

**JESUS WEPT, BUT WHY?**  
**Exegetical Paper on John 11:1-44**

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There are only two times in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John where Jesus is said to have wept, one was when Jesus was overlooking the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-42) and the other time was just before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. There is a third time that Jesus is mentioned to have wept and that is in Hebrews 5:7 when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane and praying to the Father, just prior to His being arrested. In the time of Jesus overlooking Jerusalem, Jesus had saw ahead to the destruction of that city and their rejection of God's provision in their salvation. In the time of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus saw the fate that awaited Himself and also of His being rejected by the Jews. What then did Jesus see that brought about His tears when He was going to raise Lazarus up from the dead? While Jesus is mentioned to have been moved with compassion numerous times in the Gospels, with a close study of this story we can find that Jesus was seeing a lot more than the people around Him saw and His tears may not have just been tears of compassion. Jesus' focus, ministry, mission, and purpose was always to do the Father's will and in this story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is not only a foreshadowing of Christ's own imminent death and resurrection but also in the betrayal and rejection by the Jews of not only Lazarus but of Jesus Christ Himself, and in the midst of all that, Jesus wept.

#### **Historical Context of John 11:1-44**

This story takes place in the town of Bethany in the province of Judea. The Roman ruled territory of Palestine included the provinces

of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. While the Jews were under Roman rule they were still left to rule themselves to a degree which is why the Jews are said to have picked up stones to throw at Jesus just prior to this story (although Jesus escaped). The Jewish custom of the punishment of blasphemy would have dictated death by stoning which the Jews had the authority to do.<sup>1</sup> There was a town called Bethany that was east of the Jordan River and was a two days' journey by foot to Jerusalem yet the Bethany in this story was near Jerusalem. The reason the location is important is that every year the Jews would gather together in Jerusalem for the Passover. This story takes place just prior to the Passover and Jesus and the disciples had just left Jerusalem to get away from the Jews that had just tried to stone Him.

#### **Literary Context of John 11:1-44**

There is much literary context that ties in with the historical context of this story. Jesus' ministry was strictly to the Jewish people or the "lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 15:24), although He did minister to others such as the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and the Samaritan woman (John 4), He therefore had spent much time in teaching in the Jewish synagogues. Jesus' main adversaries in His ministry were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees were the ones Jesus confronted most in His teachings as the word Pharisee comes up 95 times in the New Testament <sup>2</sup>, and they were

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1 James Gundry, A Survey of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books), 91

2 "Knowing Jesus," accessed 2/26/2021, <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/search?q=pharisee&translation=kjv>.

rebuked by Jesus for being hypocrites. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection or in angels and the word Sadducee is only mentioned 14 times in the New Testament<sup>3</sup>. By the time of this story then, the religious leaders were seeking a way to have Jesus killed since He threatened their position of authority. While the synoptic Gospels of Mark and Luke speak of the Jewish leaders conspiring to destroy Jesus after Jesus' cleansing the temple of the money changers, the story in John, of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, was the pivotal moment. Also of note is the fact that, of the four Gospels, this story is only mentioned in the book of John. Why such a key story at such a pivotal moment is only mentioned in one of the Gospels is anybody's guess. Another important element to this story is the fact that Jesus and the disciples were going to be in Bethany which was just a couple of miles away from Jerusalem (verse 18) where many of the Jewish leaders, who were against Jesus, either resided or were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover. One more important point of historical context is that as this was leading up to the Passover, to where many of the Jews from around the region were gathering at Jerusalem, excitement was building with the works of Jesus, and as was already mentioned, the tension and hostility was reaching a threshold for the Jewish leaders who were in fear of Jesus taking over their beloved "religion".

The backdrop of this story then is that it is towards the end of Jesus' ministry and by then, as He had said in responding to John the

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<sup>3</sup> "Knowing Jesus," accessed 2/26/2021, <https://bible.knowing-jesus.com/search?q=sadducee&translation=kjv>.

Baptist's inquiry of whether He was the Christ, Jesus said, "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them". Therefore Jesus' fame and notoriety by then had spread throughout Palestine.

Within the story there are several items of literary context that we will be looking at that shows the foreshadowing of Christ's death, His foreknowledge of things to come, His desire for others to believe in Him, and what what could have led to what is the shortest verse in the Bible where "*Jesus wept.*"

#### **A Look at the Text - John 11:1-44**

The beginning of this story , as stated before begins in the first verse of chapter 11 where it introduces three of the main characters in this story, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They all lived in Bethany near Jerusalem. Jesus had just left Jerusalem and had went beyond the Jordan River. Jesus had just escaped the Jews from stoning Him in Jerusalem and He knew that He could not return there until it was the right time. Nevertheless, while He and His disciples had found a refuge place beyond the Jordan, Jesus is given the message that Lazarus is not well. Jesus then waited two days and then headed for Bethany which was about a two-day's journey on foot. So, we find in verse 39 that Lazarus had been dead four days. Knowing that, it can be assumed that by the time Jesus received the message about Lazarus' condition, as we will see, he was already dead or close to

it. So now we will look at several themes within this body of text.

First is in the foreknowledge that Jesus had of not only what would happen to Lazarus but also to Himself. When Jesus was told that Lazarus was sick He replied, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus also then said that He would go and wake up Lazarus. Then his disciples thought that Lazarus was just sleeping to which Jesus said that he was dead. Jesus soon after tells Martha that Lazarus will rise again to which Martha said that she believed in the Resurrection. That is when Jesus said the He is the *Resurrection and the Life*. Jesus' foreknowledge was also in knowing why He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. He told His disciples, after hearing of Lazarus' being sick, "that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Right after that He told His disciples that the delay in healing Lazarus was for the disciples to believe. Jesus also was questioned by the disciples about returning to Judea after His just escaping being stoned there by the angry Jews. Jesus then explained somewhat cryptically that He knew He had some time left before it was His time.

The second theme in this passage of text is in the foreshadowing of Christ's death. Jesus replied that it was so that He would be glorified (vs. 4), that Jesus' time to die was approaching but not at the present (vs. 9-10). Jesus said that He is the Resurrection and the Life. Jesus had already said prior to this event, to the disciples and the Jews concerning His life that, "No one takes it

from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." There was also confusion with the disciples on what was going to happen for Thomas had said, "Let us go that we may die with Him," thinking that they were going to Jesus' death. Similar to what was said of Jesus while He was on the cross was said of Him about Lazarus. In this story they said in verse 37, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?" Another foreshadow was that the exact same scenario for the burial of Lazarus was what Jesus would have with the burial clothes and the cave with the stone in front of it. Also, there had been several days (four actually) since Lazarus had died to which his body was undoubtedly started to decompose, while Jesus rose from the dead on the third day.

So what does all this foreknowledge of Jesus and foreshadowing of His death really mean? Jesus had said in verse 4, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." He then said in verse 40, "Did I not say to you that *if you would believe* you would see the glory of God?" After this story, when Jesus was speaking to His disciples, He said, in John 15:8, " By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples." So as Jesus is glorified, God is glorified and that believing on Christ would give glory to God. In Jesus' prayer (sometimes referred to as the real Lord's prayer) in

John 17:20-23, just before Jesus was to die on the cross, Jesus prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for *those who will believe* in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, *that the world may believe that You sent Me*. And *the glory which You gave Me* I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." So the two most important aspects of this resurrection story as well as the Resurrection of Jesus is that we would believe and that then God is glorified (which would bring us into oneness in Him). While this may be a fair summation of the overall themes of this text, there is one more that can be brought to light and that is on the issue of trusting in God through obedience. The Scripture in Hebrews that was mentioned before as being one of only three times mentioned in the New Testament of Jesus weeping, says this in chapter 5 verses 8-9, "though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him." It appears then from this story that not only was Jesus reinforcing their need to believe in Christ but for Mary and Martha they were being taught to trust in God even in their suffering. As Herbert Lockyer put in a book called All the Miracles of the Bible<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert Lockyer, All of the Miracles of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Books), 228



"Although He loved Lazarus, He not only permitted His sickness but He allowed it to continued [sic] and end in death. Yet these two distressed sisters had to learn that His delays are not His denials. How often love permits pain. There are qualities unrelieved suffering alone can perfect. Jesus Himself "learned obedience by the things that He suffered.""

While Martha had it right in believing that Lazarus would rise again in the resurrection, she and Mary hadn't quite gotten to the understanding of Jesus being "the Resurrection and the Life."

Now let us look at the moment in Scripture where "Jesus wept". It is assumed by most perhaps that Jesus merely wept because of all the emotion of the mourners, especially of Mary and Martha who it is said that He loved. Was this another moment where Jesus was moved with compassion? Although the writer does not say as much, let us look at what was going on at that time a little closer. As was mentioned at the onset of this paper, Jesus was only recorded twice in the Gospels of weeping and then once in the book of Hebrews. In the passage in Hebrews it is implied that Jesus wept over the foreknowledge of what He was to suffer and in Luke Jesus wept over an unbelieving Jerusalem. For both of those other times that Jesus wept He was confronted with knowing that He (as well as the Father) would be rejected because of their unbelief. In our story, it is just simply

stated that Jesus wept. In the verses before Jesus weeps it is said that Mary and other mourners were coming to Him. Then Jesus asked where Lazarus was. Then He wept. Then the mourners thought or surmised that Jesus wept out of His love for Lazarus and then they questioned why Jesus could not heal Lazarus even after opening the eyes of the blind. What can be overlooked in this story with the action, drama and emotion together with the simple verse that says that Jesus wept, there is two times that Jesus groaned. Once before He wept and the second after He wept. Both of those instances of Jesus groaning come from the Greek word *embrimaomai*.<sup>5</sup> The word is only used 5 times in the New Testament, two of which are in our story. The other three are in Matthew 9:30, Mark 1:43, and Mark 14:5. In Matthew 9:30, Jesus had healed the eyes of two blind men and then Jesus *sternly warned them* (*embrimaomai*) not to tell anyone. of course we then read that they went around telling everyone (so much for obedience, huh?). The second one is in Mark 1:43 which is very similar to the first. Jesus healed a man of leprosy and then *strictly warned him* (*embrimaomai*) not to tell anyone. Just as the first, he went blabbing to everyone to which it says that Jesus could no longer openly enter that city. The third instance of that word is in Mark 14:5. Jesus was anointed with an expensive flask of oil over his head by Mary of Bethany. The narrative says that some were indignant for she should have sold it and given the money to the poor. Then they *criticized her sharply* (*embrimaomai*). Each of those examples have a

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<sup>5</sup> James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody:Hendrickson Publishers), 28 (Greek)

sternness and anger about them. The word embrimaomai comes from the root word brimaomai which means to snort with anger. <sup>6</sup> The full word then means to have indignation on. Webster's Dictionary says that indignation means a "strong displeasure at something that seems unjust, offensive, insulting." <sup>7</sup> So what was Jesus offended at or insulted by? Let's go back to the two instances of his groaning in this story. The first is when Mary with all of the mourners came up to Jesus. It is known that with many Jewish funerals there would be professional musicians as well as professional mourners. <sup>8</sup> It is very likely that those same Jews who came to the funeral as mourners, as was likely the situation at the funeral of Jairus' daughter where there were flute players and a wailing, noisy crowd (Matthew 9:23, Mark 5:38), were some of the same people that were ready to stone Jesus in Jerusalem. Whatever the case may be, the text says that as Mary and all of the other mourners came near Him He became indignant. Then, the second time that Jesus groaned was when the crowd questioned why Jesus couldn't heal Lazarus and then, as before, He became indignant. To add to the speculation, as Jesus and the others got to the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus said to take away the stone. Then Martha questioned His command by mentioning that Lazarus is going to stink pretty bad. Then Jesus said, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Can you maybe hear

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Carol G. Braham, ed., Random House Webster's Dictionary (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 337.

<sup>8</sup> W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, and William White, Jr., Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 419.

some of that indignant tone in that answer? Then after Jesus acknowledged the Father in prayer He cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth!" I really can't imagine that Jesus shouted just so that Lazarus could hear him. Maybe, just maybe there was still some of that indignation left in Jesus when He shouted that.

So then, now let's bring this story all together in context of what had been going on prior to this event, the event itself, the events that would follow, Jesus' foreknowledge of all things, the foreshadowing of what would be, and Jesus' desire to do the Father's will by giving glory to God and bringing in His people who He has called and chosen, that they may believe and become one in the Father and the Son. Prior to this story it was said that it was just a matter of time for Jesus to have to die and that He had to escape out of Jerusalem from being stoned. Jesus gets out of town and then has to go back to Bethany which was right by Jerusalem and possibly face some of those same people. His disciples even questioned Jesus on going back. The whole foreshadowing of the raising of Lazarus was not just to get the idea in the disciples' heads about the fact that Jesus too would have to face death, but that as He said, "I AM the Resurrection and the Life." Just as it was with all of Jesus' *I AM* statements, I AM the Bread of Life (John 6:35), I Am the Light of the world (John 8:12), I AM the Door of the sheep (John 10:7), I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), and I AM the True Vine (John 15:1), Jesus was giving the message of His Deity, that He is truly One with the Father. The

other objective was mentioned several times throughout the story and that was in the word *believe*. Just as Jesus said before that He had the power to lay down His life, He also had the power to raise up again ("I AM the Resurrection and the Life"). But even in this perfect illustration of the raising of Lazarus, that was acted out in real life, Jesus already knew that His disciples would abandon Him in unbelief. A clear example of that was when Peter thought it necessary to wield a sword in the Garden of Gethsemane and cut off the servant of the High Priest's ear. Jesus' groaning with indignance was likely out of His knowing of their unbelief and His weeping can most definitely speak to His sorrow, not only for what He knew what He would have to endure on the cross, but in knowing just as those of Jerusalem had rejected Him, He knew that their rejection was of His Father as well. This ultimately leads us to recognize that God will receive all the glory and that what not only grieved Jesus but also the Father was in not wanting any to perish but all to believe and come to the knowledge of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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