



THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF JESUS | SORROW

March 16, 2025

We're in the midst of a series during this season of Lent centered on the emotional life of Jesus. In the past, we've done series on the words of Jesus or the actions of Jesus, but never the emotions of Jesus, until now. It's possible that we might assume that if Jesus were the founder of a religious movement, that would mean that he was an unemotional aesthetic type — someone who remained placid and calm and serene despite the circumstances. Someone who was unaffected by the people and the situations around him. But that would be a mistake, because the gospels provide us with a very different portrait of Jesus.

Jesus was deeply passionate. He expressed strong feelings. He didn't hide his emotions. That's why Jesus is able to identify with us and to sympathize with us in all of our weaknesses, because Jesus has experienced everything that we do and more, yet without sin, and that includes his emotions as well. So this Lent, we're taking a closer look at the emotional life of Jesus so that we might not only better understand and appreciate who Jesus is, but so that we might also know how to better handle our own emotions as his followers. So far we have considered lament and compassion, and today we turn to the theme of sorrow.

There is perhaps no more moving scene in all of the Gospels than when Jesus is overcome with emotion beside the tomb of his good friend, Lazarus. And when we turn to John 11, we'll see that Jesus' sorrow and his grief are multi-layered. There are multiple different dimensions to his experience of sorrow. And so I'd like to help draw this out by focusing on three verbs which express Jesus' reaction. So let's consider how: 1) *Jesus groaned*, 2) *Jesus wept*, and 3) *Jesus cried out*. So let's consider each of those three verbs and what that means for us in terms of how we express our own emotions as Jesus' followers.

³²Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus wept.

³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may

believe that you sent me.”⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.”⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

John 11:32-44

Jesus Groaned

First, let's consider how Jesus groaned. But let me give you the backstory. Jesus was especially close to the family of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. Earlier in this chapter, Lazarus is described by his sisters as the one whom Jesus loved. And Jesus himself refers to Lazarus in verse 11 as his close friend. So Jesus receives word that Lazarus was sick and dying, and if they were close friends, you would think that Jesus would rush to the scene because that's what friends do. But that's not what happens.

Verse 6 tells us that rather than rushing to the scene, mysteriously Jesus chooses to stay where he was for two more days, so that when he does get there, Lazarus is already dead. In fact, his body has been lying in the tomb for four days. When Jesus does finally arrive in their hometown of Bethany, Martha is the first one to go out and greet him, and Jesus asks where Mary is. Perhaps Jesus senses that Mary might be upset with him, and sure enough, when Mary comes out to see Jesus as well, she says the exact same thing that Martha had said moments before: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Now those cutting words must have stung. And the crowd says something similar. The crowd says, “Well, couldn't this man who had opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” It doesn't really make much sense, especially when we consider that Lazarus was one of Jesus' closest friends.

Teresa of Ávila was a nun in the 16th century, and she once had an experience in which she was knocked off of a donkey and she fell in the mud and she injured her leg. And so there she is, injured, mired in the mud, and she's thinking to herself, praying to God, this couldn't have happened at a worse time. Why would you let this happen? And she sensed God saying to her in response, “This is how I treat all my friends.” To which she shot back by saying, “Well then that explains why you have so few of them.” But in a sense, she's right. This is how God treats his friends.

See, I can't get over verse 5, where it tells us that Jesus really did love Lazarus, and that is why he stayed where he was for two more days. And see, we've got to hear this, because most of us think, well, if God loves me, if I'm God's friend, then he wouldn't let this happen to me (whatever this might be for you). Sometimes bad things happen to us and we've got no one to blame but ourselves. It's the result of our own fault. But sometimes things happen to us and we haven't done anything wrong. And yet, while we may not understand why everything happens, we know God's point of view on it, especially if we are his friend. God knows what's gonna happen, God let it happen, and God must have let it happen for a reason, even if we can't tell what that reason is yet. And you see, that's how it was here. God knew what was gonna happen, God let it happen, and he let it happen for a reason.

So you see, this really is how God treats his friends. There's a real sense in which that's true. God doesn't spare those he loves from difficulties. He doesn't shield us from suffering. God never promises to take us around suffering and death, but rather he promises to take his friends through suffering and death. That's why, in verse 4, it's important that we read that Jesus does not promise that this sickness will not pass through death; no, he promises that it will not *end* in death. Death will not get the last word.

But with that context in mind, let's look at Mary. Mary's depressed. She's hurting. She's disappointed. Perhaps she's a little resentful toward Jesus for not getting there on time. And so verse 33 is the key verse. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Judeans who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. Now, this is a very difficult verse to translate. The old King James version translates it in a slightly more active sense. It says, "Jesus groaned in his spirit and was troubled." So sometimes that word "deeply moved" in spirit could be translated as "groaned" or "sighed." He sighed. he groaned. But literally it says, "He snorted," like a horse snorting in anger and distress. So Jesus doesn't just sigh or groan when he sees Mary and the others wailing with tears; no, he snorts. He gets visibly angry. He's outraged. It's hard to capture the intensity of this moment, but Jesus is furious.

Years ago, the theologian B.B. Warfield wrote an essay, "The Emotional Life of Our Lord." And in it he says that Jesus expresses here not uncontrollable grief but rather irrepressible anger. Now the question is, why? Why is Jesus so angry? Well, certainly not because Mary and her friends are grieving. He's not angry because they're weeping. No, Jesus is angry because he's furious with death. Look, Jesus doesn't pat Mary on the back and say, oh, it's okay. All is for the best, in the best of all possible worlds. He doesn't say, oh, put on a happy face, it's all God's will. No, even though God let it happen, even though God knew it was going to happen, even though there was a reason why it was going to happen, and even though Jesus was going to do something about it, he still gets furiously angry. Why? Because he knows that death doesn't belong. Death is an enemy intruder in God's good world. So Jesus doesn't try to come to terms with death. He doesn't accept it. No, he resists it. He rages against it.

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas wrote a famous poem in 1947, "Do not go gentle into that good night." It was a poem he wrote for his father who was dying, and it captures the sentiment of Jesus beside the grave of his friend, Lazarus. Dylan Thomas writes,

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Do you hear that? That's what Jesus is doing beside the grave. Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. See, death may be natural, it may happen to all of us, but it doesn't mean we have to like it. And Jesus, raging at death, invites us to join him in the fight against it.

So we see that Jesus groaned. Even though Jesus knows what's going to happen next, he shows raw emotion. He doesn't put on a happy face. He shows almost unbelievable emotional honesty. Within the space of a few verses, we not only see his hot anger toward death but also his cool tears towards suffering.

Jesus Wept

See, first Jesus groaned, but then secondly, Jesus wept. In verse 34, Jesus asks, where have you laid him? Where have you laid Lazarus? And when they lead him to the tomb, Jesus is just undone. He's overcome with emotion once more, and he bursts into tears. He begins sobbing like a baby. Verse 35 is the shortest verse in the whole Bible: "Jesus wept." Or you could translate that as, "Jesus bawled." He just started bawling tears.

Now there is no other record in the Gospels of Jesus crying like this, sobbing like this. And it's striking that we find it in the Gospel of John, because John's gospel is the gospel par excellence that above and beyond all the others is trying to solidify for us the divinity of Jesus. And yet here we see such a human Jesus, overcome with emotion, sobbing with tears, which shows us that this couldn't possibly have been made up. If you were an early Christian who was committed to worshiping Jesus because you were convinced that Jesus had conquered death, you would never invent a story of Jesus crying like a baby beside the grave of his friend Lazarus. And what that tells us is that Jesus here is not merely play-acting. He's not acting like a human being; he *is* a human being. He experiences everything we do and more. John wants us to see that Jesus is fully divine and fully human at the same time.

This experience of death literally breaks Jesus' heart. It tears him up inside, and people notice. They're surprised by this. In verse 36, some of the people standing by remark. As they see those tears streaming down Jesus' face, they say, "See how he loved him!" See how he loved Lazarus. Look at this emotion. Look at this connection. Look at this bond. Look at this grief. And all of that shows us that Jesus is not only angry because of death, but he's also overwhelmed with sorrow because of the pain that it causes. And if it's right for cool tears to run down Jesus' face, then it is appropriate for cool tears to run down ours as well.

Now you might think, that is so obvious, it doesn't even need to be said. But you know what, it does, because I have met many Christians over the years who, if they didn't say it, they certainly did think it. They thought that it was inappropriate to grieve, because in their view that would demonstrate a lack of faith, and therefore they wouldn't give space to themselves or to other people to really grieve. Even if you tragically lose someone you love — like a parent or a spouse or, God forbid, a child — they would say, well you should just be happy. You should just accept the fact that they're in a better place now, because if you let death get to you, well then that demonstrates a lack of faith. That demonstrates a lack of trust. But no, all we have to do is look at those tears running down Jesus' face to know that is not true.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself said, "Blessed are those who mourn." The Apostle Paul encourages us to grieve with those who grieve, to weep with those who weep. And Jesus not only gives us permission, he actually encourages us to grieve. But as his followers, we grieve differently. We grieve differently than the world around

us. As Paul puts it in 1 Thessalonians 4, we don't grieve as those who have no hope. No, we grieve as people with hope. And this passage from John 11 provides us with a sign that points beyond itself to give us a reason to be able to grieve with hope as opposed to grieving without it.

Jesus Cried Out

So first, Jesus groaned. Then, Jesus wept. And then thirdly, Jesus cried out. Now throughout the first several chapters of the Gospel of John, John lays out for us what he calls signs — signs that point to Jesus' true identity. And this episode involving Lazarus is the seventh and the final sign in the Gospel of John. And this sign shows us most clearly who Jesus is and what he came to do. But it's a bit curious how the actual events unfold.

See, when Jesus arrives at the tomb, he asks for the stone to be rolled away. But Martha, the first of the sisters who had greeted Jesus when he arrived in Bethany, says, Jesus, you can't do that. You can't roll away the stone, because there will be a smell. See, she knew perfectly well that in a warm Mediterranean climate like this, a body that was in the tomb for four days would begin to decompose. There would be a stench. But Jesus insists. So they roll the stone away, and then Jesus lifts up his eyes and he begins to pray. Now, in that moment, what would you expect Jesus to pray? I don't know about you, but for me, I would think, well, beside the tomb of his close friend, Lazarus, who's been dead for four days, if I were going to pray, I would pray, "God, give me the power to raise my dead friend to new life." But that's not what Jesus prays. Instead he lifts his eyes to heaven, and he says thank you. Thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but thank you that you have heard me.

Now, how can Jesus say that? Nothing's happened yet. How does he know that God has already answered his prayer? Well, the biblical scholar N.T. Wright suggests that from the very moment that Jesus heard that his friend was sick and dying, Jesus began praying. He began praying that God would, in fact, restore him to life. And the moment that stone rolls away, when Jesus simply says thank you, he knows that his prayer has been answered. Why? Because there's no smell. And in that moment, instantly he knew his prayer had already been answered. And so therefore, all that was left to do was to cry out. So Jesus shouts with a loud voice; some people translate it as "roar." Jesus roars. Think of Aslan, the Christ-figure in Narnia, the lion, roaring, "Lazarus, come out." Some commentators have suggested if Jesus didn't identify Lazarus by name, well then all the tombs would've given up their dead. "Lazarus, come out." Jesus roars two short, earthy words with this command. Literally what he says is, "Lazarus, here, out." And out shuffles the dead man, still all wrapped up in his grave clothes.

Now, John wants us to read this as a sign pointing to the reality of Jesus' true identity. But how is this a sign? Well, later we learn that from that day on, the authorities made plans to put Jesus to death. See, once Jesus restored Lazarus to life, they realized that Jesus was too dangerous. He was too powerful. So that's the moment when they decide that they have to put Jesus to death. But you see the significance of this. Out of love for his friend, Lazarus, Jesus raises him back to life. But this act of restoration will come at a cost to Jesus. Jesus' love will cost him his life. And that's why this is a

sign pointing beyond itself to something greater, because that is what Jesus has done for all of us. His love for us, for you, for me, will cost him his life. Jesus will die so that we can live. He's gonna raise us up in a far greater, more significant way than how he raised Lazarus.

See, the raising of Lazarus is meant to provide us with just a glimpse of what Jesus is ultimately going to do for us, but it really is just a glimpse. It's not the real thing; it's just a sign of what's to come. You see, Lazarus was resuscitated. Now, this was a miracle, don't get me wrong. He was dead, and Jesus restored him to life. But it was a resuscitation. Lazarus returned to the same old kind of life only to die another day. And that's why, when Lazarus comes out of the tomb, he's still wearing his grave clothes. Why? Because he's going to need them again someday. But on the third day, Jesus is not merely resuscitated; Jesus is resurrected. He's not restored to this old kind of life; no, he's raised to a whole new order of existence with a brand new body. And so when Jesus comes out of his tomb, he leaves his grave clothes behind. Why? Because he does not need them anymore. And Jesus has promised to do for us at the end of history what God did for him in the middle of history — to raise us up to a whole new order of existence, to enjoy new physical life in a new physical world with him.

So the question is, as we close, what are we supposed to learn from all of this? Jesus groaned. Jesus wept. Jesus cried out. Let me offer two thoughts, one for you if you're already a Christian, one for you if you're not yet a Christian.

If you're already a Christian, notice the emotional realism of Christianity. This is a little bit of an oversimplification, but you could contrast Christianity with both an ancient and a modern view of the emotional life. So what was the ancient approach to the emotions? Well, it was basically repress your emotions. That was the way of the stoics. The stoics would say, look, if you don't control your emotions, your emotions are going to control you. So you have to suppress your emotions. The best way to control your emotions, they said, is to never have any emotions. So you have to just grit your teeth, keep a stiff upper lip, don't let anything get to you, show no emotion.

But we all know that stuffing your emotions is never a healthy thing to do. If you don't actually process your emotions in a healthy way, they're going to come out sideways, and that's going to get you in a lot of trouble. And perhaps then, in overreaction to that ancient approach to emotions, modern people would say, well, we have to express our emotions. We have to give full vent to our emotions, no matter what they may be. We have to be able to vent our spleen. The only way to be our authentic, true selves is to express any and all emotions that come into our hearts and minds.

But it's not hard to see how that could get us into a lot of trouble, too, because our emotions, like every other aspect of our humanity, are twisted and tainted by the fall. So our emotions are good, but not everything we do with our emotions is good, which is why our emotions have to be channeled in the appropriate way, and that's the Christian approach. Our emotions are good, but not everything we do with our emotions is good, and therefore we have to channel them in line with God's purposes.

Years ago, the British Pastor John Stott spoke about how we need to channel our emotions when it came to anger on the one hand and love on the other. So let's consider anger. The Apostle Paul tells us that there are at least two different kinds of anger: righteous anger and unrighteous anger. And it's important to know the difference between the two, because he says in your anger, do not sin. So when we first feel anger rising within us, we would be wise to stop and ask ourselves the same question that God once asked the prophet Jonah: Do you do right to be angry? Check yourself. Are you sure that whatever anger you're feeling really is righteous anger, divine anger? Or maybe you're angry because your pride has been pricked. Or maybe you're angry because your plans have been thwarted. Maybe you're angry just because you didn't get what you wanted and things didn't go your way.

Or how about love? We would say, well of course love is good. God is love. We're called to love one another. What could possibly be wrong with the feeling of love? Well, let's say a married man falls wildly in love with another woman. He might say, well, I can't help it. I can't control my feelings. I can't control my emotions. I'm overwhelmed by them. As Woody Allen once put it, "The heart wants what the heart wants." So this man decides, well, the only thing I can do in response to this feeling of love is to leave my wife and to marry this other woman. How should we respond? We should respond by saying love is first and foremost an action, not a feeling. It's first and foremost a commitment. It's a promise to be there and to be there for the other person, no matter what happens in life, no matter what we experience. And therefore we would say, no, true love would mean leaning into your vows, not running away from them. You see, the whole purpose of marriage vows is that we need them not when life is easy — not when we're on our honeymoon — but rather we need our vows when life gets hard, and we remind ourselves of our promises to one another, and we lean into these things rather than running away from them. So regardless of how we might be feeling in the moment, we're called to remain faithful, because that's love. Feelings come and go.

So rather than simply repressing our emotions or expressing our emotions, we're called to channel our emotions in line with God's purposes. And so when it comes to sorrow, well if we're experiencing sorrow, we're not supposed to wallow in self-pity or play the victim, but rather we are invited to groan, and to weep, and to cry out. We're called to bring all of our honest emotions to God. And here Jesus shows us why we can trust him with our emotions.

See, if you're not yet a Christian, I want you to consider why you can trust Jesus not only with your emotions but with your life. Why should you bring your hot flashes of anger or the cool tears on your cheek to God? It's not just because Jesus can identify with your groans and your grief, but it's because he has done something about it. And see, one day he's going to return, and once more he's gonna cry out, he's gonna shout, he's gonna roar, "You, get out of there!" The question is, how do you know that he's gonna call your name?

The answer comes in Jesus' words to Martha. Earlier in this passage, when Martha first meets Jesus outside of Bethany, Jesus says that her brother will rise. And in line with standard Jewish teaching, she agrees, yes, my brother will rise at the end of time.

But Jesus presses her to go beyond general belief in some kind of life after death and to accept personal belief in Jesus as the resurrection and the life. And in verse 27, she gets it. She says, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” And so she puts her trust in Jesus in both life and in death, for this world and the world to come. But this kind of trust, this kind of belief is not a one time thing. It’s a moment by moment act of trust and dependence where we rest in Jesus and what he can do for us which we can’t do for ourselves.

And we have even more reason to trust Jesus with our emotions and with our life than even they did, because we know so much more. When Jesus weeps beside the tomb of his friend Lazarus, the crowd can’t believe it. And they say, “See how he loved him.” See how Jesus loved him, that he would be sobbing beside his grave. But we have even more reason for confidence because when you consider the cross —when you see Jesus hanging on the cross for you — you realize that Jesus does not merely weep for you; Jesus died for you. And therefore you can say, see how he loves me? See how he loves me? He doesn’t just weep for me; he dies for me. And there is no greater love than that one person should give up his life for another. And that is what Jesus has done for us by going to the cross. Jesus dies so that we might live.

Near the end of his own life, the painter Vincent van Gogh painted this scene, “The Raising of Lazarus,” and it was based on an etching by Rembrandt. Now in the original etching, Rembrandt shows the figure of Jesus standing outside the tomb of Lazarus with his hand outstretched as he shouts, “Lazarus, come out.” But in van Gogh’s version, he replaces the figure of Jesus with the sun on the horizon. That’s what van Gogh often did; he would replace the representational figure of Jesus with the metaphorical image of the sun. The sun represents the Son of God. But then if you look more closely at the figure of Lazarus in the tomb, you’ll notice the hollowed-out eyes, the sunken cheeks, the red beard, and the green eyes, and the facial features are unmistakable. Vincent van Gogh painted himself into the painting. He made himself Lazarus. Van Gogh placed himself in the tomb.

And you see, this is what it means to be a Christian. This is what it means to put your trust in Jesus. It means that you place yourself in the tomb. It means that you recognize that there’s nothing that you can do — that spiritually speaking, you’re dead. You’re as unresponsive to God as a corpse — as unresponsive to God as a dead Lazarus — and there’s nothing then that you can do to contribute to your own rescue. What you need is someone to stand outside of that tomb and to do for you what you could never do for yourself: to call you back to life. And that is what God has promised to do. So if you put your simple trust in Jesus, you can know that on the day that Jesus returns, when he shouts, when he roars, “Here. Out,” he’s going to call you by name, and you too are going to step out of the tomb like Lazarus. But unlike Lazarus — and like Jesus — you’re going to leave your grave clothes behind, because you’re not going to need them anymore.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for the emotional honesty of Jesus. We thank you that Jesus groaned. That he got furiously angry at death. That Jesus wept. He sobbed because he was overwhelmed by the pain of sorrow. But we thank you that Jesus also did something

about it. He cried out in order to restore us to new life. And so Lord, we pray that you would put our simple trust in Jesus, so that we might be ready on that day to hear your voice and to come on out of there. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.