled”* (v33). *“Groaned in the spirit”* means His spirit was deeply moved. His spirit was not at peace. Why? Because of death! Death is an intruder! Death is an enemy! *“The last enemy that will be destroyed is death”* (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Death is an enemy! Death is the result of sin. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 6:23). Until our Lord’s death and resurrection, Satan had the power of death. *“As the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil”* (Hebrews 2:14).

By the way, *“Jesus wept”* is the shortest verse in the English Bible. And if you want to get technical, although it’s the shortest verse in the **English** Bible, the shortest verse in the **Greek** New Testament is 1 Thessalonians 5:16: “Rejoice always.” “Rejoice always” in Greek takes fewer letters than “Jesus wept” in English!

“Jesus wept.” The Greek word used for *“wept”* in verse 35 is a different Greek word than the word that is used for the loud wailing lament of Mary and the Jewish mourners in verses 31 & 33. The Greek word used for *“wept”* in verse 35 denotes quiet weeping. Our Lord wept with a quiet shedding of tears.

As far as the Gospel records go, our Lord wept only three times. He wept at the death of Lazarus, He wept over unrepentant Jerusalem, and He wept in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Notice that weeping is not a sign of weakness, and it is not wrong to weep. God made us, and He has made us emotional people! It’s not wrong for men or women to weep in times of deep emotion – in times of great joy or deep grief. This Scripture definitely supports the doctrine that Jesus was fully Man, because on this occasion of deep distress, He **wept!**

Doctrinal / Teaching Points

1. Believers react differently when a loved one dies.

We know from experience that people react in different ways to the death of a loved one, and this is certainly taught in the Bible. Even though Mary and Martha both said the same thing: *“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died”* (v21&32) - their reactions to their brother’s death were quite different. Mary stayed in the house weeping with the mourners. Martha went out to meet the Lord out on the road, and we don’t read of her weeping at all. Mary fell at the Lord’s feet, overcome with grief. Martha, on the other hand, had a profound theological discussion with the Lord! Their reactions were very different.

We all react differently when a loved one dies. When I got the news that my Dad had suddenly and unexpectedly died, I couldn't cry, and I felt guilty for not crying. I was out of town when the news came. I didn't sleep the whole night, and my mind was racing. It was snowing heavily - would I be able to make the plane connections to get to New Jersey? How was my mother managing in her sudden bereavement? What about my responsibilities to help my mother with funeral arrangements? What about her future welfare? And on and on my mind went - but I didn't cry. As I recall, I didn't shed a tear until at least a month later.

Reactions are very different. Believers react in different ways when a loved one dies. Mary and Martha both loved Lazarus, but they reacted differently. The Lord didn't rebuke either one. The Bible is teaching us here that it's all right to react in different ways when a loved one dies.

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

There are different ways to comfort believers at the time of death. Because people are different and they react differently, there are different ways to comfort them when a loved one dies. The Lord comforted Mary in one way, and He comforted Martha in another way.

With Martha, He answered her questions. Martha clearly had the Jewish idea of a general resurrection of dead on the "last day," or the day of judgment (v24). So our Lord's comforting answer to Martha was, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live*"(v25).

What was the Lord mean in this answer to Martha? In essence, He said: "Martha, you need to understand more about the resurrection. You need to understand that **I am God**, and **I am the resurrection and the life!** I have the power to raise Lazarus back to life right now! Furthermore, because I am the resurrection and the life, everyone who believes in me shall live spiritually and eternally - even though they die physically. And everyone who lives physically and believes in me will never die spiritually and eternally. So there is no need to fear death!"

If you're a believer, there is no need to fear death, because the Lord is the resurrection and the life! Martha went back to the house not only comforted, but having grown in her faith as well (v27-28). So you see, **the Lord comforted Martha by answering her theological questions!** She grew in her faith, in her understanding of who Jesus is, and in her concept of the resurrection to come.

I recall visiting a couple that had lost their child. I intended just to pray with them, but when I got there, they began to ask me all kinds of theological questions. Our whole time was spent, not so much in weeping together, but in discussing their questions. It was wonderful to see how biblical answers from the Word brought comfort and growth to them.

How different was our Lord's comfort for Mary! As far as the record goes, the Lord said nothing at all to comfort Mary. **He simply wept with her!** I believe there is a lesson here for us. We don't need to say something profound to comfort believers who have lost loved ones. Many times just our presence is enough to bring comfort. And we shouldn't be afraid

to weep with people. The Lord did! He didn't mourn loudly like those around Him, but He wept quietly with Mary.

Don't be afraid to just "be there" - but saying nothing to a person who is grieving. Your supportive presence may be all that is needed. I'm sure you know what I mean. Most of us feel awkward in that kind of situation - we don't know what to say. (Can you identify?) Well, your supportive presence may be all that is needed.

There are different ways comfort believers at the time of a loved one's death.

Practical Application

Don't let your "if only's" move you away from God.

At the time of a loved one's death, invariably the "if only's" will arise. "If only we'd gotten to the hospital sooner." "If only we had used a different doctor." "If only someone had done CPR." "If only he or she hadn't taken that trip, he wouldn't have died." We have the same kinds of reactions and questions a Martha and Mary had.

And it won't be long before the "if only's" begin to center on God. They will come, just as we see Martha's and Mary's reaction in verses 21 and 32: "*Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.*" We begin to think along those same "If only" lines: "If only God had intervened to prevent the accident." "If only God had warned us with symptoms of his illness." "If only God loved us more." "If only God wasn't mad at me."

During times of crisis and despair these "If only's" come into our thoughts, and they will move us either away from God or toward God. For both Mary and Martha, their "If only's" moved them closer to the Lord. **They turned to the LORD** with their grief and their questions.

I know people who are bitter and angry with God for "taking a loved one away" in death. They have never forgiven God! Their "if only's" have moved them away from God. But on the other hand, I know some folks who have drawn closer to the Lord as a result of a loved one's death. They have brought their grief and pain and "If only's" to the Lord, and they have found comfort and peace in the realization of His love for them and His sovereignty over life and death.

Be prepared for the problem of the "If only's" when a loved one dies. Move closer to the Lord and find comfort in Him.

Don't let your "If only's" move you away from God!