

THE COMPASSIONATE, COMPETENT CHRIST
John 11:17-44

Who will care for you when you are suffering? Who will care for you if everyone is suffering? Who will care for you when care and connection and human touch are being restricted by governmental controls?

We are not the first people to ask that question. So some innovative people have attempted in the past few years to come up with some solutions:

- To comfort people with dementia, [Paro](#) was invented. Paro is described as “a white-furred baby cyber-seal that responds to sound and touch, makes cute seal noises when stroked and turns its dark, appealing eyes towards your face. A sort of pet...without a living animal’s drawbacks...”
- A few years ago, [Dan Chen](#) invented the [“End of Life”](#) machine; it’s not as ominous as it sounds.

As a patient is nearing the end of life, he lies next to the robot and places his arm under a caressing mechanism. As the patient slips out this world, the robot gently strokes the person’s arm while speaking to the patient:



“Hello Susie, I am the last moment robot....

“I am here to help you and guide you through your last moment on earth.

“I am sorry that (pause) your family and friends can't be with you right now, but don't be afraid. I am here to comfort you. (pause)

“You are not alone, you are with me. (pause)

“Your family and friends love you very much, they will remember you after you are gone. (pause)

“Time of death, 11:56.” (pause)... “Good-bye, my friend.”

- [Chen](#) has said that he didn’t make the machine to actually serve dying patients, but to see what the response would be to such a device and whether we are moving towards too great a dependence on machines; he “has been disconcerted when people have asked him where they can buy it.”

Suffering isn’t easy. And suffering provokes questions. In the midst of suffering, [Philip Yancey](#) (whose books are not always helpful) suggests that there are three questions that the sufferer is inclined to ask:

- ✓ Is God listening to me?
- ✓ Can He be trusted?
- ✓ Does He even care?

It is that last question that I want to address this morning as we prepare for Easter Sunday next week and as we think about Covid-19. It is the question many in our world are asking, and it is the question that these inventors were addressing:

- ✓ Does God care?
- ✓ Does God care about our suffering?
- ✓ Does He care what Covid-19 is doing?
- ✓ Does He care about our inconveniences and trouble with Covid-19?
- ✓ Does God care about the death of our loved ones?
- ✓ Does God care about *our* death (or potential death)?
- ✓ Does God care about our suffering and sorrow as we approach death and walk through death's valley?
- ✓ And what will God do for us if He cares?

To answer the question about God's compassion, I want to turn to the familiar story of Lazarus in **John 11**. It is a story about death, and it is a story about Christ intentionally letting a man (Lazarus) die, so He could reveal a particular truth about death and even more, so He could reveal particular truths about Himself.

The story of Lazarus is not just a story about death — it's a story about resurrection. It begins as a story of gloom and a story in which the compassion and abilities of Christ are questioned; it ends as a story of hope in which Lazarus is resuscitated and the ultimate resurrection is promised and anticipated.

It is a story that reveals the compassion of Christ — and also the competency of Christ to do something about His compassion towards needy people. We might summarize the passage this way:

CHRIST CARES ABOUT DEATH AND PEOPLE WHO DIE.

CHRIST IS POWERFUL TO DO SOMETHING FOR THOSE WHOM HE LOVES.

1. The **COMPASSION of Christ: Does Jesus Care That People Die? (vv. 17-37)**

- ✓ Jesus and Martha — a **COMPASSIONATE** word (vv. 17-27)
- ✓ Jesus and Mary — **COMPASSIONATE** tears (vv. 28-37)

2. The **COMPETENCE of Christ: Can Jesus Do Something About Our Suffering? (vv. 38-44)**

- ✓ The resurrection reveals the **GLORY** of God (vv. 38-40)
- ✓ The resurrection reveals the **UNIFIED PURPOSE** of God (vv. 41-42)
- ✓ The resurrection reveals the **POWER** of Christ (vv. 43-44)

CHRIST CARES ABOUT DEATH AND PEOPLE WHO DIE.

CHRIST IS POWERFUL TO DO SOMETHING FOR THOSE WHOM HE LOVES.

1. The COMPASSION of Christ: Does Jesus Care That People Die? (vv. 17-37)

- This is a story about Jesus and three people as they face death: Jesus and Martha, Jesus and Mary, and Jesus and Lazarus — with each one He demonstrated His compassion in unique ways. But in each interaction, He was not just compassionate, but He stimulated them to trust Him in their trials.

• Jesus and Martha — a COMPASSIONATE word (vv. 17-27)

- ✓ Martha's words ***If you had been here...*** (v. 21) were not disrespectful, but they did reflect the meditation of her heart (Lk. 6:45). These are well-rehearsed words that reflect her assumption that if Jesus would have been there, He would have healed Lazarus. Martha had desires and supposed those must also be Christ's desires; she wasn't thinking that He might have different plans (vv. 4, 6).
 - Also, Martha believed in healing power, not resurrecting power (though Christ had resurrected others); while she believed in Christ's abilities, when she said ***whatever you ask of God*** (v. 22) she was not referring to the resurrection (cf. v. 39b). She had a deficient view of Christ's power.
 - She believed Christ's "power stopped where a doctor's power stopped."
 - In short, Martha had a corrupted theology that limited God in both wisdom and ability. She didn't believe that "with God all things are possible" (cf. Lk. 1:37; Mk. 9:23ff).
 - ... She had a faulty comprehension of God's purposes — "Does He know what to do?"
 - ... She had a faulty comprehension of God's ability — "Does He have power to act?"
 - One of the reasons we grieve or become angry or despondent or weak (in Covid-19 and at other times) is that at the core of our hearts we simply do not believe that God is wise or sovereign over the situation. *This one thing*, we think, has surpassed His understanding or ability to work...
 - Even though some hardship has happened does not mean that God has lost His sovereignty. Hardship and death are not part of our plan for our lives and we don't think it should be part of God's plan for our lives either. Yet Jesus says it was the means of demonstrating God's glory (v. 4). That was true of Lazarus and his sisters and it is true of us as well.

"In case of the loss of dear friends, a wife, or child, or husband, let us rest satisfied in God's wisdom. God takes away these, because he would have more of our love; he breaks these crutches, that we may live more upon him by faith. God would have us learn to go without crutches." [Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 77.]

- Unbelief, fear, anxiety, and worry are all interpretive problems. We have misinterpreted our situation (like Lazarus' death and Covid-19) and we have misinterpreted God (like Martha). So in vv. 23ff, Jesus helps Martha (and us) reinterpret our situations with four compassionate and wise words.

• Four correcting and compassionate WORDS from Christ —

1. ***your brother will rise again*** (v. 23). There was a common understanding that the OT taught the resurrection and even Jesus Himself had promised it (6:39). But Jesus meant far more with this statement than Martha understood (as He will demonstrate)!

- *Psa. 16:10 For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.*
 - *Dan. 12:2 "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt".*

2. ***I am the resurrection and the life*** (v. 25) = this is the fifth great "I am" statement in John; all either directly or indirectly refer to Him as life — He is the only source of eternal (real) life. They are an affirmation of deity and equality with God the Father — "I am who I am" (Ex. 3).
 - When he says ***resurrection and life*** Jesus is not talking about one thing, but two realities — He has the ability to bring to life and He has the ability to keep alive everyone He raises.
 - So this statement was a claim to have every power of life. Death is no obstacle to Him — Lazarus' death is not an obstacle now and His own will not be an obstacle later. Christ's life is different in both quality and quantity than anything else we know about life, because it is unending.
3. ***Everyone who lives and believes will never die*** (v. 26a)
 - For the believer, physical death will culminate in spiritual life (v. 25b); **2 Cor. 5:1ff**
 - For the believer, there is no such thing as spiritual death (v. 26; ***will never die*** is "will not never die forever..."); cf. **11:4a; 6:50**.
 - Belief in Jesus Christ may not prevent physical death, but it does prevent perishing — physical death has no effect on the length of our (eternal) life. Jesus is arguing from the greater to the lesser — since God keeps us alive eternally, we should not despair over temporal death. Since God keeps us alive eternally, He is not defeated or compromised by physical death.
 - Are you believing that Covid-19 similarly cannot take away your eternal life as a believer? Is our worry saying something else about our belief in God's ability?
 - These first three statements deal with the issue of death and are given to encourage despondent hearts. These statements culminate in a question —

4. **Do you believe?** (v. 26b) What will encourage Martha in her grief is a correct understanding of the power of God and a willingness to submit to Him and trust Him.

- Martha did — **Yes, Lord** (v. 27) — one of great confessions of the NT (cf. 1:49; 6:69; Mt. 16:16).
- What do you think and say when suffering and death comes? Do you trust God to do what is best in your life and that He has the power to do it?
- This is the test of all men at all times (but especially in Covid-19) — not just “am I aware of His ability?” but, “Do I have genuine confidence that He alone is the source of life?” This is one of the purposes/tests Jesus is working in Martha and Mary through Lazarus’ death.
- **Do you believe** is the great question of life. What Martha said revealed what she believed about God; what Jesus said was the most compassionate response because it corrected a faulty understanding of God. He is helping her to reinterpret her circumstances and her theology.

... If you are struggling with suffering and death, hear the words of Christ that your trouble is not the end. He is not surprised or overwhelmed by your suffering. He is sovereign over it and He will be sovereign over the greatest enemy of your soul. Do you believe?

- ☐ Even as believers in Jesus, you and I will still sometimes struggle to believe (Mk. 9:24).

These statements are a reminder that God is trustworthy even in despair and death.

- ☐ If you are not a believer, these statements are a reminder that apart from Christ you are hopeless, and you must turn to Him; only Jesus can make these kinds of statements and follow through on them. Turn away from your sin and trust Him for life.

... In troubling times we need to interpret our situations and God rightly. Do we believe in God?

- ☐ Do we believe He is wisely working the circumstances into our lives?
- ☐ Do we believe His authority over life and His ability to resurrect us and keep us alive?

• Jesus and Mary — **COMPASSIONATE** tears (vv. 28-37)

- ✓ Mary had the very same verbal response as Martha (vv. 32, 21; they’d been talking to each other), but Mary’s presupposition was different — **Jesus saw her weeping** (v. 33, wailing and moaning) — “it’s over!” It was uncontrolled emotive reaction that elicited Jesus’ own emotive response...

- ✓ Two compassionate actions of Christ to comfort and correct Mary:

- **He was deeply moved...troubled** are unique words of compassion.

... **Deeply moved** was used of “horses snorting” and refers to indignant anger & violent displeasure.

... **troubled** means “agitated,” or “trembled.”

... Combined, these words indicate His response was far more than just empathy.

... Some have suggested He was angry over the insincerity of mourners & the commotion.

... Some suggest grief over the anticipation of the cross He will endure shortly.

... He was angry over the intrusion of sin and the devastation it wrought in His friends’ lives.

... Jesus was not moved by “uncontrollable grief, but irrepressible anger.” (Warfield)

➤ **Jesus wept** (v. 35) — this is the only time this verb is used in the NT.

... It is not uncontrollable weeping (as in v. 33), but a kind of “quiet grief.” He is in control.

... “This is the shortest verse in the Bible, but no verse carries more meaning in it.” (Robertson).

He indeed is “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:6).

... The first time I preached this was when a 12-year-old girl was murdered in Granbury and I was asked to do the funeral. To a community that was reeling in sorrow, this Word needed to be heard — God is not only compassionate towards you, but He hates what happened...

“[Jesus] has the same compassion now he is ascended into glory: there is still the same encouragement for bereaved ones to go and spread their sorrows before Him.” [Jonathan Edwards.]

✓ The love of God (His compassion) was communicated to Mary by the tears of God.

✓ While God is sovereign and not indebted to us, He has deep compassion toward us in our weakness and pitiable conditions.

“[Some] will say, Yes, but you do not know what our afflictions are; our afflictions are such as you do not conceive of, because you do not feel them....[Yet] I am sure that there can be no afflictions in this world as great as the mercies that you have. If it were only this mercy, that you have this day of grace and salvation continued to you: it is a greater mercy than any affliction.” [Burroughs, *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*]

- To one sister He said four things. To the other, He did two things. Both revealed compassionate love.
 - ✓ Every person has an inadequate, incomplete, insufficient theology — including theology of suffering.
 - If you believe, “God doesn’t care,” then see His tears: death not only angers Him, He’s done what is needed to conquer death and vanquish that worst of our foes.
 - If you believe, “God can’t fix it,” then hear His Word: there is a resurrection coming (2 Cor. 5) and He’s working (Rom. 8:28). We might grieve, but not hopelessly (1 Thess. 4:13).
 - ✓ But even more, He not only cares about your problem, but He has addressed the root cause of your problem (sin and death) by the resurrection.

2. The COMPETENCE of Christ: Can Jesus Do Something About Our Suffering? (vv. 38-44) What does the resurrection power of Christ reveal about Him so that we will believe Him?

• The resurrection (of Lazarus) reveals the GLORY of God (vv. 38-40)

- ✓ When Jesus commanded the stone to be removed, all Martha could think about was the **stench** — **He’s been dead** = “He’s really dead — He died, and He’s still dead...” (no embalming...).
- ✓ When Jesus commanded the stone to be moved, He was thinking about **God’s glory** (v. 40).

- ✓ God's glory, in this case, was revealed through Lazarus' death (v. 4). In this circumstance, nothing would reveal God's glory as much as if Lazarus died (and then was resuscitated).
- ✓ We must not assume that illness, loss, suffering, and death are opposed to God being glorified.
- ✓ Sometimes God's glory (nature) is most revealed by healing, and other times by death. Don't despair if you don't receive what you think is best: God will always give you what He knows is best.
- ✓ We often ask for what is "fair" or "right" in life. Instead of asking for what's fair, we should be asking for God's glory to be demonstrated through us whether we live or die.

• The resurrection reveals the UNIFIED PURPOSE of God (vv. 41-42)

- ✓ When you hear Christ pray, you are hearing an inter-Trinitarian conversation — God speaking to God. Chapter 17 is the great prayer of Christ, but this one also reveals the nature of Godhead.
- ✓ Note all the references to their unity —
 - **Father** = He doesn't say "our Father." He is speaking in unique, Trinitarian way. No Jew would use this term; this indicates a unity and fellowship and kinship that was unique to Christ.
 - **heard Me** = This is not the prayer for Lazarus' resurrection; evidently that was already prayed. Now He thanks the Father that what has previously been prayed has been answered in the divine will and sovereign purpose of God. God heard Him because they are One.
 - **always hear Me** = God always responds to what Christ asks because they have one mind.
 - **people...they** (v. 42) = they are different from the Godhead and Christ and the Father.
 - **You sent Me** = He and the Father are One in deity and one in purpose.
 - The Father and the Son were united in purpose in Lazarus' resurrection, and they were united in the use of God's infinite power. The compassionate, competent Christ asks the compassionate, competent Father for the expression of that power and they are in full agreement. (Don't make the mistake of thinking there are diverse levels of love, compassion, wisdom in the Godhead. Father, Son, and Spirit are one God working for one purpose to glorify Himself and — if you are a believer — to produce good in your life.)

• The resurrection reveals the POWER of Christ (vv. 43-44). This is a fulfillment of 5:25.

- ✓ If there is instant replay in heaven, I want to see this — **come** forth — lit., "HERE! OUTSIDE!"
- ✓ Now He had to be careful, so He called **Lazarus** by name, or the cemetery would have emptied!
- ✓ How extensive was the miracle? A dead man heard, a dead man moved, and a dead man was restored!
 - **came forth** = he would have been tightly bound and would have had difficulty seeing, yet still God drew Him. It had to be an amazing sight: because of the wrapping around his legs did he shuffle with small steps? did he hop? was he levitated? All point to the miraculous!
 - Remember the fear about the stench? Stench comes from decay. There could be no stink because Lazarus was fully and instantly healed. He was not dead. He was alive in every way.

- Jesus made the watchers **unbind** (v. 44) Lazarus to reinforce the extent of the miracle.
- You cannot see this miracle without also recognizing that this is the very thing that God does for sinners when He saves them (**Eph. 2:3ff**), turning back effect of sin. This is what redemption and reconciliation accomplish for the believer.
- We must note that Lazarus was raised with a body that was still corruptible; his resurrection at that point was not yet complete. He would die again. Technically, he was “only” resuscitated.
- But Lazarus’ resuscitation prefigured the resurrection of Christ which was incorruptible; and his resuscitation anticipates our own resurrection. If he and Christ were raised, we have hope.

“We celebrate Gethsemane and Calvary, and find no bitterness in all their grief, because death is swallowed up in the victory of the resurrection.” [Spurgeon]

- This miracle demonstrates God’s authority and power. *When He doesn’t act to remove our suffering (Covid-19), it’s not because He can’t. Lazarus’ resurrection demonstrates He can.* He just has a greater purpose for us in that moment than removing our problems.

CONCLUSION: J. I. Packer has written,

“It has become conventional to think as if we are all going to live in this world forever and to view every case of bereavement as a reason for doubting the goodness of God.”

You may be doubting God’s goodness and wisdom today in the middle of Covid-19 (with warnings of harder days ahead); you may be asking in so many words, “Does God really care?” You are tempted to say “no, He doesn’t.” This story affirms that *He does care, and He has infinite power to act on that compassion.*

Be confident and rest in the provision of Christ for you as you face Covid-19, death, and *all* your daily fears.

BENEDICTION: **Romans 8:35-39**