

# Our Pain within His Plan

Jn 11:1-46 (text)

21 November 2021, Reformed Church of Wainuiomata 16:30  
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)

## Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Last Tuesday as I was walking from the Lower Hutt library westward over the Ewen Bridge and the Hutt River, my eyes caught the big red capital letters on the façade of the *Hutt City Church*.

What do these letters say?

Well, just two short words: “GOD CARES.”

Instantly I began to wonder what the general public’s reaction might be to these words – particularly what reaction the *terminally ill and their loved ones* would have.

Would they perhaps read, “GOD CARES,” then go, “Ha!” “You wish!”?

Well, let’s change the question and ask, “What would the *Christian* terminally ill person (and *his/her* loved ones) say?” Yes, what are the chances that even the grieving *Christian’s* first reaction would be any better than that of the non-Christian?

What is *your/my* reaction to these two words?

Well, have you noticed that these two words (“GOD CARES”) encapsulates, in a short yet powerful way, the message of our text?

So, what *is* the main message of this very rich text?

Here it is: Christian, are you perhaps processing serious news about the state of your own health? Are you perhaps grieving the loss of a loved one? If so, then, dear child of God, don’t think that God does not love you any more (that He no longer cares)! Rather, see your situation/pain in these two ways: 1) see it as part of His higher plan, and 2) see it in light of the One who Himself underwent great pain for you; yes, the One who is the Resurrection and life!

Our text allows for us the following three points:

- Our Pain
- His Plan
- His Pain & Resurrection

## Our Pain

Martha & Mary of a village called “Bethany” just 3km east of Jerusalem were carrying much pain – the pain of a dearly beloved brother who was, at first, just ill – but then died! And they did the right thing: they turned to the Lord for help – just like you & I would do when one of our loved-ones gets seriously ill!

Yes, Martha & Mary, trusting that their Lord could heal their sick brother, prayed to Jesus – in the sense that they sent their “prayer request” with a messenger to Jesus who was, it seems, at least a day’s journey on foot away.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in order to heal Lazarus, Christ did not need to be physically present at his sickbed! Over a distance, He could just speak a word! I mean, did He not once do that?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in another place called “Bethany” which was across the Jordan, where John the Baptist at first preached (cf. 10:40 and also Hendriksen, 2004:129-130, 136).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Mt 8:5-13 (Lk 7:1-10)

But if Christ wanted to be physically present at Lazarus' sickbed, He would have had to return already the very moment when Martha & Mary's messenger left Bethany!

You see, if you do the calculations, it seems Martha & Mary's brother died (later) that very same day when their messenger came to where Christ was!

But their Lord did not come that day. In fact, He even waited two more days (v.6) before He started walking to Martha & Mary's town!

So, Martha & Mary's Lord did not respond on their *time* neither on their *terms* – He did not come straightaway, and did not prevent their beloved brother from the worst!

Does that sound familiar...?

My brother & sister, at least a couple of times in my life, our Lord answered my prayer exactly the way I prayed for – and even straightaway!<sup>3</sup>

But there were many times when my family and I prayed for the healing of a loved one. Yet, God did not grant us our request!

Well, the Lord did not answer Martha & Mary on their *time*, neither on their *terms*.

Does that mean that He did not care and did not love them?

No, at least three times our text says that ***Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.***<sup>4</sup>

So, how did Martha & Mary then react to their seemingly “unanswered” prayer?

Well, **in their pain**, they did what is so human to do – analysing the Lord's seeming inaction – perhaps even subtly blaming Him!

Is that not clear from Martha & Mary's words to their Lord when He finally (in His timing) arrived!? You see, first Martha, and then, some minutes later, also Mary, told Him what they must have been milling over in the previous few days,<sup>5</sup> ***“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died”*** (v. 21b, 32b).

Is this perhaps a polite way of saying, “Lord, why did You not come straightaway when we asked You?”

See how, in their pain, they questioned their Lord's love/care for them?

But, then some of their friends in the crowd even *critiqued* Christ and said, ***“Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”*** (v.37b).

You & I? Do we do the same?

You see, when, by way of the motor neuron disease, God took my mother away at the young age of 56, my dad's first reaction clearly questioned God's love. This is what he said in his pain, “I can't understand why a loving God could allow this for her who has always loved Him so much!”

Believers in pain...!

Believers in pain pray! Then, when their prayers are not answered in the time & manner they desired, some question God's love/care. Some might even go so far as to blame Him!

Well, in this world of pain & brokenness – before we blame God – there's something we have to remember: that our best knowledge of the Lord is still limited!!

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<sup>3</sup> Feb 1973 when I prayed in the Army that God would make we win the 2.4km race so the guys who critiqued me the previous night for Bible reading (& “preaching” to them) could see that it's not only sissies who are believers. And in Oct 1994 when I prayed that God would open a hymn book for me on M Luther's hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God (in the big church on the corner of Symonds St & Alten St, Auckland).

<sup>4</sup> John 11:5 ***Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*** (NASB). But also cf. verse 3, ***So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.”*** (NASB), and also verse 36, ***So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!”*** (NASB).

<sup>5</sup> I agree with *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition*. 1994 (D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer & G. J. Wenham, Ed.) (4th ed.) (Jn 11:1–57). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

You see, on the one hand, Martha had a good knowledge of the Lord! Yes, according to v. 27 she was convinced that He was the Messiah, the Son of God!

What's more, given her family's special relationship with Jesus, Martha would certainly have known about the miracles Jesus had already performed:

- that He had healed lepers before
- that He had also healed the Lame (Mk 2) and the blind (Jn 9)
- yes, that her Lord had already performed even a *resurrection* (!) miracle when He raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead!<sup>6</sup>

So, Martha had a good knowledge (and a head-heart faith) of who Jesus was and what He could do – yes, that He could even raise the dead! Look! Is that not why, in great faith, she told Christ, “...*even now* (meaning: now that my brother is dead) ***I know that God will give You whatever You ask of Him!***” (v.22)?

What faith!

Yet, when Christ told her, “Your brother will rise again,” she could not realise that, *within minutes*, her Lord was going to raise her brother; yes, even when Christ told her straight-out, “***I*** (I who stand here in front of you, I personally) ***am the resurrection and the life!***” – in other words, “I am the resurrector! I am He – the life-giver!”

Even when Christ gave her this powerful revelation, she still did not grasp that He was going to raise her brother within minutes!<sup>7</sup>

You ask, “What's the point?”

This: that even though believers (yes, also you & I) may have a sound and knowledge-based faith, we still only have *limited* knowledge of our Lord's sovereign will and power! And who would have wanted it otherwise!? Who would have wanted a God whose every thought & move we could predict!? No wonder the Bible says, “***The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever...***”<sup>8</sup>

My brother & sister, what was God's sovereign plan with the pain of those two sisters and their brother?

What is God's sovereign plan with *our* pain?

Well, here is point 2...

## His Plan

Here was His plan with Martha & Mary's pain: that God would be glorified!

See v. 4..?

***“This illness does not lead to death* (i.e., this illness' main purpose is not death); *rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*”**

You ask, “But, pastor, how could God be glorified through those poor people's pain?”

Well, in this way: that many people would come to faith in Christ when they see Him raising Martha & Mary's beloved brother from the dead!! Look, is that not exactly what Christ was praying for before He spoke the powerful resurrection command? Here is His prayer...

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<sup>6</sup> In order to understand how long before Christ raised Lazarus He raised Jairus' daughter, cf. the chart “Unity and Diversity in the Gospel Accounts” (HOUSE, H.W. 1981. Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan. 156 p.)

<sup>7</sup> Did she perhaps think, “Well, last time He raised that little girl from the dead, she had only just died, but my brother has been dead for four days – one day longer than what our Jewish literature allows for a dead body to be revived”?

<sup>8</sup> Dt 29:29a

***“Father, I thank you for having heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me” (v.41b-42).***

What is the “this” that Christ referred to when He prayed, “I have said *this* for the sake of the crowd standing here”? Well, “this” refers to Christ’s earlier words, “***Remove the stone!***” (v.39), and “***Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?***” (v.40), and “***Father, I thank You that You have heard Me***” (v. 41)!

God had to be glorified through people coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

And indeed! That did happen!

You see, Christ deliberately waited four days – i.e., one day more than the three days the Jews usually waited when they wanted to make sure that the dead person was really dead!

Why did our Lord wait one day longer?

Well, so that when He would call Lazarus out of that tomb of death, it would be plain to everyone that He (our Lord) did not just resuscitate someone who had been in a coma.

And so, some who saw the miracle came to faith in Christ!

Just look at v. 45,

***“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in Him.”***

See? Martha & Mary’s pain had served its God-glorifying purpose in that many people, for the first time, received Christ as Lord & Saviour of their lives!

You ask, “But pastor, could it really be that unbelievers will come to faith in Jesus through our suffering – especially if God is not ending our suffering as miraculously as He did for Martha & Mary?”

Well, to be honest, some people will not believe in Christ even if they saw Him performing a miracle in front of their very own eyes. After all, was that not some people’s reaction when they saw how Christ brought Lazarus back to life and, in disbelief, they went and told the Pharisees & Sanhedrin who wanted to kill Jesus(v.46)?<sup>9</sup>

However, by the Holy Spirit’s powerful work, it may just be that when unbelievers see how you & I carry our pain (with patience, Bible reading & prayer, and how we receive great peace in our pain), that they will receive Christ!

I mean, does not church history give us many examples of how the blood/witness of the martyrs became the seed of the Gospel?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. John 11:45-48, ***“Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done. Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, ‘What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’”***

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g., “More than 1,800 years ago, an author named Tertullian explained in Apologeticus: “The blood of the Martyrs is the seed of the Church.” Our state won’t let us buy seeds at stores: but the seeds of our faith are like the seeds at the tip of a wild dandelion. Blow on a dandelion at the right time and the seeds will spread faster than you can imagine. Especially in spring. Ideas work the same way as dandelion seeds. Blow at the right time and they go everywhere, sprouting up in places you’d least expect. Here is how Martyrs become seeds: A Martyr, named after St. Justin Martyr (100–165), is someone killed for his or her beliefs. Just 30 years after Justin Martyr’s death, Catholic author Tertullian saw that all martyrs grew more powerful and influential after their death. He saw how the blood of murdered martyrs planted the seeds that would grow faith” (<https://medium.com/catholic-way-home/church-has-left-the-building-blood-of-martyrs-is-the-seed-f4d1d3c068e3> ).

You say, “But what if *no* unbelievers come to faith through our pain and the Christ-like way in which we carry it?”

Well, then God might still use your & my pain to draw other *believers* – yes even our loved-ones, family & friends and even *ourselves* – closer to Him; to make our/their faith even firmer & stronger! He might still strengthen our faith for better & stronger God-glorifying witness; perhaps even for bigger & more challenging tasks ahead (which He in His sovereign will – unknown to us – has prepared for us).

Look! Is that not what happened through Martha & Mary’s pain? Even the disciples needed to believe and have their faith strengthened. I mean, is that not why our Lord told them in v.14-15, “*Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him*”?

And, really, looking at Thomas’ cynical remark in v. 16 (*Let us also go that we might die with Him/Jesus*),<sup>11</sup> who can deny that the disciples needed strengthening of their faith!? Besides, as Christ’s suffering & cross-death were only two-to-three months away,<sup>12</sup> now was the time for the disciples’ faith to be strong!

Perhaps you still say, “But isn’t God heartless?” “I mean, to allow such pain – physical & emotional for His poor creatures?” “Just look at Lazarus’ pain!” “Look at Martha & Mary’s pain!” “Look at us – even us believers – and our pain!”

Well, the answer comes in the last point of our sermon...

### **His Pain & Resurrection**

My brother & sister, please hear again the shortest verse in the Bible, v. 35 – “Jesus wept!”<sup>13</sup> Stand still, reader! Spend time on these two words, for you see, a whole Bible verse has been reserved for them: “Jesus wept!”

God, who for our sakes has put on human flesh & soul and entered our world – *He* wept!! Yes, despite the fact that He knows (that) our pain falls within His sovereign plan, He *still* weeps with us in our pain!

Compassion! Empathy! Stirring of His innermost being!!

And, is this not a vivid display of the words of Ps 116:15?

**Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.**<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the death of God’s loved-ones is no small matter to the Lord!

But look, our Lord did not just weep! No, v.33 tells us that, when He saw Mary and the Jews weeping, He was *deeply moved*,<sup>15</sup> and also *greatly disturbed in His human spirit* (yes, angered/indignant)!<sup>16</sup> Then, v.38 tells us that, later, when He came to right in front of Lazarus’ tomb, Jesus was *again deeply moved within*!

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<sup>11</sup> **Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”**

Also cf. Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Jn 11:1–41). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Hendriksen (2004:136-137)

<sup>13</sup> ἐδάκρυσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς.

<sup>14</sup> Emphasis mine

<sup>15</sup> Lit. and He/it distressed Himself greatly (ἐτάραξεν ἑαυτὸν); aor ind act 3 sing of **ταράσσω** “disturb; to stir up; to cause acute emotional disturbance or turbulence” (Louw & Nida, LOGOS 4)

<sup>16</sup> ἐνεβριμήσατο τῷ πνεύματι aor ind dep 3 sing of **ἐμβριμάομαι** “to have an intense strong feeling of concern, often with the implication of indignation” (Louw & Nida, *ibid*)

Why so?

Well, because in Lazarus' tomb, our Lord is now directly confronting His own opponent, death, whom He Himself would face within two-to-three months! And, because our Lord knew that He would conquer that opponent (yes, that bully) – He now looks at Martha & Mary's sorrowful scene in light of the reality of the resurrection! And what does our Lord see? Well, He sees the *futility* of that sorrowful scene! And all the results of sin and death, including the pain & devastation that it brings, produce outrage in Him!

My Brother & Sister,

Those big red capital letters on the façade of the Hutt City Church say, "God Cares!"

Does He?

Yes, indeed, for He has not left mankind forlorn in their fallen state in which strife, pain, and death have the last say! I mean, does not our text show us how God, in the Person of His very own Son, stepped right into our world, and how He, for our sake, took upon Himself enormous pain? Yes, did not our Lord Jesus, by His vicarious death (His in-place-of death), *sealed by His resurrection from the dead*, give the author of sin and death (satan) the decisive blow?

See why our Lord told Martha, "***I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...***" (Jn 11:25)? In other words, "Just as I *am* the light that *gives* the light, so *am* I the resurrection that *gives* resurrection!"<sup>17</sup> See why the Apostle Paul exclaimed with great conviction, "***Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?***" (1 Cor 15:55).

See why we say "God cares!"?

Granted, until the end of time, death will still be with us, and it will still hurt – and badly so! And, just like our Lord, we are allowed to weep and grieve, but not without any hope,<sup>18</sup> for we have the sure knowledge of our Lord's victory over death!

So, one day when it's our turn to lie on our deathbed, may your & my heart and mind be like what I imagine Lazarus' heart & mind were, not so much when he died the *first* time, but when he died the *second* time.

You ask, "But what *was* Lazarus' heart like when he died for the *second* time?"

Well, would he not have gone, "*I know this sad road, but I know all too well (and first-hand) my Lord's resurrection power!*"? "After all, did not my Lord once empty my tomb when He brought me back from the dead?" "But now, look, here is something that gives me even greater peace, assurance & comfort, i.e., that I still remember how He, my Lord Himself, emptied His *own* tomb when He rose from the dead, yet not with a body like mine – one that can die again!" "No, His resurrected body is glorified – can never again die!" "So, look, that's how I'm sure He will in His time raise me again, just as He promised my sister Martha, "***I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies...***"

My brother & sister, here's a final question: Why did God care for it that the account of Lazarus' resurrection from the dead be included in the Bible?

Well, look, does not the answer lie nine chapters later in this same Bible book, in Jn 20:30-31?

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<sup>17</sup> Cf., "His works are concrete. He is not just the light; he gives sight to a blind man. Jesus is not just the resurrection and the life; he brings a man from the tomb. The revelation of Jesus does not take place apart from concrete acts in history" (Burge, G. M. (2000). *John* (pp. 308–332). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House).

<sup>18</sup> 1 Thess. 4:13, ***Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.***

***“Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written (But this miraculous sign has been included in the Bible) that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”***

How do you answer?

AMEN (2,890 words excluding footnotes)