

John 11:1–48 // “The Disappointed” // Can’t Believe #4

We’re in week 4 of a series through the Gospel of John called *Can’t Believe* in which we’re looking at 7 kinds of people who couldn’t bring themselves to believe, and how Jesus dealt with each of them.

This week we are looking at “the disappointed”—those who can’t believe because God should have done something for him, but he didn’t. There are a lot of people in this category:

- *I recently read an article about Ted Turner, the media mogul, creator of CNN and TBS, multi-billionaire. He became a very outspoken atheist in his 20’s (although he’s backed off of it now), but he was an extremely religiously-committed high schooler. In his youth group. Wanted to be a missionary.*
- When he was fifteen his younger sister, Mary Jane, who was twelve, contracted lupus, a degenerative tissue disease. She was racked with pain and constantly vomiting, and her screams filled the house. Ted regularly came home and held her hand, trying to comfort her. He prayed for her recovery; she prayed to die. After years of misery, she succumbed.
- Ted's dad, Ed Turner, remarked at the time, "If that's the type of God He is, I want nothing to do with Him." And Ted lost his faith. 'I was taught that God was love and God was powerful,' he says, 'and I couldn't understand how someone so innocent should be made or allowed to suffer so.' On March 5, 1963, Ed Turner had breakfast with his wife, went upstairs, placed a .38-calibre silver pistol in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. He was fifty-three." That sealed the deal for Ted. "If that's the type of God He is, I want nothing to do with Him."¹

¹ Taken from http://www.kenauletta.com/2001_04_23_thelosttycoon.html and <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1064962/9/index.htm>.

- Bart Ehrman, our famous skeptic here at Chapel Hill, says this is the reason he lost his faith. He says, “*I think that if, in fact, God Almighty appeared to me and gave me an explanation that could make sense even of the torture, dismemberment, and slaughter of innocent children, and the explanation was so overpowering that I actually could understand, then I’d be the first to fall on my knees in humble submission and admiration.* On the other hand, I don’t think that’s going to happen. Hoping that it will is probably just wishful thinking, a leap of faith made by those who are desperate both to remain faithful to God and to (cope) with the harsh realities of the world.”²

Even if you haven’t lost your faith, I think we’ve all gone through this.

- **C. S. Lewis** lost his wife to a painful bout with cancer, and he wrote, (“I can’t understand why God is always there when things are going well, telling you what he expects of you) *“But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once... Why is God so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?”*³ This was a long time after he became a Christian. This never makes it on everyone’s “favorite CS Lewis quotes” page.
- Now, he made it through this, and his faith ultimately was strengthened in it, but he articulates what many of us feel.

You have three options when God really disappoints you.

1. **Lose your faith.** You conclude—like Ted Turner and Bart Ehrman—that he’s not really there; he’s never been there; and if he is there, you don’t want to have anything to do with him.
2. **Isolate that question from your faith.** i.e. Gloss over it and refuse to think about it. Many people have simply shut

² Ehrman, *God’s Problem*, 153.

³ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1961), 17.

off parts of their hearts and minds to Christian faith and just refused to think about it—because they are afraid their faith can't stand up to these questions and they don't want to lose their faith (that would be too painful), so they just don't think deeply about these things. The result, however, is a superficial faith that doesn't consume your whole being because you have a God you can't love with your whole heart.

3. **Press deeper in your faith.** i.e. let these questions drive you deeper into God. I'll tell you that the times in my life when I asked the hardest questions, when I struggled, and doubted God, even—that was when my faith grew the most, became the sweetest. **Spurgeon said** that doubt and pain are like a foot poised... The depths of God's love can often be known best in the depths of despair. You can't know how deep the love of God is until you cry out to him from the depths of despair, and you say, "My pain is deep. God's love is deeper still."

So here is question for the weekend: *What do you do when God disappoints you?*

And for some of you, the question may not be this extreme: You may not be about to lose your faith, but you are frustrated at God because your lives are not going according to plan.

- All your friends are getting married right now, but you aren't.
- Your friends are getting jobs or promotions but it's not working out for you. *When I was in seminary*, I had several friends that were getting these great ministry jobs and I wasn't. I was working the French fry machine at a restaurant. God, why? Why aren't you coming through for me?
- Or maybe you are not having kids.
- Or you are approaching retirement and it's not looking good.
- Or your kids didn't turn out right and you thought, "God, by this time I was supposed to be enjoying my grandkids"—and if you're honest, you're just angry about it.
- You're in your 40's and your husband just walked out.

- And you're like, "God, I don't understand it. How can this be your *perfect* plan?"

[11:1] Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. [2] It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. [3] So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

- Now, what are they hoping for?
- They'd seen Jesus heal. They know what he can do. Surely if Jesus healed complete strangers he'd do this for a friend.

[4] But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

[5] Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. [6] So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

- Read ahead a few verses and you'll see that this intentional 2-day delay would cost Lazarus his life. While Jesus waited, Lazarus died.
- I think in that light the word "so" is curious. It wasn't that Jesus loved this family *but* he waited; he loved them *so* he waited. That's a very curious use of that word.

[7] Then after this he said to the disciples... "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."

[12] ~~The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."~~ Vs. 12-13, the disciples are like, "Well, Lord, if he's asleep, he'll wake up."

[14] So Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died..." Can't you see Jesus just rolling his eyes here? "Really, guys, that's what you thought I meant? That I'm going to take a 2 day walk to wake Lazarus up from a nap?"

[17] Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

[21] Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Martha has the same problem we do. “God, where were you? You could have fixed this. Why didn’t you come?”

[23] Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” [24] Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” [25] Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” And she says, “Yes, I believe you are the Son of God.”

[28] When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” [29] And when (Mary) heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. [32] Now 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.” [33] When Jesus saw her weeping... he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. [34] And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” [35] Jesus wept. (Gr. burst into tears⁴)

I want to focus here on how Jesus responded to the two sisters in this story, because I think the teaching in this story and the answer to our question hinges on the 2 reactions Jesus gave to these 2 sisters.

Mary and Martha, you see, made the exact same statement to Jesus—verbatim, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not*

have died”—but Jesus responds to each of them in two completely different ways.

When you are disappointed with Jesus, you need these two things.

To Martha, he gives a theological answer: “I am the resurrection and the life.” The one who lives and believes in me will never truly die. Even when he does die, he won’t really be dead because I’ll reverse all that.”

Let me stop here and build you, very briefly, a theological case for **SUFFERING**. There are 3 important truths:

1. Suffering is the result of the curse of death on our sin.

- God created this world with no suffering—perfect.
- It was our sin, our rebellion—a rebellion we all have voluntarily participated in—that brought God’s curse upon ourselves.
- Most of the objections raised against God about suffering are built on the assumption that we as a human race deserve good things—we’re owed good things—and God is unjust for not giving them to us.
- The Bible takes an entirely opposite tack. We don’t deserve good things. As a race, we rebelled against God, a rebellion we have all voluntarily participated in, and the just result of that was death.
- What we deserve is death. The fact that there is still good in the world—things like sunshine and food and happiness—that’s all grace.
- And the fact that God has given us a space to repent and to teach our children to repent—that is unspeakable grace.
- **The Bible doesn’t wrestle with the problem of evil as much as it marvels at amazing grace.**
- Luke 18.
 - The question in the story: *Why are we surprised?*
 - When something bad happens, instead of saying “*Why me?*” we should ask “*why not me?*”

⁴ Andreas Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 341. Cf. Note in HCSB Study Bible on John 11:35.

- As sinners, to put God on trial for our suffering as if somehow he was unjust is what Jewish people called “chutzpah,” which they defined as the audacity of a guy who kills his mom and dad and then throws himself on the mercy of the court because he is an orphan.
 - **So, truth 1: all the suffering in the world is the result of the curse of death for our sin.**
 - Now: to clarify. I’m not saying that you ever look at a particular instance of suffering and tie it to a particular sin. The Bible never tells us to think that way... that ‘this’ happened because of that.
 - Well, he got cancer because he wasn’t a good husband. Or ‘you had a miscarriage’ because God was paying you back for your sexual promiscuity in college. That’s never how the Bible presents suffering.
 - It’s more of a general thing. We live in a world of suffering because we, as a race, rebelled against God.
2. **God (in his love and mercy) has reversed the curse by suffering it in our place.** The only truly innocent sufferer ever in history was Jesus. He was the only human ever to live free from the curse, but he voluntarily died anyway. And when he did, he overturned the curse of death and started the process of healing. That healing begins by cancelling our sin debt and reconciling us to God; it starts to affect our relationships; it will one day soon include our bodies when they are resurrected perfect and without pain, and will eventually extend to our world as God establishes resurrection shalom (peace) again to the earth. Jesus is the one who will make the oceans recede and heal the planet.
3. **God now uses our suffering redemptively: for his glory and our good.**
- His glory.** There are some things that God can demonstrate about himself to the world through our pain better than he can any other way.
 - For our good:** There are some things God can teach us about himself through our pain better than he can any other way.

Now, some people balk at that last point and say: “All pain, for God’s glory, our good? What about the Holocaust? Sept 11? How can you say the Holocaust was in any way good for the Jew?”

- But you’re forgetting truth #1, that suffering is the just result of the curse of death for our sin. Just like the sun comes up and shines indiscriminately on the good people and bad people, the curse of death (by one way of looking at it) indiscriminately affects people, some of whom are exceptionally bad and others who seem more innocent.
- Of course, the point is, in the larger scheme of things, none of us are really innocent.
- Does that make sense?
- Think of 100 people standing somewhere, both good and bad people. The sun comes up. All of them are warmed. God doesn’t individually shine the sun on a few people and leave others out. The curse of death rises up over them, and the same thing happens. It indiscriminately affects them all. But we can’t ever say that is unfair because what is “fair” is that we are under the curse of death.
- For the believer, however, God has taken the sting out of death and suffering and promised to now use our suffering for our good and his glory.
 - So in every seemingly “random” bad thing he is working redemptively for his purposes. Therefore Paul says that “all things work together for good to them that love God” that they might be reformed into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28), and that “God works all things according to the counsel of his will” so that we would “resound to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:11); and this is why Joseph could say to those who committed grave injustices against him that “*what you meant for evil, God re-purposed for good.*” (Gen 50:20).

Let me show you how this plays out in this story, because in it you’re going to see a pattern for all suffering:

[38] Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. [39] Jesus 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." [40] Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

[41] So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. [42] I 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."

Let me stop there... there's a textual thing here you might miss. There is a phrase that's been used a couple of times which just doesn't translate well into English. The phrase is "deeply moved" (appears once vs. 33 and again in vs. 38) Scholars say "deeply moved" is a terribly deficient translation, but English doesn't have a great word for this Greek word, *embriMAOmi*. It really should be translated "snort" with anger.

- One scholar says the word really has the connotation of an animal snorting in anger (as if getting read to charge).⁵
- John Calvin says this word indicates not sympathy so much as Jesus preparing to enter a ring *"like a wrestler preparing for the contest. (He groans because) the violent tyranny of death which He had to overcome now stands before His eyes."*⁶
- Vs. 43, Jesus shouts at death in a loud voice.

⁵ ἐμβριμάομαι (*embriomaomi*) Andreas Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 339.

⁶ *"...like a wrestler preparing for the contest. Therefore no wonder that He groans again, for the violent tyranny of death which He had to overcome stands before His eyes."* John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, Volume 5: John 11–21 & 1 John* (Trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 13.

- Snorting, yelling. Do you see what is happening? Jesus is entering the ring with mankind's greatest enemy.
- This is when, if you are writing the soundtrack to the Gospel of John, you'd start playing the "Rocky" theme.
- Now, the other thing that is interesting is that John points out (in vs. 47) that this event, the raising of Lazarus, would trigger the events that would lead in Jesus' death.
 - This fight started in chapter 11 with Jesus yelling and shouting at death, but it would end 8 chapters later in the crucifixion, with Jesus going full-body contact with death, absorbing the curse of death we deserved in our place, and snapping the neck of death through his death.
 - The only way Jesus could interrupt the funeral of Lazarus was to start his own.
- Jesus here in vs. 11 climbs into the ring with death and wrestles with it so that Lazarus and everyone Jesus loves can live.
 - As a dude, I love this because I always heard Jesus presented in these soft, feminine terms. This is a man shouting at the greatest enemy ever to face those that he loved and destroying it even when it took his life.
 - *September 11* movie: Person in the rubble. "Leave you?" That's our job.
 - Jesus says, "Leave you? That's what I came to do. That's what I came to earth to rescue you! I wouldn't leave you in the darkest hours of death; I won't leave you, now."

[44] The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth.

- What did that look like? How's he walking? Did he roll out?

Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Now, if you remember, Martha had warned Jesus not to open the stone because it had been 4 days and the body would stink. But Jesus said to do it because when they did what they would encounter was not "the stench of death" but "the glory of God." (vs. 40). You've got to notice the contrast.

- She was expecting the stench de-composition; but he knew that what they would find is the glory of re-composition.

Now, follow me here: I think you see in this a picture of how God, in all pain, works for good. The curse of death and suffering touches us and we expect to find the decay of de-composition, but God has been working behind the scenes so that what you find is not the decay of de-composition but the glory of re-composition.

- Sometimes you see that on earth. You go through some difficult time, and you wonder where God is, and just a few years later God rolls away the stone, and you see what he's done. "Oh, that's what you were doing!" Hasn't that happened to you? Something bad happened to you and you couldn't figure out what God was doing, but just a few short years later you see how he was using it for good?
- Well, there are going to be other times he's doesn't roll the stone away down here on earth; you never figure out exactly what he was doing. But you go into eternity and there you see, "That's what the bigger picture was."
- Rest assured—passages like this one assure us that he will roll back the stone of all suffering and death—and when he does you will be overwhelmed by the glory of what he's done!
 - And I know you can't see that now... but if you can already see a purpose for some of the pain in your life it, don't you think given enough time and space you'll see a reason for all of it?
- For the believer, Paul calls our suffering a "light and momentary affliction." (like birth pangs.)
 - You hear two people moaning in pain in the hospital room next to you. What emotion does it cause in you? Well, if the person is in the final throes of dying, it's depressing. If it is a woman giving labor, it's different, right? You might feel sympathy, but even in the pain there is a joy because you know the pain is temporary and soon to be swallowed up by the glory of the child coming through that pain.
 - Pain and suffering for believers is like birth pangs, not like the despairing cries of the dying.

- Suffering in this life is real, but the next life is forever. And in light of forever the pain of this moment will disappear.
- I heard a guy once describe a recurring dream about his wife dying... terrible dream. But he said he loved the 1st few minutes waking up. Because everything sad became untrue.

Before we end this, let's go back and pick up Jesus' reaction to Mary, because it is important. It is the reaction of a friend.

Mary, vs. 32, [32] "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Again, the exact same thing Martha had said. But notice the new detail. [33] When Jesus saw her weeping... he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. [35] Jesus wept. (Again, Gr. "burst into tears")

- I've always thought these tears were a little odd. Did he not know that in 10 minutes Lazarus would be out of the grave and they'd be re-united? Yes! He knew that from the beginning of chapter 11.
- Well then, why didn't he just say, "Don't cry! I'll fix it!" Why weep with Mary if in 10 minutes the issue is resolved?
- To give you a picture of how Jesus goes through suffering with you. You see, even when Jesus knows the pain is temporary, he knows what it feels like for you, and he weeps with you.
 - That's how I know a friend loves me. They weep when I weep.
- Ten minutes is not that much different to Jesus than 10,000 years. He can already see the beautiful end to your story, to see that all suffering is swallowed up in the glorious resurrection of what will be revealed.
- But when you've lost someone, as much as you tell yourself you'll see them again in eternity, it's still painful now. When you are lonely, and hurt, it is painful.
- Sometimes what you need is not theological answers, you need the presence of a Savior who feels your pain and weeps with you.
- **What a friend we have in Jesus.** "He took our sin and our sorrow, and he made it his very own. He bore our burden to

Calvary, and suffered and died alone.” He feels, as his own, every broken-heart, every shattered dream, every sorrow.

There was another time in Jesus’ life that he wept, but nobody was there to weep with him. The Gospels tell us in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus was weep with such great anguish that the capillaries in his face would burst. But no one would respond.

- The Father turned his face away.
- He would ask his disciples to stay awake with him, but they’d all fall asleep.
- He would die friendless, and Godless.

Because of that, I know he’ll never forsake me. He was forsaken so I could never be. He died so that all that could ever separate me from God would be removed, so I would never have a season of suffering where God would not hear me in my pain or he would not weep with me in my pain. He will never turn his face away from me, because Jesus wrestled with death and took the full force of its sting, its source, my sin, and put it away forever.

Story I have told you before: **D.G. Barnhouse: Death or its shadow?**

- Ps 23, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.
- Never. Never. Never will he leave.
- Never, never, never will he turn his face away or not feel my pain.

Sometimes you need to understand the theological answer. Sometimes you need simply to know that he is there. That he is present. That he is fully committed to you and fully in control.

For those of you that are disappointed: What if Jesus appeared to you and told you, “This is for the glory of God.” And he assured you that he loved you. You saw him weep in your pain. And that he was fully in control. Could you endure—if you knew it was all working for the glory of God; that he was fully in control and completely in love with you?

Of course you could.

- By the way, anybody know where Lazarus is today? Guess what? He died again. But this time, no resurrection.
- Don’t you think that the next time Mary and Martha buried their brother (if that’s what happened), they did so with the knowledge that Jesus can heal whenever he wants, and ultimately he will, and when he doesn’t he’s fully in control and pursuing a greater plan that leads to God’s glory and our good?
- Yes. I’m sure they knew that. And so can you.

John 20:31 tells you that all these things that Jesus did were signs; they were simply physical, temporal demonstrations of God’s eternal plan. Just as Jesus’ apparent absence did not indicate he’d lost control or faltered in his love, his apparent absence in your life doesn’t indicate that either.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!” HE IS THERE! He’s always there. But you might be in day 2 and feel like Jesus hasn’t shown up. Or maybe Lazarus has been dead 4 days and still no sign of Jesus yet. Hang on. He’s coming. And his delay is for his glory and your good.

- Now, one quick objection: “Maybe I’m suffering because I’m doing something wrong. Maybe I lost my job... maybe I keep destroying potential marriage relationships because I...” That’s why God gave you the church, to help you see that. So if you’re making dumb decisions they can point it out. But we can also help you see when the delay in your life is appointed by the sovereignty of God.

Summit: We worship, we believe, at the feet of one who has power over death! Do you realize the raw power this shows? He can bring anyone out of grave with just one word. D.A. Carson says that *had Jesus not specified Lazarus, every tomb in Jerusalem would have*

given up their dead.⁷ Do you realize this is the power of the one who walks beside you, with you, and is at work in you? If he can do this, what could he not do? What is he not worthy of? What kind of worship reaction should that solicit from us?

Invitation:

- **Are you really going to resist him?** He's the only one who can overcome your greatest problem. The death rate is holding steady at 100%. Do you want to live forever? He's your only hope.
- **We're going to give an invitation again:**
 - **Salvation from today, or last 4 weeks?**
 - Have doubted Jesus' love or power and just need to pour out your heart to him?
- Either way, we want to pray with you.

Counselors at BACK

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 418.