

The Grave

A Message to Mourners Concerning the Power and Sympathy of Christ (John 11)

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“She goeth unto the grave to weep there” (John 11:31).

“Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

Today, how many possess a grave where they go to weep, or one which they can visit only in thought, for it lies far away in some foreign field.

A terrible catastrophe has befallen the human race. This has been intensified by the war, though always present since sin entered, and death by sin. Some try to be oblivious to these mysterious facts — sin and death, while others are bewildered and baffled. To such, the grave, with its mystery, remains unsolved and unsolvable. It keeps its dark secret — “man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.”

Yet the grave has witnessed one of the brightest and most glorious scenes ever depicted upon the canvas of human history. It has been the occasion of a revelation—a revelation of God — which should make us wonder and adore. Out of the eater has come forth meat, and out of the strong sweetness. For the shadows of death have been illuminated and the most terrible enemy overthrown. Sorrow has been turned into joy, and defeat into triumph.

The record of this is found in John 11 and is connected with the raising of Lazarus. The chapter begins, “Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.” In that town of Bethany there lived this family of three, and Jesus had often been welcomed within its circle. There, if anywhere, He had found a home, and, for this reason, we might have looked upon it, perhaps, as a charmed circle, yet within these very precincts death is allowed to enter and claim a victim, snatching away the only and beloved brother. Not only is sickness permitted — death even is permitted. Why did not Christ intervene? Why did He not come immediately when the tidings reached Him, “Behold, he whom Thou lovest is sick?” The sisters had sent to Him, and He had received their message. Yet He tarries. He purposely stays away.

Was He indifferent? This could not be, for we read, “*Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.*” Yet He did not come, in spite of the appeal which had been made to Him. He tarries two days, and during those two days Lazarus dies. How strange are some of the ways of divine love! Things happen which seem to argue there is no divine love at all — only a blind, unfeeling force at the back of things. The heart seems to be crushed and broken beneath the seemingly ruthless blows which are allowed to fall, or it is turned into stone. Yet Jesus must have given evidence of His love, for the message sent is, “He whom Thou *lovest* is sick.” Christ then really loves, and how much meaning lies within this fact. Proofs of this had not been wanting in their case. Whatever shadows might now have fallen upon that home in Bethany, it had been brightened, in the past, by the presence of the Saviour, and many a word and look and act must have told its inmates that He loved them. Nor was it only Lazarus that He loved; all three, different as they were in temperament, had shared the same friendship. “Jesus loved Martha,” we read, “and her sister, and Lazarus.”

Yes, it was true, these sisters and their brother were the objects of His love, and He was about to give them a greater proof of it than ever. This is why He stayed away, and this is why the

shadow of death was allowed to cross the threshold of that home, contradictory as, at first sight, it may all seem. He was about to prove, in a way never dreamed of, how much He loved them, and in a way which would leave them infinite gainers, for they were to see and know Him, as they had never seen and known Him before. A new and grander revelation of His glory was about to be given them.

But some there may be reading these lines who cannot say that they know Christ, or know anything about His love. To them God and Christ are but names which come up periodically at certain functions, but are nothing more than names with which to decorate certain occasions; they mean nothing to them personally. What are you to do in your sorrow and where are you to turn?

The story we are considering can answer all your questions and meet all your need. God has revealed Himself in Christ, and nowhere is that revelation more intimate, and nowhere is it more appealing, more commanding, or more arresting than in the incident before us. May we beg your careful attention while we seek to unfold its teaching.

Let us look at this history of the family of Bethany from three points of view, and we shall see in it **(1) the love that permits sorrow, (2) the sympathy that shares the sorrow, and (3) the power that intervenes to deliver from it.** Christ said to Martha, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?"

The Love That Permits Sorrow

Sin, suffering and death were all permitted for a purpose. They are not evils over which God has no control and of which He can make no use. They are not simply destroyers of happiness — *they serve a purpose*. This is what we are so slow to realize. As soon as Lazarus was sick, the sisters sent at once to the Lord tidings of the circumstance, their one thought being that his pain and their distress might be removed. This is natural, and, from one point of view, it is legitimate. But we need to remember that the *getting rid* of the supposed evil is only one aspect of the case. Had Christ gone no further than to respond to their request, how much they and we would have missed, but He takes a wider view of the matter, and He would have us do the same.

When the message reaches the Lord, His immediate reply is not, "I will come; he must be healed without delay; he must not suffer another moment," but, "*This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.*" Are not these words worth pondering? "Not unto *death*" — "for the *glory* of God" — "that the *Son of God might be glorified thereby.*" If Mary and Martha had heard such words and understood them, would they, later on, have expostulated with the Lord on His tardy arrival? Where they saw only death, Christ saw an opportunity to reveal Himself and, in so doing, manifest the very glory of God and thus achieve their highest blessing.

Does not this utterance of Christ show us the use God can make of a simple circumstance, and also show us that the more terrible the circumstance, the brighter the glory with which God can invest it? How little those bereaved sisters dreamed that a special manifestation of

the glory of God would be forever connected with their family history! And yet this could never have been had not Jesus tarried those two days.

And so we read, “When [Jesus] had heard therefore that he was sick, *He abode two days still in the same place where He was.*” How well He knew what He would do! He was completely master of the situation. And how well God knows the meaning and the possible outcome of every circumstance of our lives! Yet appearances were all against Christ. Why this inexplicable delay, if Lazarus was sick and Jesus loved him and had power to do him good? Why abide two days still in the same place after receiving such tidings and from such a quarter? Why should those anxious sisters, watching by the bedside of their dying brother, be kept waiting, their hearts torn with anxiety, as hour after hour passes, and he seems to be slipping away. Yet Jesus comes not. There is the additional anxiety besides as to why He tarried. But there it is: Christ moves not one step in the direction of Bethany, nor does He send even a message! Oh, these divine pauses! these divine silences! How can we explain them?

Yet there is an explanation, and, in His own time and way, God will always give it. How little any of us understands His ways! The *sisters* could not understand why Christ *delayed* coming, and when He did go, the *disciples* expressed their wonder that He went. “The Jews of late sought to stone Thee,” they exclaim, “and goest Thou thither again?” Christ was misunderstood from both sides, but until the right time, not even love on His side or need on theirs would draw Him from His place. When the time to move had come, no stones would keep Him back!

*“God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.”*

Those “two days still in the same place” — can we understand them? They *seem* to argue that He does not care, and yet the sequel discloses that they were necessary. Let us remember them when God’s dealings with us are difficult of comprehension. Can we not imagine what passed in the minds of those two waiting, watching ones at Bethany? Surely it is not difficult to interpret their thoughts by what our own have been under conditions perhaps not unlike theirs. Have we not known these two days? We have prayed, and there has been no response. We may be still in “the same place” — the same place of difficulty or danger. Or worse still, during the waiting the blow we feared may have fallen, and we seem left to face the trial and bear it alone. At such times, how we are tempted to reproach God — to think Him hard and to say to ourselves, He might have done better for me.

Was there no lingering reproach in those words with which Christ was greeted when He at last reached Bethany, however politely phrased: “Lord, if Thou hadst been here, my brother had not died”? Yet, had the Lord come sooner and had He done just what they wished, how much they would have missed! His glory would never have been seen, as now they were about to see it, nor would they have seen His tears. If they had not wept, He never would have wept with them. If Lazarus had not died, the power that raised him could not have been witnessed. Those words, “Jesus wept,” would never have been written for succeeding generations to draw comfort from, nor would those words have dropped from His lips, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Yes, there is a love which permits sorrow, and Christ made no mistake when He abode two days still in the same place. The delay did not indicate want of love. Rather, it was in the highest interests, not only of those immediately concerned, but of all mankind. These sisters were not called upon to endure that sorrow simply for their own sake, but that multitudes in all ages might receive a blessing. And does not the remembrance of this help us amid all that disturbs our own minds, lacerates our hearts, or causes us to bow our heads in shame. Someone may reply, But God brought the lost one back in their case, but my loss can never be made good. True, but God has other ways of blessing and comforting. The great point even with Martha and Mary was not in having their brother back. The supreme lesson, the supreme gain, was that the bringing of him back became the means of a fuller revelation of Christ, and of God. Death, sooner or later, came to that home in Bethany again and took one or another away, but death could never take away that vision of the Son of God. And it is just in that way God would make up to you for your loss. Your heart bleeds — ties the most endearing have been riven — but God waits to make real to you those words of Christ, “This sickness is not unto *death*, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.” Do you say, How? The answer is, By faith in Him — by expecting Him to reveal Himself to you. And if you see Christ, as He is to be seen, and know Him, as He is to be known, you will, presently, even *thank* God that your sorrow was permitted. “Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?”

The Sympathy That Shares Sorrow

But there is not only the love that permits sorrow, there is also *the sympathy that shares it*. Christ does not leave us alone in our sorrow. The Son of God is glorified by the sympathy He manifests. *He has allowed the sorrow in order that He may share it with you*. And this sympathy in sorrow makes even sorrow sweet, and it will have the effect of drawing you wondrously near to Him. If love kept Him waiting in the same place for two days in order that Martha and Mary might have the fullest revelation of His glory, part of that glory would be manifested in becoming a partner in their grief. Ah, here is the reason why sorrow is allowed. Christ’s sympathy brings Him near and makes Him known. There is no call for His sympathy unless we have been stricken. The Jews sitting with Mary in the house, when she rose up hastily and went out, said, “*She goeth unto the grave to weep there.*” Little did they think that *Jesus* was going to the grave to weep there! He who had just spoken of Himself as “the resurrection, and the life” and had said, “Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die,” and whose voice was presently to wake the dead, was about to mingle His tears with the mourners at the graveside. “Jesus wept.” Those tears were the inlets to His heart and the outlets of His glory, and they revealed a fountain of sympathy just such as mourners need — a fountain which has its rise in the heart of God Himself. And those tears elicited from the standers-by the comment, “Behold how He *loved* him.” Yes, there was no doubt about it now — He loved him. And they were about to witness all that that love would do.

The Jews were mistaken. Mary had not gone to the grave to weep there; she had gone to fall at the feet of Christ. And it makes all the difference whether we fall at His feet, or visit the grave alone; whether we are occupied with the One who declares Himself to be “the resurrection, and the life,” or with the darkness of death and the separation it entails.

Bereaved one, do you know Jesus as the sharer of your sorrow? He permitted death to come to that home in Bethany that we might see Him and know Him as otherwise would have been impossible. What gain is ours, and what glory is His, as He stands before us revealed in those tears! Can He be nearer than when He mingles His tears with ours and shares our inmost grief?

*“We know Him as we could not know
Through heaven’s golden years;
We there shall see His glorious face,
But Mary saw His tears.”*

With some, sorrow puts Christ at a distance. The other day, in one of our London parks, we overheard a lady unburdening her heart to a friend. Her conversation, which was in such loud tones as to compel others to hear (no doubt the result of her strong emotion), revealed the fact that the One who saves and sympathizes was unknown. She was relating how her husband had come back from the trenches shattered in health and a physical wreck, and then she declared in excited tones she would take poison, and with an oath upon her lips she swore she did not care what happened. What a difference it makes whether we know the Son of God, as revealed in the chapter before us, or whether we do not! The one great overshadowing loss — the tragedy of all tragedies in human life — is for Him to remain unknown — the One who loves with a love that can sympathize — a love that has all power at its command and is willing and eager to exercise it, if only we will believe.

The Power That Delivers From Sorrow

And this brings us to our third point, *the love that delivers*.

The state of the dead is, owing to the war, engaging the attention of men and women more than ever before. If some were only as much occupied with what may be known, and ought to be known, because revealed, as they are with speculating upon what never can be known in this life, because unrevealed, their spiritual prosperity and peace of mind would be greatly promoted.

This chapter which tells us so much, and leaves nothing to be desired, as a revelation of Christ and of God, and in close relation, too, with the very mystery of death, tells us nothing of the experiences of Lazarus as a departed spirit. Now, if we believe the records of this chapter at all, giving us as they do a revelation of wisdom, love and power beyond all human thought, are we not forced to the conclusion that had it been for our good, something would have been told us respecting the state of the departed? Here was just the occasion for such a revelation to be made — a revelation which some seem to think would surpass in value all others. One particular cult occupies itself with little else than to discover, if possible, the conditions of life beyond the grave, and they seek to receive communications from the departed. Surely the One who could call Lazarus back to life and unite spirit, soul and body once more knew what was beyond the veil and could have communicated it if He would. Yet He maintains absolute silence. Has He left it to twentieth century quacks to make good His omission? Are they doing what He might have done, but neglected to do? or are they attempting to discover what He, of

set purpose, abstained from disclosing? May God's people allow the impressive silence of Christ and of Scripture to teach them that nothing which is good for us to know, here and now, has been hidden from us. And therefore these unhallowed and unlawful attempts — to pry into unrevealed secrets of the spiritual world — are mischievous and deceptive to the last degree. Let it be carefully noted that this chapter, which reveals so much of the love of Christ and the power of Christ, maintains an absolute reserve as to the experiences of Lazarus during those four days.

The narrative centers, not on Lazarus, but on Christ, and it invites us, not to speculate upon the experiences of Lazarus during those four days of disembodiment, but to be engaged with the glory of One who could raise the dead, who is revealed to us as the Son of God, and whose power is exhibited just where man's weakness is most felt. As He passes before us, we see divine love in every step of that wondrous progress. Love kept Him those two days still in the same place where He was, love made Him a mourner among mourners, and now it will lead Him to put forth His power to deliver. Can we believe that *such* love has deprived us of knowledge that would have been good for us to possess? The words of Tennyson possess only a sentimental interest:

*"Where wert thou, brother, those four days?
There lives no record of reply,
Which, telling what it is to die,
Had surely added praise on praise."*

Scripture does tell us very plainly what it is to die, both as regards the believer and the unbeliever.

There were those who said, "Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" Yes, He could have prevented it, but He will do something even greater and more glorious. How ready we are to ask with those Jews, *Could* not God do this or that? Yes, God *could* do many things, but we may be sure that what He chooses to do is most for our blessing and for His own glory.

Before the final word is spoken, which shall call Lazarus back to life, another glory of the Son of God is revealed — we are permitted to see Him in perfect communion with His Father. Here, again, He thinks of us, for He speaks in order that we may believe. In fact, all that is done here is in order that our faith may apprehend Him, for that is our blessing. To hear Him speak to God is to learn who He is. "Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, *that they may believe that Thou hast sent Me.*" And then, having spoken to His Father, He speaks to Lazarus. He is in touch with and master of the whole spiritual domain. There is perfect communion Godward and perfect power manward. "When He thus had spoken, He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." These grave clothes are not without significance. They prove it was the same Lazarus, for the spirit had returned to the same body. And let us never forget that this resurrection of Lazarus is a pledge and proof of the coming resurrection of all Christ's own.

What a combination of glories belong to the One here presented to our faith. And to discover Him is to find all the comfort we need, even if an open grave is beside us. Love, pity and power are here seen at their highest. He declared Himself to be the resurrection and the life, and He loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. He could call their brother from the grave, yet before doing so He would mingle His tears with theirs. He could say, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth," and thus make Himself one with His disciples and with the sisters at Bethany, yet He is equally one with God and can say, "Father ... Thou hast heard Me."

Again, we say, What a combination of glories, glories which tell us that He was indeed the Son of God. And as we see the love that permits sorrow, the love that made Him participate in it, and the love that led Him to put forth His power to deliver one of His own from the grasp of death, we may surely exclaim with Browning:

*"To perceive Him has gained an abyss
where a dew drop was asked."*

To "perceive Him"! That is why this wondrous record has been given to us — to perceive Him and not to pry into mysteries that are hidden. How we can thank God that we perceive Him just where we most of all need to perceive Him — at the graveside and in the presence of death! Yes, there where our weakness and blindness are most felt and the power of sin and Satan are most seen, we meet the Son of God. If He had failed us there, He would practically have failed us everywhere. But it is just here He wins His most complete triumph, and we are permitted to see the very glory of God in place of the corruption and darkness of the tomb.

Christ challenges every one of us, as He challenged Martha. May we respond as she did, "Yea, Lord: I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world."

Angels in White — OR — Words to the Worried. P. 118