

Crisis of Faith

“Why Did God Let This Happen?”

Ant Frederick

April 2, 2017

Intro

What’s up fam? I’m Ant, pastor at Two Notch. Glad to be here with y’all today, and as always, I’m excited to be able to celebrate Easter with you in a couple weeks when we bring the Two Notch fam over here to celebrate our risen savior together.

We are in the middle of our Crisis of Faith series, where we’re looking at some of the biggest doubts, hang ups and questions that people have directed towards God throughout time. Today we’re covering very weighty question that everyone will ask at some point in their lifetime: “**Why did God let this happen?**”

If you have not yet to this point in your life, one day something is going to happen in your life that makes you feel like your life is coming undone.

- Phone call that’s going to give you a sharp pain in your stomach that seems to cut you to the core
- One day someone you **love is going to die**, maybe very young or unexpectedly, or something terrible is going to happen to you
- Some **other form of terrifying suffering** is going to shake up your entire life. And your life will never be the same.
- Amid these moments in our lives, the question of “**Why did God let this happen?**” will almost inevitably spring up. You’ll ask, “**Where was God?**” You’ll think, “God, **you could have done something about this and you didn’t**. I don’t know how to get past that. I don’t know how to process that.”

And I want to say from the very beginning that **I do not believe asking those questions is wrong**. Healthy grief will cause you to ask these questions, and the Bible is filled with people who direct questions like these to God. He’s big enough to handle them.

Today, as we work our way through **John 11**, we’ll talk about what to do when you have the question, “**Why?? If God is good, why?**”

This question isn’t an easy one.

We have a story here of some friends of Jesus who were asking the exact same question we’ve all asked.

John 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.”

Here is the set up for our story. Jesus had befriended a sibling group, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They lived outside of Jerusalem in a small town called Bethany. And I want us to pay attention to the language John chooses to use in this story, because he’s trying to communicate with his word choices and the way he tells this story.

Their brother Lazarus is really sick--so sick they are worried about his life. They had become convinced through Jesus’ life and miracles that He was the Messiah, so they sent for him. But they didn’t just say, “Jesus,

Lazarus is really sick.” They said, “**Lord,**” which affirms their belief in Him as the Savior who has power over all things, and the end of their message is “**He whom you love is ill.**”

Mary and Martha, in one sentence affirm that Jesus is both powerful enough to do something about Lazarus’ condition, and that He loves Lazarus. In doing so, they’re bringing to the forefront the two issues that frame the question that I was saying that we all ask or will ask at some point.

1. Is God All powerful?
2. Is God truly loving?

Because in the natural human perspective, facing the terrible realities of injustice and death and suffering, it feels like you must pick one. Either He’s all-powerful but not all-loving, or He’s all-loving but not all-powerful.

He either cares about us but can’t really do anything about the mess of this world, or He can do something to fix suffering but He doesn’t care about us enough to do it.

And in this one, simple statement, **Mary and Martha are subtly rejecting that dichotomy.** They affirm both that Jesus is Lord and therefore powerful enough to do something about their suffering, and that He loves Lazarus and them. **They had seen him heal people, and they knew that He loved them. So, their response was: “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”**

This is a tough place to be in. It’s a statement, but often when we’re in this type of situation, it’s also kind of a question, right? **“God you’re all-powerful, and you’re loving, right? And I have this situation that is difficult for me. So that means you’re going to work this out for me, right?”**

Let’s check out what Jesus does. It might not be what’d you’d expect.

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.

John who wrote this is a close disciple of Jesus. So, when He says, “Now Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus,” he’s speaking from a place of intimate knowledge.

For example, if my wife tells you, “Now, Ant loves Taylor Swift.” Then you know you can trust that because she knows me well enough to be able to make that type of claim. Now whether, or not that’s a true statement is something that I can neither confirm or deny, and I will answer no questions about the matter.

6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

It’s crazy how these sentences read.

Especially the transition from verse 5 to 6, which says, “*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*” **The word “So” here is crazy to me.** Shouldn’t it read “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, **but** despite that, when he heard about Lazarus He stayed put.” But it says “So.”

That means, Jesus has an intention, because of His love, to let Lazarus die. The implication of this passage is that Jesus could have healed Lazarus if He had chosen to, but he did not. And **in this instance,** Jesus has a reason for not intervening that’s driven by His love for them. He loved Mary and Martha and Lazarus, **so** He stayed put.

JESUS TELLS DISCIPLES BUT NOT MARY OR MARTHA

Here's what else is crazy, in verse 4, Jesus tells his disciples the reason before it happens. He says it's for the glory of God, that He might be glorified through it, or that people might know **that He is God**. A few verses later Jesus tells the disciples that He's going to go raise him from the dead so that people will believe in Him. So, Jesus has a reason for letting this happen. He tells His disciples the reason. And we haven't gotten this far in the story yet--we will--but at this point Jesus has not told Mary and Martha the reason. He has a reason, but He currently isn't doing what they want, and He has not told them why. There are three implications that I want to draw from this. If you're into taking notes, this is your part. Write these down:

THREE IMPLICATIONS:

Implication #1: God can have a reason you'll never know about.

In this instance, God had a reason for it that He never communicated to them. **And the fact that Mary and Martha weren't told the reason doesn't mean there wasn't a reason, and it doesn't mean that they weren't loved by God**. So that must **at least be a category** for us. Because there is **this assumption we all have** in our modern mind that if I can't think of a reason, God cannot possibly have one. A lot of us don't realize we have this assumption until something difficult comes. This story shows us that it's a **false assumption** to say that since I can't imagine there possibly being a reason for this suffering in my life, there isn't one.

Implication #2: It is not wrong to ask for a reason, but it is wrong to demand one.

It is wrong to say that God is in the wrong if He doesn't give you a reason. When we think about the suffering that has happened to us and in our world in general, **it is fine to ask, "What reason could God possibly have to allow this?"** I do not believe that God is offended by our questions. I believe it is fine to tell God, "I can't imagine there possibly being a good reason for this" ... AND ... AND... I also want us to **question our place** to demand reasons from God, and declare Him to be in the wrong if He doesn't give us the answer we want.

Here's how C.S. Lewis explained this in his book *God in the Dock*: (By the way, "Dock" means "on the stand" or "on trial," it's where the person sits who is **being accused of a crime** in a courtroom).

C.S. Lewis, God in the Dock - The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.

When faced with suffering during our culture, **we tend to put God on the defendant stand**. This is just **the default way** we approach it. We sit in the judge's seat and expect God to have "a reasonable defense" for permitting certain things to happen.

He says that in reality, **God does not belong on the dock**. The crazy thing about our posture towards God in all this is that all this suffering was not God's plan for the world, this is the fruit of us **refusing** to live under God's rule and care in the original home He created for us. Jesus did not create death and suffering. It was **never part of God's design** in the Garden of Eden--it was a **consequence** of our rebellion against God. So, it's perfectly fine to want an answer, but wrong to demand one. The creator does not owe he whom he has created an answer, and putting God, the creator of all, on the Dock means that we believe ourselves to be fit to judge the universe... which means we see ourselves as God. God does not owe us a response and He isn't on trial.

Implication #3: You need a person, not a reason.

It is easy to believe **that what I need to know in order make it** through our suffering is a reason. We believe that we need to know a reason. I need to know why this happened. What Jesus is going to show as we

work our way through the rest of this passage is that knowing a satisfying reason in our suffering is a luxury-- and knowing a satisfying person in our suffering is a necessity. And Jesus is about to show us that. He had a reason that He didn't give them, but He did give them Himself. **What you need to know to survive your pain is the all-satisfying Person.**

11 After saying these things, he said to them, "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." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.

So, **Jesus shows up during Lazarus's wake**. Many Jews from Jerusalem had come to comfort Martha and Mary in their grief and shock. When Jesus was coming:

- Martha goes to Jesus
- Mary sits down in her house

They're both grieving and hurting, but they respond differently to the news that Jesus is coming. **John draws attention to the differences in their responses and the difference in how Jesus responds to both in their grief**. One of the good things about having Jesus, the perfect One, as your friend is that He meets you right where you are and can give you what you need.

Picking back up in verse 21, we see that Jesus meets Martha first, as she's the one that goes to Him:

21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 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 dies, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." 28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 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."

(Exact same sentence that her sister said)

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved [and] 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. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Martha gets to Jesus and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

Mary gets to Jesus, falls at His feet, and says "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

They grieve and respond somewhat differently at the news that Jesus is coming. One goes to Him and the other sits there in the house, but when they get to Jesus they both say the same thing.

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

We all are different in many ways, but when suffering hits, we might use different words, but we often say the same thing that Mary and Martha said. “God you’re all powerful, you could have done something about this. You could have stopped this from happening, but you didn’t”

What’s beautiful is as they’re in this place of grief and expressing themselves to Jesus, He responds to both differently. Look back at **verse 21**:

21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” 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 dies, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

JESUS GIVES TRUTH

Martha

- Finds out Jesus is near, and she goes to Him
- Jesus, you could have prevented this
- “Your brother will rise again”
- I know, on the last day
- “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even if He dies.”
- “Everyone who believes in me shall never die. Do you believe me?”
- Yes, I do.

Jesus just tells her beautiful facts about who He is. He tells her that He is the resurrection. He is the reversal of death, and in Him the brokenness that we brought into this world will be undone for all who believe in Him. Death and suffering do not have the last laugh. Death and suffering do not have the final say because I am here, and I am more powerful than even death... and whoever believes in me will conquer death with me. Because of His love for her, Jesus gives her truth.

I have a friend that in tough times, has told me she feels like she’s drowning. She just kind of wallows in her pain and it’s like she can’t even think clearly. She can’t pull herself out of it. She told me that what she needs in that time is for someone that knows her to come to her with scriptures that remind her of true things about Jesus that are difficult for her to believe. She says that is the only thing that yanks her up out of the water she’s drowning in. In those moments, she needs someone to give her the words of God and remind her of what’s true.

- That God still loves her with a never ending, relentless pursuing love
- That she has a new identity as a loved daughter of Christ.

Lest self-pity reign in her life, she needs people to give her truth to anchor her heart, mind, and soul, and the truth of Jesus is that for her. After that, she can gain clarity and sanity, and though she might still be grieving, and the waves and winds might still be hitting her, she has an anchor that she’s holding onto so that she’s:

- Bent but not broken
- Injured but still standing
- Hurting but not hopeless
- Hit by the wind and waves, but not drowning
- Hurt by the suffering, but not owned and defined by it

The truth is what holds her together when she feels like she’s becoming undone and falling apart

Often, Christians, we wallow in self-pity, and we allow our grief and pain and sadness to define all our life instead of clinging to Christ our hope, our anchor. As Christians, we cling to Christ our hope, and the truth of His power and love. We remind ourselves of this to fight against the desire to have all our thoughts consumed with our sorrows. Now, don't get me wrong, grieving is good, being sad and crying are often appropriate... and the timeline looks different for everybody... **and, we need to remember and meditate on the encouraging truths of who God is... some of which we'll get to at our conclusion today.**

My wife on the other hand. When she's really going through it, she often has thoughts of truth in her mind. What's true about her, what's true about God. She's aware of these things, and the thing for her is knowing that she's not going through it alone. Knowing that she has a companion. She's often desiring me to show her that I care and that I'm hurting with her. **It tough to be suffering so much that you're crying and weeping, but it's worse to be suffering to that degree alone.** My wife desires for me to be with her and hurt with her.

MARY GOES TO JESUS

Mary, who is still sitting broken-hearted, knowing that her friend Jesus that could have done something is near, here Martha whispers, "Mary, He's asking for you."

Verse 29 says that when she heard this, she rose quickly and went to Jesus, who was still outside of town. The story tells us that the Jews who had come to mourn and weep with them **saw Mary get up and start running.**

WEEPING TOGETHER

As soon as Mary gets to Jesus it says she:

- Falls at his feet,
- "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died."
- **Those who were following Mary saw her do this, they all began weeping too.**

Check out what Jesus does with Mary. It's different from His response to Martha.

JESUS WEEPS WITH MARY

Jesus sees his friend weeping at his feet and doesn't immediately give her reasoning or truth. Verse 33 tells us what He did:

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also 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. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Mary comes in weeping. The Jews mourning with her, come to Him weeping... and Jesus, deeply troubled by death and suffering, Jesus, weeps with her.

God Himself, had God tears well up in His eyes and run down His face. This is Jesus sobbing, grieving with His friend.

Jesus gave Martha truth and He gave Mary tears.

And this is what we need! We need a God that gives us the truth we need and the tears that we need! We need a God that both has the truth about Himself that He is more powerful than death, and the tears that show that He is with us and His heart breaks with ours. We need the truth that tethers our souls together when we feel like we're becoming undone, and we need the tears of God that show us that our God says,

“No way I’m letting you walk through this alone. I’m here with you all the way through this. Hurting with you. Crying with you. Grieving with you. Suffering with you.”

Verses 36 and 37 shows some of them saying:

- See how He loved him!
- Couldn’t He have stopped this?

Picking back up in verse 38, we’ll see how the story ends:

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb.

It says once He again became deeply moved as He arrived at 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 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.” 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.”

Jesus, who displayed his love for Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in His weeping, his moment of vulnerability, if you would, just moments later, proves that He is all-powerful, and can indeed do something about their suffering.

What we learn from this story is that yes, Jesus does indeed love us like He loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. And yes, Jesus does have the power to do something about our suffering. What this means is that when you ask the question “Why did God let this happen?” the answer cannot be that He doesn’t love you, and the answer cannot be that He couldn’t do something about it.

But I want to end today by pointing out something you may have never realized about this story. Because I think that as 21st Century Western Christians, our response to hearing this story can sometimes be something like, **“That must have been nice to have been Mary and Martha and Lazarus. That must have been amazing to have Jesus meet you in your most dire and hopeless moment, and literally raise the dead. I wish He would do something like that in my life.”**

And I would argue that He in fact has. Jesus’s decision to raise Lazarus from the dead is what cost Him His life? For many of your bibles, the next subheading is “The Plot to Kill Jesus.”

In the following verses, verses 45-52, we get a conversation between some of the leaders of Jesus’ day about the problems that they’d experience because of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Verse 53 gives us their concluding thoughts.

53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

The raising of Lazarus happened just weeks before the eventual crucifixion of Jesus. It was the final nail in His coffin. **Jesus yelling at the tomb to release Lazarus sealed the deal for Jesus to enter into His own tomb mere days later.** For Lazarus to live, Jesus had to die. Jesus knew this, and He still did it. **He substituted His life for His friend’s life, and that’s where Jesus really does deal with our biggest problem and provide our greatest need.**

A TEMPORARY SOLUTION

Here's what I mean. Raising Lazarus from the dead didn't solve all the problems. Lazarus did eventually die, and he was mourned thoroughly one day when Jesus didn't call Him out of the tomb. Jesus didn't ultimately solve Mary and Martha's biggest problem because surely, they still grieved the loss of loved ones later in life, and loved ones grieved their death one day as well.

When we go to Jesus with our grief, often what we are asking for, like Mary and Martha, is a temporary solution. We, like Mary and Martha, would love to have:

- a few more years with our loved ones
- Less suffering in this life
- Less sickness in this life

Jesus is very sympathetic to these desires but **ultimately, we don't need someone who gives:**

- A few more years in this life.
 - We need someone who gives eternal life
- A life with less sickness in this life
 - A life where there is no sickness
- A life with Less suffering in this life
 - A life where there is no suffering
- A life with less life-changing phone calls that give us that sharp pain in our stomachs...
 - A life where we will never get another phone call like that again
- A life with less hospital visits with sick loved ones
 - A life where there will be no hospitals because no one ever gets sick
- A God who will give us the reasons for why things happen
 - A God that is:
 - Compassionate/loving enough to hurt with us through suffering
 - Powerful enough to rid us of it forever

We need someone to come and overpower death itself when He is raised from the dead. We need the One who is the Resurrection and the Life... the one who promises that all who believe in me will live even though they die.

And that is who He is because after he raised Lazarus from the dead, **He allowed Himself to be crucified on the cross, where He took upon Himself, suffering and death, to give us what we really need which is an eternal place where we will never know suffering or death again...**

So, when suffering comes to you or your family or loved ones, if you have a thought that says, **"God can't be loving and all powerful, because if He was, this wouldn't have happened."** ... remember, that as Christians, **"We don't let our suffering tell us who God is, we let God's suffering tell us who God is"** The cross shows us that Jesus is the God that we need.

- The Cross shows us the truth that He's loving and compassionate to suffer with us and powerful enough to deal with our problem of suffering and death

That said, we're going to take communion today.

- "In Remembrance of Me"
- Sacred for believers
- What you're holding in your hand symbolizes the proof that Jesus is the God that we need
- What you're holding is the symbol for why, even though we grieve, we don't wallow in self-pity.

Before I pray for our time of communion, I want to read a quote from John Stott in his book *The Cross of Christ*:

I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross.' In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of the Buddha, his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in Godforsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross that symbolizes divine suffering.