

## **Back To Life (Part Four)**

**The Story of Lazarus**

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In the story of Lazarus, Jesus Christ's disciples were to learn that wisdom of godly love does not always shield its recipients from suffering sorrow and death. Even the personal affection that Jesus' friends enjoyed with Him did not persuade Jesus to stray from His responsibility to glorify God in all that He did.

So the family of Lazarus had to experience illness and grief. The gospels do not record the nature of Lazarus' illness, but it was serious enough for his sisters to request Christ's intervention, expecting Him to immediately heal the disease. The ease and simplicity of their message in John 11:3 shows the faith that they had in His ability to heal. Therefore the sisters sent to Him saying, "Lord, He whom you love is sick."

God does not always shield His friends, like Martha and Mary, from sorrow and as we continue in the story of Lazarus we are now going to look at an invitation of Jesus Christ that is not recorded in the Bible. It was spoken, we can read between the lines, but it is not recorded. It is an invitation of Christ to Mary, which we can learn several things from: 1) the bearer of the invitation, 2) Mary's response to the invitation, and 3) the way in which the invitation comes to us.

In applying the principle of the invitation to us, we must ask ourselves: Do I respond to the invitation, to His calling? Or do I just sit and do nothing and wait for the Kingdom to come?

In John 11, Jesus had come to the area of Bethany near Jerusalem because Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, had been sick and subsequently died. By the time Jesus arrived in the area a great crowd of mourners had gathered. So Jesus did not go into the city, but rather stayed on the outskirts. Word

came to Martha that Jesus was there, so she went out to meet Him. Jesus then has the conversation with Martha recorded in John 11, in which He reveals Himself to be the Resurrection and the Life.

At this point, although it is not recorded, Jesus must have said to Martha, “Go call Mary and ask her to come to Me.” Now we know He said this because of what we are told in verse 28.

**John 11:28** 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.”

So although it does not directly say that He said that to Martha, we gather from what Martha said to Mary that it is exactly what Christ said.

First, we need to look at the bearer of the invitation which is Martha. Martha is still in the story, as we can see, and is still a prominent character in this story. Mary was quiet but seemed to have always been prominent. She had met with Jesus Christ and had been given this task to go and call Mary, and so she does.

There was a time, recorded in Luke 10:40, when Martha tried to keep Mary from Jesus. It was the occasion of the supper in her home and Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet learning from Him while Martha was doing chores and was bothered. She asked Jesus, in a sense, to rebuke Mary. In other words, she tried to get Jesus to make Mary get up from His feet and go help her instead.

But that was before, now we see that things have changed. Here Martha calls Mary to be with Jesus. What happened to make the difference here? The difference is that Martha herself has met with Jesus and has been stirred by His teaching. In a sense there has been a conversion that has occurred in her.

We will never be a great witness unless we spend time in communication with Jesus Christ, and that is exactly what happened with Martha. Unless we spend time in Bible study, prayer, and living His way of life, our understanding will be nothing more than a philosophical theory. There are many professing Christians that have their own theory about what the Bible

says and means and most of it is through human tradition. This thinking comes from human reasoning rather than a foundation of truth.

Now there is a second significant thing about Martha's action here and that is that she called Mary personally. The story tells us that and the actions suggests it. For instance, when Mary arose quickly and went to Jesus, the Jews did not understand where she was going. Obviously this was because Mary had whispered the invitation in Mary's ear. And when Martha came into the house the friends must have been clustered around Mary because they were weeping and mourning with her.

If Martha had spoken in a loud voice, "the Teacher has come and is calling for you," they would have heard and understood, but instead she whispered it to her.

Now there is an important principle involved here. The most effective witnessing is when [you] the individual Christian take the word of Christ to someone personally by way of your own personal words and example of living by those biblical principles.

So, 1) Martha called Mary, 2) she called her personally, and 3) notice that she did it on orders from Jesus. Does that apply to us? Yes, of course it does. We are under orders to make God's truth available to as many people in the world as possible.

The command of this commission occurs at the end of every one of the four gospels and at the beginning of the book of Acts, so we should take notice. The church's task is to feed Christ's flock and let as many people as we can know that salvation comes through Jesus Christ the Son of God and that God's Kingdom is coming. God calls people, but we are commissioned (individually and as a church, as a whole) to make this known whenever we have the opportunity.

Now let us look at Mary's response to Martha's invitation because her response is a pattern for us as well. Her response is a pattern for what people should do when they hear the Word of Christ. So what did Mary do?

**John 11:28-32** 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.” As soon as she [Mary] heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. 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.” 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.”

At first we are told that Mary ran to Jesus, indicating that she responded very quickly. Now to do that she had to leave the others who were with her. Other people are often a great hindrance to our belief or our faith.

Here Mary, mourning in her home, her friends and acquaintances had come as was the custom in biblical times and still is to a large extent today. They had sympathized and they had surrounded her with comfort, they brought in food. Mary might have considered how it would look to others if she ran out on all those people who were there to comfort her, to be with Jesus instead.

Many people feel that way today. They hear the gospel, and hear that they are sinners and need a Savior, they hear that Jesus Christ is that Savior and they even believe it, but they say to themselves, “What will my friends and family think of me if I become a Christian, or change my ways doing something different than what the rest of the family is doing?” They do not want to look like a fanatic or offend their friends, so they postpone the decision and the opportunity passes by. The lesson to be learned here is to not let the opinion of others hinder your conversion. This can still happen after you come into the church. When it comes to doing the right thing do not let anyone cause you to doubt whether or not it should be done.

Secondly, Mary fell at Christ’s feet and worshipped Him. This should be true of us as well. When Jesus says, “Come to Me,” and we do, our next act should be to fall at His feet and worship Him. Every time we see Mary in the

gospels she is at Jesus' feet. Earlier Mary was at His feet learning from Him, here she is at His feet worshipping Him. On a third occasion, we see her at His feet serving.

We should learn from these examples. We should sit at Christ's feet to: 1) learn from Him, 2) to worship Him, and 3) to serve Him (which requires both action and a right godly attitude).

Many people learn of Christ but do not worship Him. They acknowledge Him as God and that He is a Savior, but they do not obey and serve Him. But we are called to have faith *with* works, therefore we must actively worship and glorify God by our thoughts and actions.

Finally, after Mary had run to Christ, had worshipped and served Him, she expressed her faith verbally.

**John 11:32** 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."

Anyone who reads this closely will notice that Mary said the same thing as Martha, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." So what is the difference here? Martha called Mary by telling her, "The Teacher is here and is asking for you." Mary was the "nobody" of the story so to speak, the quiet one, and the only thing she says in this entire chapter are the words that she says here.

Mary was the quiet, overlooked one, yet Jesus called Mary. No one is too low or too high, too poor or too rich for God's words to apply. There is not one who does not need to hear God's call. Of course there is a right time that only God knows for the proper calling of each individual.

**John 11:33** Therefore, when Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled.

Weeping is an expression of sorrow. A reaction to being wronged or to having committed a wrong or to have experienced a loss. Scripture frequently portrays weeping as a communal or public way of handling grief.

Very often people weep because of intense personal loss. Such as how Abraham wept for the death of Sarah or David wept over the death of Johnathan, his dear friend. In Acts 20, we see a rare display of outward emotion by the apostle Paul when he leaves the elders in Ephesus. Tears can also be triggered by a sense of spiritual loss or hunger, as when the psalmist speaks in Psalm 42.

**Psalm 42:3** My tears have been my food day and night, while they continually say to me, “Where is your God?”

On other occasions weeping is a sign, not of sorrow but rather of joy. The tears flow from Jacob and Esau as they are reunited in Genesis 33:4. And again when Joseph is reunited with his brothers after much sorrow in Genesis 45:15. The tears of the sinful woman in Luke 7. Although they may be tears of joy, they also express her sorrow and contrition. They are also the free-flowing tears of one who knows herself to be forgiven. So, they were both joyful and sorrowful tears.

This scene of death and despair in John 11 deeply moved and upset Jesus even to the point of what we might call indignation. Lazarus was dead because sin had entered the world and brought death and the sorrows that followed. Sin does not bring life, it always results in death. Our Savior’s groaning shows the pain of sin.

With the exception of the much-vaunted verse in the Bible, John 11:35, where “Jesus weeps,” weeping is not a display of emotion by God. Emotions such as joy, anger, and passion, are associated with God, but not weeping in the Bible. However, as we have seen, there are numerous occasions where God’s people are depicted with tears in their eyes and usually for quite specific reasons.

**John 11:34-37** And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. Then the Jews said,

“See how He loved him!” And some of them said, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?”

Verse 35 is only two words, “Jesus wept,” yet it is of such importance that it rightly deserves to stand alone the way that the translators placed it. There is infinitely more in these two words than anyone will ever be able to bring out of them. If you look closely we will get a great deal from it.

The Greek verb translated “wept” is found only in John 11:35 and its root means “tears.” Jesus’ tears were not the tears of a sentimentalist but those of a pure, righteous, sympathizing High Priest.

**Hebrews 4:15** For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.

So the word twice translated “weeping” in verse 33, is not the same word as the word translated in verse 35. In verse 33 it means to lament loudly; to wail. Unlike these others, Jesus did not wail, but wept quietly with tears flowing.

Let us look at these words for what they teach about Jesus Christ, about God the Father, about ourselves, and about the love of Jesus Christ for us which is to be our example.

What do these words teach us about Christ? The first thing that John 11:35 teaches us is that Jesus was truly a man. It is primarily the fact that He was a man that He wept on this occasion. There are other facts that reveal the full humanity of Jesus, many of them are physical. We read that Jesus was born of a woman, that He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. We are to suppose that He was nourished as other babies. We read in Luke that He increased in knowledge.

**Luke 2:52** And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

We read that Christ hungered. This occurred many times, but especially when He fasted for forty days in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan to turn stones into bread. Jesus also knew thirst. On one occasion, being wearied with His journey, He sat at by Jacob's well and asked a Samaritan woman for a drink. Even on the cross He cried, "I thirst," and they gave Him vinegar.

Jesus grew tired. One time He was so tired that He fell asleep in a wildly rocking boat and even the wind and waves failed to rouse Him. Jesus' humanity is also seen in His emotions. At times He was angry, although He differed from us. He grew angry but did not sin. In such times He denounced the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of the day, calling them "blind leaders of the blind, whited sepulchers, and a generation of vipers."

Jesus also showed pity as in His compassion for the multitudes whom He termed sheep without a shepherd. At times their hunger moved Him, because He fed them in Galilee on at least two occasions.

These facts from the life of Christ all speak of His humanity, yet we compare them with John 11:35 and realize they do not speak to us as "Jesus wept" does. From this we know that His body had tear glands like we do and we know that He felt as we feel. He is our Savior and became as we are so that we might become like Him. Christ is and was truly divine and He was also truly human, because it is as a man as well as God that He presents Himself to perishing men and women.

The second thing John 11:35 teaches us is the fact that Jesus wept shows He experienced grief as we do. In this we find Him fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 53.

**Isaiah 53:3-5** He [Christ] is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was



wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.

Now it may be that Jesus could have come to this earth and died for our sins without having entered into the grief that we experience, but He did not avoid sorrow. We learn therefore that whatever our grief may be, Jesus knows of it and has experienced it.

**John 11:33** Therefore, when Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled.

Now we have a problem at this point, because the word translated as “groaned” or “deeply moved” is one that is difficult to understand. It is the Greek word transliterated as *enebrimesato*. *Strong's Concordance* explains that this Greek word contains a root which means to snort with anger; to have indignation on; transitively “to blame”; intransitively “to sigh with chagrin”; “to sternly enjoin.” This seems quite confusing because the definition seems to contradict itself. So, it depends on how the word is used on which of these meanings it has.

So the Greek verb for groan seems to imply anger or sternness. This Greek verb is used only five times in the New Testament and each time it is of Jesus’ words or feelings. Part of the problem is that other than John 11:33 and verse 38, the word occurs only three other times in the New Testament. Even then it has a meaning that does not seem to fit this situation. We find the word in the following three scriptures:

**Matthew 9:30** And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them, saying, “See that no one knows it.”

**Mark 1:43** And He strictly warned him and sent him away at once.

**Mark 14:5** For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.” And they criticized her sharply. [referring to the oil that Mary used on Jesus’ feet]

In the first two instances it is translated “sternly warned” and “strictly warned,” in the sense that Jesus strictly commanded a person whom He had healed to tell no one. In the third instance it is used of those who witnessed the anointment of Jesus with costly ointment by a certain woman and who were said to have criticized her sharply about it.

Nether of these translations “strictly warned” or “criticized sharply” seem to fit the context of John 11. In each of these uses there does seem to be, what William Barclay calls: “a certain sternness, almost anger, to Jesus’ expressions.” Since this is true some commentators have placed the idea of indignation or even anger in John’s passage and they would translate the verse “Jesus was moved to anger in His Spirit.”

Now if we ask why Jesus would be angry, they (the commentators) would either say He was angry with the supposed unbelief or hypocrisy of the those who were weeping over Lazarus or else with death, which He would have viewed as a tool of Satan and a great enemy. So there is an element of truth possibly in that. And it may have been that some of the weeping in the crowd was less than sincere, but this is not said or implied in the passage. Besides whatever may have been with the crowd, it was certainly not the case with Mary and Martha faking it.

So we reject the idea here about anger, at least at the hypocrisy of the crowd. And anger certainly did not produce tears on this occasion. The other possibility is to translate the word in a way that suggests deep emotion. This is made possible by the fact that one other known use of the word *enebrimesato* is to describe the snorting of a horse as in the excitement of battle or under a heavy load. For humans it would be like a heavy sigh of exasperation.

In this, Jesus is said to have groaned with the sisters in deep emotion, an emotion out of which an involuntary cry or sigh was wrung from His heart, a deeply-felt emotion. This is the view captured by J. B. Philips who renders the phrase: “He was deeply moved and visibly distressed.” Or by the translators of the NIV who say:” He was deeply moved and troubled.”

Jesus grieved over sin, even more than He grieved over death, which is the consequence of sin. At times He was also saddened by unbelief as when He looked on unbelieving Jerusalem, described here in Luke 19.

**Luke 19:41-44** Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

There are certain things that are related, for instance grief, sin, unbelief, sorrow, and death. Jesus accepted His own emotion toward all the misery resulting from sin represented in a dead man and a brokenhearted people.

What does all this mean? It means that Jesus was acquainted with grief, as we are, that He understands it and is therefore able to comfort those who sorrow. The author of Hebrews knew this so he commends the suffering of Christ to Christians as a point of identification.

**Hebrews 2:16-18** For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham [we know that the seed of Abraham spiritually is the church]. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

So it is not an impassable, insensitive, unmovable Christ that is commended to you and me. It is one who has entered into our grief and who understands our sorrows. If you are suffering, He knows it. Are you suffering distress? So is He. But He went on to overcome these things so that we might overcome them. Meanwhile He is one who understands us and to whom we may go to at any time, day or night.

John 11:35 teaches us a third truth about Jesus. It teaches us that He was not ashamed to be human. He could have repressed His tears rather than allowing them to flow. He could have not shown tears so as to not be misunderstood by the people and it been taken as a sign of weakness. And this is exactly how men reacted, it is what they meant when they said, in verse 37,

**John 11:37** And some of them said, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?”

They interpreted His tears here as a confession that He could do nothing. Or Jesus could have argued that it was foolish to cry when He was about raise Lazarus, “Why weep now?” He might have contemplated that in a few minutes everyone is going to be rejoicing or He might have even saw His tears as inappropriate in that the whole episode was going to rebound to God’s glory. John 11:4 once again says:

**John 11:4** When Jesus heard that, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

That was His goal in this whole story. But He did not use this excuse either. It is true that the miracle would result in the giving of the glory to God, but that was still minutes away and now the sisters and the friends were weeping, and if they were weeping He would weep with them. Jesus knew how the story would end, but in the meantime, He was not ashamed to be one of His brothers and sisters and weep with them.

This leads us to our fourth truth from John 11:35. Because, not only does His weeping teach us that He was truly a man and that He was acquainted with grief and was not ashamed of His humanity, it also teaches us that He was pleased to identify with His brothers. He could have remained aloof, as we often do, but He did not. Instead, He identified with us in all things thereby becoming our example.

Moses, recall, was suspected that he was to be the liberator of the Israelites, but the first time that he attempted to liberate them it was from a position of privilege and superiority, and he was a failure. He was a member of the

household of Pharaoh, he killed an Egyptian who had been beating an Israelite. But when he came back the next day, he was rejected by the very people whom he was trying to serve. Verse 14 of Exodus 2 tells us that they sarcastically asked:

**Exodus 2:14** Then he said, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” So Moses feared and said, “Surely this thing is known!”

Years later however he had chosen to be mistreated along with the people of God.

**Hebrews 11:24-29** By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned.

This is the message to us, that as Moses identified with people because he became a part of them, wept with them, marched with them, and went against the government (that at that time represented sin), and he was accepted by them.

Moses was able to identify with them, to share their hunger, their danger, and their problems, and they followed him. It is when we humbly identify with the sorrows of other people by understanding their weaknesses that we are most compassionately effective and compelling in our teaching of God’s way of life, by our humble example and witness.

Finally, John 11:35 teaches us, through the fact that Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, that He loves. This is what the people of Christ’s day saw in His tears. Notice what they observed and said about Jesus.

**John 11:36** Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him!”

Did Jesus love Lazarus before that? Of course He did. He also loved Mary, Martha, and the others, but it was His tears that actually got through to at least some of them and convinced them of His love. And they knew that He loved when they saw Him weep with the sisters over Lazarus.

Now the most poignant Old Testament instances are found in the prophets as they weep over the sins of the people after describing the fate of His people. Jeremiah laments in Lamentations 1,

**Lamentations 1:16** “For these things I weep; My eye, my eye overflows with water; because the comforter, who should restore my life, is far from me. My children are desolate because the enemy prevailed.”

This is what happens when we are far from God, we have the tears but our comforter is far from us. It is what happens when we are sinning on a regular basis, when we have separated ourselves completely from God.

Jeremiah was so tied to the fate of his people that he weeps even in anticipation of their suffering and feels their sorrow as his own. Jesus felt a similar sorrow over the sinful society during His earthly ministry.

**John 11:33-37** Therefore, when Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him!” And some of them said, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?”

So, we have looked at some of the words in John 11 for what they teach us about Jesus Christ, but the words of John 11 can also teach us about God the Father and about ourselves and about the love of Christ, which is to be the pattern of our love both for God and for one another.

It is the first of these remaining subjects, the teaching about God the Father, that we are going to turn to now. We can see how this follows that John 11 teaches us about Jesus, because if Jesus is God, as He is, and if Jesus wept then there must be a sense we can say that God the Father weeps too. We must be careful how we say this, of course, because the biblical examples that we see does not show God weeping, but it does show God having other emotions. But I will define what it means by “weep” here referring to God the Father.

We will see some qualifications of this statement a little later, nevertheless even with these qualifications we must say that if Jesus weeps then we are to learn that the God of the universe weeps in a sense that He cares about us, identifies with us, and shows us mercy.

This was a novel and even shocking idea in Christ’s day, particularly among the Greeks in whose language John was writing. Today, conditioned as we are by a culture that has taken on some Christian values and ideas, we find the idea of a compassionate God more natural than they did back in Christ’s time. Now why would He not be like this? In John’s day, among the Greeks, God was thought to be above all such emotions. This is the mentality where they were coming from in the Greek world at that time.

In his commentary, William Barclay shows that to most pagan thinkers the primary characteristic of God is what they called *apathea*. This is the word from which we get our English word apathy, but it does not mean precisely what we mean when we see the word in English. Apathy means a lack of feeling or indifference. *Apathea* means a total inability to feel any emotion whatsoever. This is how the Greeks describe God.

By it, the Greeks meant that God could not feel anger, love, pain, disappointment, hope, or any other emotions. How did the Greeks come to attribute *apathea* to God? They reasoned that if a person can feel sorrow or joy, gladness or grief it means that someone else can have an effect on him because it is someone else who causes these emotions. If another can have an effect on him then it follows that he must also have power over him, at least for the moment. It is almost as if the Greeks are describing Satan in this definition.

Although the Greeks had many gods, they did recognize that there was “the unknown God.” They believed that no one can have power over God, and if this is so then it must mean that God cannot have feelings. He must be lonely, isolated, and lacking compassion. He may be approached through reason, perhaps, but not on the basis of His love or pity. This is what the Greeks believed. Let us turn to Acts 17. This is where Paul is addressing the Areopagus. It says:

**Acts 17:22-24** Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.”

So they (Greeks) saw the true God as having no feelings at all and isolated from them. Now the Jews should have had the right picture because the Old Testament reveals that God is the God of love and compassion. But even the Jews had lost this element as a result of their rebellion against God and the introduction of their own humanly-reasoned tradition in their false religion called Judaism, that had been developed in Israel in the centuries before Christ’s birth. In Mark 7, Jesus says,

**Mark 7:8-9** “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”

That is the mentality that the Jews had reached at that time, and because of that God was distant from them. Judaism is not God’s true religion because it is human tradition that supersedes God’s truth. That is found in both the Old and the New Testaments. It rejects Jesus Christ as the Messianic Savior therefore limiting Him to the level of a mere human prophet.



**Colossians 2:8** Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

To the Jews, Yahweh had become cold and distant just as He had always been to the Greeks. This is what happens because of sin, it separates people from God. But Jesus wept and thus revealed a God who enters into the anguish of His people and grieves with them in their afflictions.

To add clarity to this whole matter of speaking of the sufferings of God, it is necessary to add some qualifications, because we must not think that we are saying precisely the same thing when we say, “we suffer” and when we say that “God suffers.” It is not the same thing.

For one thing, when we suffer, weep, or grieve, we never do so entirely innocently. Our sorrows are usually linked to sin and we are never entirely sinless in any situation, and yes, we can suffer from the sins of society, not just our own personal sins.. But this is not true of God. If He sorrows with us it is because of our sin and its consequences and never because of some sin or shortcoming in Himself. We can suffer from the sins of society that may not be our personal sin, but because we are a part of society we do suffer with society.

Secondly, when we say that God suffers with us, we do not mean that there is therefore a change in God, as though we were not suffering before and now suddenly grieves because of what we have done. In their aversion to this idea the Greeks were right, God is the Eternal One, He is the same yesterday, today and forever. In God there is no variables.

**James 1:17** Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.

So while saying that God enters into our suffering, we do not mean that God has ever been surprised or has altered His feelings or plans because of anything that we have done.

Thirdly, we must notice that while we are told that Jesus wept on three separate occasions, at the grave of Lazarus, over Jerusalem, and in the garden of Gethsemane, strictly speaking we are never told that God the Father weeps, either in the Old Testament or in the New Testament. So we must be careful what we infer from John 11:35. We may say that God weeps perhaps, but not as we do. We must remember that this is not true for Him precisely as it is for men and women.

What then may we say about the tears of God? The answer is that we may say anything that is suggested by the tears of Jesus and substantiated by other verses. Let me give you a few thoughts on this. First, we may say that God *notices* our tears. Nothing is more apparent than this in the story of Christ weeping at the tomb of Lazarus because the text tells us that Jesus groaned and wept when He saw others weeping.

**John 11:33** Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled.

Jesus wept partly because He noticed their weeping and in the same way, many texts tell us that God the Father sees our tears. They tell us that He is not oblivious and that He takes notice of them. One example of this is found in the story of God's dealings with the aged King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was sick and about to die and Isaiah was sent to tell him to put his house in order. Instead of doing this, Hezekiah began to weep. In II Kings 20:3 He cried to God saying:

**II Kings 20:3** "Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what was good in Your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

The Bible says that he wept intensely, and what did God do? Surprisingly we read that God spoke to Isaiah at once and told him to return to Hezekiah with a new message. We will continue reading here.

**II Kings 20:4-6** And it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of David your father: “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. And I will add to your days fifteen years. I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake, and for the sake of My servant David.’””

As we read this story we may feel that the king's tears were unwise because the fifteen years lived after this were not good years for him. He would have been better off dying earlier. Nevertheless, the point of the story is that God heard him, as he also hears us. In the same way Job declared, in Job 34,

**Job 34:28** So that they caused the cry of the poor to come to Him; for He hears the cry of the afflicted.

Likewise David also testified in Psalm 6.

**Psalm 6:8-9** Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity; for the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer.

These last verses also introduce us to a further thought because they really mean, not only that God knows of our tears, but also that He is touched by them. Jesus was touched by the tears of Mary and the others. It is partly because of this that He wept with them. In the same way the Father is touched, and it is this that we mean above all when we say that God groans and weeps for His people. Again, there are several Old Testament texts that reveal this.

**Psalm 9:12** When He avenges blood, He remembers them; He does not forget the cry of the humble.

**Psalm 34:15** The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry.

There are three verbs in these scriptures which are: “hears,” “does not forget,” and “are open,” each of which suggests that God is genuinely touched by our sorrow. This should be a great encouragement in our prayers, although we would not want to pray foolishly as Hezekiah did, but neither would we want to pray coldly, particularly when it is of another interest that concerns us. Did Jesus weep before His loving Father? Then so can we and we can find our genuine tears effective.

Notice one more thing about our tears and the concerns that both God the Father and the Son have for them. We have seen that God notices our tears and is touched by them, but notice also that God remembers our tears and are therefore precious to Him.

In the psalms there is a wonderful verse that expresses this truth in a metaphor. David is writing telling on this occasion of the many griefs he has had as a result of the deeds of his enemies. They fight against him, they slander him distorting his words, they hide themselves in order to fall upon him by surprise and destroy him. But he cries out to God, saying:

**Psalm 56:8** You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle; are they not in Your book?

What is the bottle about which David speaks of here? We know that the Romans frequently had little glass bottles called “tear bottles” in which they collected their tears. But that is not what David is referring to here, it is too limited; it is too physical. As far as we know, the only bottles that David knew were large leather bottles, the kind that Jesus later termed “wine-skins.”

It is not that David presents his tears to God as though to prove something. Rather it is God who collects David’s tears and He does so in a bottle so large that He will lose none of them. In other words, God notices the tears of His people, is touched by them, and places them up in remembrance before Him. If you are in God’s church, know that He treasures your tears and He remembers them long after you have forgotten them.

Finally, I want you to see that God acts to remove our tears. God notices our tears, is touched by our tears, remembers our tears, and also acts to remove our tears forever. Here again the example of Jesus is instructive. Suppose for a minute that John 11 had ended with, “Jesus wept,” or that “Jesus wept and returned to the area of Jordan.” It would be kind of a let down, would it not? There would be no comfort in it at all, but instead what happened was that Jesus first wept but then acted to raise Lazarus and restore him to his sisters. He wept, but then acted to remove the tears and bring joy to the sisters and to the rest of the family. It is the same with the Father. He notices our tears, but He also acts to remove them.

**Psalm 116:8** For You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling.

**Psalm 126:5-6** Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.

**Isaiah 25:8** He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken.

As things describe Jesus Christ, it also describes God the Father. Now turn to Revelation 7. We should note that Isaiah 25:8 is picked up twice in the book of Revelation, once in chapter 7 and once in chapter 21 to speak of the final holiness of God’s saints.

**Revelation 7:14-17** And I said to him, “Sir, you know.” So he said to me, “These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

**Revelation 21:2-4** Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

So what is our sorrow to be like now? It will be gone by the time of Revelation 21:2-4, but what about now? First, do not look at sorrow and death as an unbeliever might, but rather see them through the eyes that have been accustomed to dwell on such promises. This does not mean that we will not sorrow, but it does mean that we must sorrow differently than the world, our sorrow being mixed with faith and expectation. Thus, as Paul acknowledged, we will sorrow but not as those who have no hope. I Thessalonians 4 talks of the comfort of Christ’s coming, Paul writes:

**I Thessalonians 4:13** But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [died], lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.

So we are not to sorrow in the way the world does.

Secondly, do not be afraid to feel with those who feel sorrow, even those of the world. What was proper for Jesus Christ and His Father is not improper for us who are His servants. If Jesus wept for others, we may also weep for them. Truly it is as we weep that we most identify with others and exhibit our right to speak the comforting words of God to them.

**Psalms 119:50** This is my comfort in my affliction, for Your word has given me life.

Here are two great examples of this point, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. The Old Testament example is Moses. He had

learned to weep with his people, so much so that he was willing to be sentenced to death if it meant that they would experience salvation. We will read this in Exodus 32.

This story is a simple one, Moses had gone up to Mount Sinai to receive the law, but as he was receiving it, the people who remained below in the valley were breaking it. God asked Moses to step aside while He destroyed them. Moses was horrified at the sin of the people and frightened because he knew that God meant it. He went down the Mount, dealt with the sin and then on the next day he returned with an offer that must have welled up from his heart. Nearly broken with grief, in Hebrew Moses' words are somewhat choppy and one sentence is incomplete, possibly showing Moses' emotion as he approached God about this on the Mount.

**Exodus 32:31-32** Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Oh, these people have committed a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin—but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written.”

So here is a cry from the heart of a man who so identified with his people that he was willing to be sent to death if only it could mean their salvation. Greater love has no man than this!

The other story is from the New Testament, it involves the apostle Paul. He too grieved for Israel.

**Romans 9:3** For I could wish that I myself were accursed [removed or separated] from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh.

Paul's willingness to sacrifice himself for his people would remind his biblically informed hearers of Moses, although God did not permit Moses to sacrifice himself, Paul is saying the same thing Moses said, only unlike Moses, Paul knew that the thing for which he was asking was not possible.

Moses and Paul did not hesitate to express their willingness to be wholly sacrificed for the sake of those whom God had entrusted to their love. This

expressed their willingness to be wholly sacrificed, it expresses the perfect idea of the whole burnt offering.

Burnt offerings signify the complete dedication of the offers to God. Moses and Paul had complete dedication and love for their people, as Jesus had complete dedication and love for all peoples, especially His own, because the same loving Spirit dwelt in all of three of them.

Jesus' example shows that heartfelt mourning in the face of death does not indicate lack of faith, but rather sincere sorrow at the reality of suffering and death. Weeping shows Him as a compassionate friend and from this we learn that it is natural and right for us to sympathize with others in their afflictions, whether or not they are caused by sin. Paul wrote in Romans 12:

**Romans 12:15** Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Sorrow at the death of friends is not improper, yet we should not belabor that sorrow and carry it on and on, but rather help others to grieve and to find peace in the God of all consolation.

We see in this miracle an instance of the tenderness of the character of Jesus Christ, the same Savior who wept over Jerusalem and felt deeply for others even in their sins. To the same tender and compassionate Savior we may now come knowing that He will not cast us away but can grieve with us and understands our sorrows and sufferings.