

Who is Jesus?

Messages from the Gospel of John

Message 2

The Resurrection and the Life John 11:1-44

Destruction in New Orleans

It has been a surreal week. Last Tuesday night we knew Hurricane Katrina had caused enormous havoc. The New York Times headline that day read, “Hurricane Slams into Gulf Coast; Dozens Are Dead”. The sub-headline said, “New Orleans Escapes a Direct Hit”. It was bad, but it could have been worse. Nevertheless, we prayed for the south here at our RUF meeting. On Wednesday the Times said, “New Orleans Is Inundated as 2 Levees Fail”. By Thursday the nation knew that this was no ordinary disaster. We began reading and seeing news of colossal destruction – devastation on a scale we could hardly imagine. The Times opened its lead article saying, “Chaos gripped New Orleans on Wednesday as looters ran wild, food and water supplies dwindled, bodies floated in the floodwaters...and officials said there was no choice but to abandon the city...” Friday’s headline read, “Despair and Lawlessness Grip New Orleans as Thousands Remain Stranded in Squalor”, and in yesterday’s news, “New Orleans Begins a Search for its Dead”. Katrina has ruined New Orleans and much of the south, and soon we shall see if her effects reach out to damage the whole U.S. economy.

I said that it has been a surreal week, because while the horror of destruction is evident on our TV screens and newspapers, few of us are directly affected by it. There is still something slightly unreal about the destruction of New Orleans. While the scope of the disaster is almost too great to fathom, the human cost is more tangible. Now we know that the dead will probably total thousands, and tens of thousands have lost everything they owned. Some will never go back. They will sleep in shelters or lodge with relatives while they try to find a job to pay for food, clothing and their own apartment in a new place. Others have lost their loved ones. One elderly man was clinging to his wife, but the water swept her away. He watched his loved one drown in front of him. The crisis has been so intense, two New Orleans police committed suicide and several hundred have fled their jobs. There is some good news in all this. Did you read about the seven children found walking down the street in Baton Rouge? A six-year-old boy was carrying his baby brother and followed by four younger cousins. They had taken the last spots on an evacuation helicopter, and their parents were left behind. It turns out that the parents escaped later and were sent to Houston. Now the families are back together again. Perhaps the most poignant story was of an older woman who escaped with her grandchild, but not her daughter. News reporters recorded her intense relief at her salvation followed by her tragic despair at having lost her daughter. Praise to God turned to accusation as she wept bitterly at her daughter’s death. How could God do this, she cried out! Then she again praised God when her daughter showed up. What an emotional roller coaster!

How could God do this? Or did God do this? Where was God when Hurricane Katrina was forming in the Caribbean Sea? Where was God when she set her course for the U.S. Gulf Coast? Where was God when the water overwhelmed the levees and flooded the city? Does God love His people, or not?

When we are hit with blunt question like these, we tend toward two possible answers. Either God is good, but not powerful – or He is powerful, but not good. If God is powerful enough to control Katrina, but chose not to, we are appalled by His cruelty in permitting such suffering. We are appalled, and angry, and frightened. Such a God is a monster – worse than Saddam Hussein. At least Hussein needed time and effort to kill his thousands. This God can wipe out multitudes in minutes. No one is safe from such a God. Such a God is so terrifying and repulsive, most people tend toward thinking God is good, but not powerful.

When was the last time you read or heard a news report ascribing natural forces to God? Never, I bet. But we live in a cause-and-effect world, and *something* must be behind tsunamis and tornados and hurricanes. So we blame Mother Nature. We think of God as good and loving – a being who only wants the best for His children. That is why so many people pray to God. They think He hears their prayers and wants to help them. Nature is the sometimes-evil force which harms us, but God is the good force who can rescue us.

The thought that God is both infinitely good and eternally powerful is never considered by most people. Nine/eleven, the tsunami, and Katrina make that an impossibility. An infinitely good and powerful God would never allow something as bad as Katrina to happen to us. So man thinks. But man thinks not as God thinks. In this matter we are totally, hopelessly wrong – as today's scripture shows.

Mary, Martha, and Jesus

Mary and Martha were about to enter the most miserable part of their lives. They were grief-stricken at the loss of their brother. Some of you here have suffered the loss of a father, or grandfather, or friend. Death is a curse, and its scars last forever. Ironically, the fond memories of the past only make the future without your loved one more anguished. But in addition to their personal loss, this puts Mary and Martha in a difficult position socially. Single women – and it appears they were either spinsters or widows – had no defined place in that society. Furthermore, they had no way to make a living. The future of Mary and Martha is bleak – very bleak.

Their suffering is further compounded by the knowledge that all this was unnecessary. Lazarus did not have to die. Jesus could have healed them. Everyone knew this. They had seen Jesus heal hundreds of people for several years. He had the power. So why, Mary and Martha ask, why didn't Jesus arrive in time to heal Lazarus? What was He doing? Who delayed Him? The senselessness of Lazarus' death was a crushing blow.

Mary and Martha probably did not know what detained Jesus, but the disciples did. They were right there when Jesus received the urgent news that Lazarus was sick. They were with Him for the next two days and saw Him minister to the people around Him. But even they probably did not understand then why Jesus delayed going to Lazarus. Verses five and six tell us. Jesus delayed because He loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus. "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was." Jesus let Lazarus die because He loved him.

Does this offend you? Are you angry at the thought that Jesus let someone die and then claimed it was for love? Doesn't that make a heartless act cruel? Part of the reason we struggle so much with this is that we have a false idea of love. We confuse love for indulgence. You think you are loved when someone does things that make you happy. When a guy brings you flowers, or a girl cooks you dinner, or when you satisfy each other's sexual cravings – you are happy; and you conclude you are in love. Well this *is* love of a sort, and I am not one to disparage romantic love. But romantic love is often selfish. That is why marriages based on romantic love fail. When your idea of happiness clashes with his or hers, you conclude that you are no longer loved – so you kill the marriage.

If love is indulgence, you will think yourself loved by whoever satisfies your desire for happiness. But indulgence is not love. Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But the kisses of an enemy are deceitful." The handsome man who kisses you may not love you at all, but the father or friend who rebukes you is the one who really loves you. Perhaps the best statement on love was penned by the same author as this gospel. In John's first letter, 4:10 we read, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." The death of Jesus does not make us

all warm like a hug from a lover, but it is the gold standard of love. There is no indulgence here. God did not overlook our sins like a doting grandfather. God extracted full payment for our sins. The fact that He paid for it Himself is the proof of His love.

Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He loved them so much that He did not grant their initial request. He had something better planned for them. They would suffer in the process, but Jesus' love is never indulgent. It is always real.

Jesus' Compassion

As we move into the passage we see this love in action. Jesus did go to Lazarus, and we learn that was not a trivial matter. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived near Jerusalem, where the Jewish leaders who were trying to kill Jesus were located. Don't you love Thomas' sarcasm in verse 16, "Let us go also, that we may die with Him"? But Jesus' love was greater than the threat of death. Then when Jesus arrived, He spoke tenderly to Martha. He offered her hope that she would see her brother again. He encouraged her to believe this even though it must have been difficult at such a time. Then Mary came to see Jesus, and He was deeply moved by her distress. Verse 33 says, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. Then He wept.

Does this surprise you? Jesus cried when He saw Lazarus' tomb. Why? He knew Lazarus was buried. He didn't need to see the tomb to be convinced. Perhaps just the physical sight touched Him the way mere knowledge couldn't. Why did Jesus weep? He had just reminded Martha that he would rise again. Didn't He believe His own words? Why did Jesus weep? *He* was the one who caused this to happen. *Jesus* made the decision to delay and thereby allow Lazarus to die. Whatever else you think about this passage, the one thing you must see is that Jesus was responsible. So was He weeping for all the harm He had done? Or simple emotional exhaustion? Or because He dearly loved His friends?

Jesus caused Lazarus to die. Jesus later raised Lazarus to life. Jesus did all this to teach His disciples. Jesus was in control all along. Jesus clearly did not weep in frustration or despair. His weeping was simply His compassion for His friends. Jesus genuinely loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It wasn't that indulgent love of selfish people – it was the perfect love of God. Jesus loved them enough to let Lazarus die. He loved them enough to bring him back to life. And He loved them enough to cry with them in between.

This is a vital point. We, like Jesus' disciples, often cannot understand what Jesus is doing. Sometimes He is severely frustrating. He doesn't answer all our prayers the way we want. Honestly, sometimes it seems as though Jesus ignores our needs – or wants. And now, Jesus allowed Katrina to destroy New Orleans. Why? Is it because New Orleans was such a wicked city? Jesus answered that question in Luke 13. Turn there and let's read verses 1-5.

There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Luke 13:1-5

New Orleans was a sinful city, but so is Bethlehem. All cities deserve to perish for their sins. Sin by itself is not an adequate explanation for Katrina's destruction. We will never know all God's reasons for bringing Katrina into our coasts, but one thing is certain. He weeps with us. Just as Jesus felt the suffering of Mary and Martha, so He feels our suffering, too. Even though He brings difficulty and hardship upon us,

even though He disciplines us for our own good – still Jesus weeps when we weep. HE is not a tyrannical manic – He is a compassionate savior.

Jesus' Power

Now if anyone wishes to persist in believing that Jesus is loving, but not powerful, the conclusion of this passage destroys such an idea. In the next couple of weeks we will look at John chapter 1, where Jesus is revealed as the life. Jesus does not merely give life, He has life within Himself. Life is part of the divine nature, and God imparts it to whomever He wills. And what greater demonstration of power is there than this? Hurricanes and tyrants can destroy life, but only God can give life. Man has created intricate and powerful machines, but he cannot create life. We can prolong life, in other words, slow the inevitability of death, by modern medicine – but death has a 100% success rate.

Without medicine, without technology, without anything but His own words, Jesus raised Lazarus from death. This is the ultimate demonstration of power. If Jesus can do this, He can do anything. And if Jesus can do anything, why did He allow Lazarus to die in the first place? He told us in verse 15. It was to make His disciples believe in Him.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you think He is who He claimed to be? He claims to have all power and authority. Do you believe Him? Do you believe He brought Katrina to destroy New Orleans? He claims to love His people. Do you believe Him? Do you believe He brought Katrina because of His love for us? No? Is this too hard to believe? Then look at Lazarus. Jesus loved him and his sisters enough to bring him back to life. Can you trust a man like this with your life? If Jesus loved Lazarus so much He raised him from the dead, can you trust Him to raise you from the dead?

This is what Jesus was teaching Martha in all this. He said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26) Indeed – do you believe this? The point of this story is not merely Jesus’ love for Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The point, the reason Jesus allowed this to happen, is to convince *you* that Jesus loves you and has the power to give you eternal life.

Conclusion

Not long after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He died at the hands of those Jewish leaders who were seeking to kill Him. Jesus said plainly that He has power over His own life, and He laid it down freely. The good news is that Jesus Himself rose from the dead three days later. By rising from the grave, Jesus has conquered death. The grave no longer has power over us, because a greater power invaded Hades and broke its chains. The promise of the gospel is that all who believe in Jesus will also rise from the dead to live with Him forever. Then all sorrows, troubles, and fears will be swallowed up in eternity with Jesus.

In this life you will never understand everything that God does. Sometimes He will confuse and frustrate you. Evil lurks in this world, and you will suffer the effects of evil in this life. But in the midst of hardship and suffering, the one thing you can count on is that Jesus is loving enough and powerful enough to save His people. You may not understand Him, but you can trust Him. Come to Jesus. Give Him your sorrows and fears. Rest in the safety of the one who died to give you life.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
September 6, 2005

