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INTRODUCTION

Why does God allow his people to suffer? Is it a sign that God does not love them? Is it for their good, in some way? Or perhaps for the good of those around them? Why do Christians suffer? Well the answer to this great question —perhaps surprisingly— is to be found in our Scripture passage before us today, John chapter 11.

As we make our way through the seven “I am” statements of Jesus in John’s Gospel, we have come to number five, “I am the resurrection and the Life.” And we discover that this “I am” statement coincides with the greatest miracle Jesus performed. In his Gospel, John not only records seven “I am” statements Jesus made, John also records seven great miracles Jesus performed.

And today’s fifth “I am” coincides with the seventh—and greatest miracle — Jesus performed. It is as this seventh miracle is unfolding that Jesus said “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

I say that this is the greatest miracle Jesus ever performed because although he had already raised a few other people from the dead, he had not raised anyone from the dead *four* days after they had died.

Four days after someone dies the trillions of highly intricate and complex cells that make up their body are falling apart and the trillions of helpful microbes that live inside them have turned against them: irreversible decomposition has set in - and yet by the almighty power of Jesus, every cell which had died was restored to structure, order and function, and Lazarus came back to life! That, most surely, is the greatest miracle Jesus ever performed!

And it was in the midst of this great miracle Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection and the Life.”

Let’s remind ourselves of what happened, and then we will see how this great event reveals the three reasons God allows his children to suffer:

- For our own good
- For the good of others
- And for the glory of God

The Grand Miracle

In Bethany there lived a little family of three, sisters Martha & Mary and their brother Lazarus, all known and loved by Jesus. But Jesus and his disciples are miles away from Bethany (and its neighbouring city of Jerusalem.)

Well, one day Lazarus fell ill, and when it seemed as though the illness was serious, Mary and Martha sent a messenger to Jesus: “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

Perhaps they hoped that Jesus would speak a word at a distance and in an instant Lazarus would be healed! Perhaps they hoped Jesus would rush back to Bethany and restore Lazarus with a healing touch!

Oh that you and I would immediately turn to Jesus when trouble comes our way, as Martha and Mary did!

Jesus tells the servant to give a message to the sisters: “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” - the final outcome of this illness will not be death, and somehow through the events of the next few days, God will be glorified.

Then Jesus does something that seems harsh at first sight: he stays where he is for a couple more days, he doesn’t go with the servant to Bethany. (We’ll come back to that in a moment.)

When the two days are over, Jesus tells his disciples he is going down to the Jerusalem –Bethany area.

His disciples are alarmed at this decision because Jesus has enemies in Jerusalem, so traveling anywhere near that city was high risk: there was a very good chance Jesus would be arrested and killed.

But Jesus assures his disciples that while he is walking in the daylight of God’s will he’ll be safe and that he wants to go back to wake Lazarus up from his sleep:

“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

What wonderful words Jesus uses to describe the death of a loved one! Loved ones who gone before us Jesus says have “fallen asleep.” Sleep is a temporary state: we wake up in the morning. And so it is with all who believe in Jesus; they have only fallen asleep and will wake up one day on resurrection morning.

The disciples don’t understand this “fallen asleep”—they think Jesus means that Lazarus is taking a snooze - so Jesus tells them plainly, Lazarus has died.

Thomas, the faithful but melancholic disciple thinks to himself, “Lazarus is dead, Jesus will be dead if he goes to that area; we’ll all be dead,” so he says;

“Let us also go, that we may die with him!” Thomas is one of those catastrophic thinkers!

But look at what is happening down in Bethany and consider God’s wise plans: because Bethany is close to Jerusalem, lots of people have come over to comfort the sisters. There are now crowds of mourners all around – lots of people who soon will be able to witness the dramatic miracle Jesus will perform!

As Jesus arrives at Bethany, Martha – always the active one - goes out to greet him and pours out her grief. “Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” If only things had turned out different!

We sometimes say that to God when suffering knocks on our door don’t we? If only things had been different!

“But I know”, says Martha” that even now God will give you whatever you ask,” (Perhaps Martha is hoping for some kind of last minute miracle.)

Jesus replies “Your brother will rise again.”

“I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Martha replies - because that was standard Jewish belief.

But Jesus wants to draw Martha’s attention away from a future event to a Present Person so he says to her the majestic words of our fifth “I am”:

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he died; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? ”

We know the rest of the story. Mary, the quieter sister, also comes to greet Jesus with a great crowd of mourners in tow. When Jesus sees this noisy and sorrowful scene he is angry at death, angry at the curse which brought death angry at all of its effects on the world.

“Where have you laid him?” he asks.

And they take him to the tomb, where Jesus weeps.

Jesus weeps three times in the Gospels, here to shows us his tender compassion for all those who suffer and to teach us that it is OK, it is right to weep with those who weep.

Jesus commands that the stone be removed, but Martha questions the wisdom of his command: “by this time there is a bad odour for he has been there four days.”

“Did I not tell you” Jesus replies, “that if you believed you would see the glory of God? “

Jesus prays and commands Lazarus to come out. And a decomposing body was instantly brought back to life and Lazarus came out of the tomb alive!

What was the outcome of this glorious miracle, apart from the joyful reunion of the little family from Bethany? “Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.”

Now, before we return to the reasons God allows his children to suffer, we should note, in passing, how different the followers of Jesus, Mary, Martha and Thomas are! Martha was the outgoing let’s-get-it-done serving type! Mary was more reserved, quieter, emotional and reflective. Yet Jesus loved them both! And then there is Thomas! The cup was always half-empty with Thomas, the rose bush always full of thorns! Yet there was a place for him too!

From these wide differences among the followers of Jesus, we learn that many varieties of flowers bloom in God’s garden. And you and I must accept and welcome those who are very different from us!

So what about the question we asked right back at the beginning:

Why does God allow his children to suffer?

Well, it is never because he does not love us. We should start with that. Do you remember how Jesus delayed his return to Bethany for 2 days which could be read as unloving? John is quick to remind the reader: “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick he stayed where he was two more days.”

Yes, Jesus’ delay would mean that the sisters would suffer the death of their brother, but that did not mean Jesus did not love them. Suffering is never a sign that God does not love us, that’s what John is teaching us here, and we need to remember that when we suffer. Jesus loves his suffering children.

So why does God allow his children to suffer? There are three reasons:

(1) Sometimes God allows his children to suffer for their own good.

Mary and Martha learned patience as they waited day after day, for four sorrowful days to see how the words Jesus sent with the messenger would be fulfilled, “this sickness will not end in death.” Suffering often teaches us to be patient, to wait. More patience always does us good!

Martha and Mary’s faith in Jesus’ almighty power grew, for they witnessed a far greater miracle than a healing. Suffering often increases our faith in God.

And Martha and Mary experienced a greater joy when they received their brother back from the dead than they would have gained receiving him back from an illness! The Lord can use suffering to increase our joy, strange as that may seem!

God allows suffering into our lives for our personal good – in one way or another. And when we cannot see that good, we must just believe it. Maybe that’s a word for someone tuning in this morning—you cannot see any good coming out of your own particular suffering. But will you trust the Lord and his wisdom and his love?

But there’s a second reason God allows his children to suffer—and I think we often lose sight of this one:

(2) God allows us to suffer for the good of others.

You and I can be self-centred even about suffering (as we can be about everything else!!), and imagine that it is only about us and God. But look at what happened through the suffering of this little family at Bethany: “Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did put their faith in him.” On that day many people became followers of Jesus! How wonderful! If Lazarus had been raised from a sick bed the moment Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus none of that would happen!

When we suffer we must learn to look beyond ourselves and consider how God might use our suffering to bless others!

I remember one parent whose child was unwell for many years telling me how they had had opportunity over those years to witness to all the medical consultants and doctors who came across their path – who they’d never have spoken to had it not been through the suffering of their child.

(i) God allows suffering for our own good, (ii) he allows suffering to bless those around us, and finally,

(3) God allows suffering to glorify his Name

“It is for God’s glory” Jesus told the servant to report, “so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” The mighty power of Jesus Christ was revealed on that day as Jesus commanded Lazarus to rise from the dead! (As one writer from centuries ago commented: if Jesus had not addressed his command specifically to Lazarus, every dead body in the world would have risen from the dead!)

Jesus was glorified through the suffering of Martha and Mary.

Sabrina Wurmbbrand languished in a soviet prison for five years, but she survived because she the Lord was with her. And all the prisoners around her witnessed God’s power keeping her sane. (In fact she testified that the youngest and newest Christian in prison had more resources to cope with the terrible conditions than the strongest, wisest, cleverest unbeliever!) God’s power to keep his children in the most horrific circumstances was made known to the world: God was glorified through the sufferings of those believing prisoners.

Let us remember that, when we suffer: God is glorified through the sufferings of his children. PAUSE

Brothers and sisters are you with me?

When suffering comes our way, which it most certainly will, let’s remember that Jesus still loves us and that he has great purposes to achieve through it: (i) for our good, let us trust him for that, (ii) for the good of people around us and (iii) for his glory.

Final Challenge

The reason Jesus performed this – and all his other miracles - was to draw people to himself in the hope that they would believe as Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Thomas did: “These miracles are written” writes John, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.” And so as we close this morning, Jesus says to every seeker:

“I am the resurrection” — meaning that if we believe in Him he will give us hope beyond the grave. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead never to die again, so we will one day be raised never to die again! Every night

on the news, death is mentioned, the tragic daily death toll and the total death toll. Jesus came to bring us resurrection hope in the face of death.

Jesus says, “I am the Life” —meaning that if we believe in him he will give us new life here and now, a foretaste of heaven today.

Jesus says to every seeker listening today: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he died; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Do YOU believe this? Will you believe it?

If you do, you’ll be able to sing the joyful and hopeful words of our last song with confidence:

*There is a hope that burns within my heart,
That gives me strength for every passing day;
A glimpse of glory now revealed in meagre part,
Yet drives all doubt away:
I stand in Christ, with sins forgiven;
And Christ in me, the hope of heaven!
My highest calling and my deepest joy,
To make His will my home.*