

LD 6.9 – Theodicy and the Raising of Lazarus

1. **THEODICY – THE PROBLEM OF PAIN AND SUFFERING AND AN ALL POWERFUL-BENEVELENT GOD AS IT LANDS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT – THE GOSPEL OF JOHN CHAPTER 11:**

- a. **INTRODUCTION – BACKGROUND:** In all of the stories from John's Gospel, there is always an obvious and a more subtle interpretation available. The account of Lazarus is one of the most powerful passages in Scripture... it grabs your attention and you can almost feel the shock and awe of the incredulous observers as they witness this great event. This passage begs the question, "Why would it be important for John's readers to hear this story... or put a better way, why would the Spirit want this story revealed in this way?" We need to do some hermeneutical reconnaissance to better understand what was going on in the Christian community at the time before we can understand what the Spirit was saying to them near the end of the 1st century AD, and then to extrapolate what it means to us today.
 - i. **Expositor's Commentary says** – The account of the raising of Lazarus is the climactic sign in the Gospel of John. Each of Jesus' seven signs illustrates some particular aspect of his divine authority. They are called "signs" because they point to something beyond the event themselves. In most cases, these signs were followed by a confession of belief on the part of many of the spectators. This particular sign [of Lazarus] exemplifies Jesus' power over the last and most irresistible enemy of humanity – death. For this reason it is given a prominent place in John's Gospel. It is also significant because it precipitated the decision of Jesus' enemies to finally decide to do away with Him. Something changed here and [as a result the Jewish leaders] conclude they must act. Furthermore, this episode contains a strong personal command to believe in Jesus in a crisis, when such belief would be most difficult. All that preceded this story in John's Gospel is preparatory [for this event]; all that follows it is the unfolding of a well-marked plot... revealing Jesus as the Author of Life and the Master over death.
 - ii. **Historically, the events of which John is writing, actually took place in the early 30's AD. Later in AD 64 Emperor Nero burned much of Rome and blamed the Christians of arson. This launched the terrible persecution of Messianic Jews and Christians until AD 68. Many martyrs were killed during this time including Peter and Paul in Rome. By AD 70 the Temple in Jerusalem was completely destroyed as Jesus had predicted... not one stone left standing. When Emperor Domitian came to power in AD 86, he soon after claimed the title of "Lord and God" and demanded everyone address him accordingly under penalty of death for their refusal. Christians flatly refused to so acknowledge him for they had One Lord and God being Jesus. Domitian then launched another persecution of Christians including the region of the seven Churches listed in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation. It was at this time that the Apostle John was exiled to the Island of Patmos where he wrote Revelation.**
 - iii. **Into this context the Gospel of John was written in the early to mid 80's followed by Revelation written in the early to mid 90's. With so much turmoil going on in the**

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Christian community, it is understandable why the Spirit through John would want to provide such a powerful message of consolation. It is generally accepted that the Spirit sought to console Christians to stand firm in their faith in the face of any adversity and hold fast even to the point of death knowing that since Jesus was the Master of Life, death had lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55).

b. OVERVIEW – TWO OBVIOUS THOUGHTS:

- i. **First obvious thought – Jesus gets the word that Lazarus is ill, but He stays away and knowingly lets him die. At face value this seems unusual and even cruel, but the story is soon transformed into an amazing act of power, love, and kindness.**
 1. When Jesus finally goes to see Lazarus, he is not only dead but rotting in his grave. Jesus gives an object lesson to Martha that is the main point of faith in Christ in this passage (John 11:25-27) – Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” This confession is key and is the point of the drama that follows.
 2. Now put yourself in this situation... Lazarus’ body is not merely dead but he’s been buried for four days – meaning his body is decaying, and everyone knows it. There’s a bunch of people observing this event, people from all over including some leaders of the Jews. With the tension high, Jesus calls Lazarus to come out, and the dead man obeys Jesus... being made whole and healthy again. It’s important to note that Lazarus is raised but not resurrected... resurrection refers to the new physical body we will receive at the end of the age in the new perfected world. This raising is a completely restored Fallen physical body... but the observers had to have been absolutely blown away! No laying on of hands, just a firm vocal command, and even the dead must respond to Jesus.
 3. Conclusion... if you were there in the crowd and had observed this, you would have to profess that Jesus is the Messiah because only God could do such a powerful miracle. After this sign, there is no way that death would be an impediment preventing one’s obedience and devotion to Jesus. Paul puts it this way in Philippians 1:21 –For me to live is Christ [meaning His Life being lived out in me], and to die is gain [meaning I gain all the glory of eternity with Jesus].
- ii. **Second obvious thought – the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem hear of this amazing thing that Jesus has done, but instead of believing in Him John writes of them debating what to do about their “Jesus problem”... which is simply stated in John 11:46-48 – Some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone**

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will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”

1. Notice the identity distinction... to the friends of Mary and Martha Jesus is the Messiah; but to the Jewish leaders He is “*this man*.” They acknowledge what Jesus is doing as miraculous; they acknowledge that only God could enable such miraculous works; but they refuse to believe He is the Messiah, because then they would have to submit to Him as Lord.
2. Notice their stated concern... firstly “*our place*” meaning their preferred role of privilege; secondly “*our nation*” meaning their right to rule in God’s name. Because they are locked into a self-serving and status-quo preserving mind set, they refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah in spite of all the proof they witnessed. Their false faith is now openly revealed... they are wicked men and not the Godly Spiritual leaders they ought to be. The Prophet Ezekiel adequately described such false leaders some 800 years before this event in Ezekiel chapter 34.
3. Conclusion... Jesus is all the things God wants in a Servant Leader, and the Jewish leaders are not. That is why Jesus is the “Good Shepherd” and the false leaders are merely thieves (John 10:7-15). The miracles Jesus performed proved that He is doing the Work of His Father... ergo Jesus is the Messiah. The false leaders are now found plotting to destroy God’s Messiah because they find His message not to their liking. This reveals that they cared little for God, and even less for God’s people. Essentially, they are in this for themselves here and now. This is also an important reminder as to what our priorities should be as modern day disciples and leaders of God’s people in the Church.

c. MESSAGE OF THEODICY:

- i. It involves the shortest verse in Scripture... John 11:35 – “*Jesus wept*.” The immediately preceding text states, “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” This is similar language to what Jesus said to His disciples at the Last Supper and also in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to His crucifixion. This is not a mere tear or two, this is a gut-wrenching emotional connection. The language is similar to what Jesus said to His disciples before His crucifixion.
- ii. This response from Jesus begs the question, “Why?” Why would Jesus be so distraught? Jesus knew what He intended to do... He knows that Lazarus will be raised, the text says He knew what was happening and what He would do when He first got the word that Lazarus was sick. Why then this strong emotional response?
- iii. The first part of the answer is a reminder that Jesus is “Emmanuel”... meaning “God with us” both as man and God. Jesus understands the fragile and tentative nature of humanity, being fully God and fully human. Jesus completely understands our hopes and

- our fears, and He is moved by sorrow and loss. This emotional connection demonstrates Jesus' humanity, and His connection to all who suffer.
- iv. The second part of the answer has to do with Jesus lament for the leaders of the Jews who should have recognized Him as their Messiah, but also submit to Him as their Lord and Master. The Jewish leadership is now openly prepared to solve their "*Jesus Problem*" by getting rid of Him by killing Him to protect their own personal interests; and notice they won't take the action themselves, they push it off onto the Romans.
 - v. The third part of the answer is a very complicated theological matter known as "Theodicy." Simply stated, Theodicy deals with the theological problem of how an All-Powerful, All-Good and All-Loving God could allow the pain and suffering of humanity. If God is all powerful, good, and loving – then it would seem obvious that He can certainly eradicate all pain and suffering... so why does He tolerate it? This raises some troubling questions – 1) maybe God isn't who we think He is, and 2) maybe He just really doesn't care about me.
 - 1. This problem is exactly what the Book of Job deals squarely about. Job's conclusion is that we don't see the entire picture... we don't know how personal freedom and the opportunity for evil work through the Spiritual Realm. Ultimately, Job repents of his doubt and shortsightedness, and reaffirms his trust and obedience of God.
 - 2. Many of King David's Psalms contain a "complaint" as to why God allows evil men to prosper while many of the righteous suffer loss. However, it is important to note that David never doubts God's goodness or His power. David always affirms that God's Goodness will ultimately be demonstrated, and that good will be rewarded and evil will be destroyed in the end.
 - 3. In writing this chapter, John is answering the question many Christians would have been asking at the time... "Does God really care about Me? Does He care about what I feel?" And the answer provided in this story is a resounding yes! God understands... in fact He is crying with us!
 - vi. Theologically, the problem of resolving God's tolerance of pain and suffering and God's Goodness and Love – is based upon the concept of humanity's free will and the working out of the three aspects of God's Will:
 - 1. First is God's Sovereign Will – these are the specific things that God decrees must occur. These are things that are necessary for the playing out of God's purpose in redemptive history. God in His Sovereign Will sees that certain things occur to advance His redemptive plan for humanity. God's Sovereignty plays out in redemptive history in perfect balance with all the Scripture revealed attributes of God... expressed perfectly all the time.
 - 2. Second is God's Prescriptive Will – these are the things that God prefers or desires

to occur, but that He doesn't necessarily compel or force them to happen.

Redemptive history plays out within a moral and ethical relational framework where humanity may deliberately partner with God to advance His Kingdom... or refuse. These are the things that expose our inner-being through our priorities and our intentions.

3. Third is God's Permissive will – these are the things that God allows humanity to decide for themselves within the ongoing evolving of God's Sovereign and Prescriptive Will. These are the myriad choices we make each day in which our character plays out in our ordinary life in real time. These decisions are how salt and light are demonstrated in our nature.
4. Humanity's Free Will – plays out in the context of these three aspects of God's Will. In this interaction God works all things for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).
 - a. Our God given conscience provides a moral and ethical compass by which we can choose to do what is right and good. As we deliberately seek to please God and advance His Kingdom, these choices become increasingly obvious with the Spirit's internal guidance.
 - b. However, we are free to refuse. When we persist in wrong choices our moral and ethical compass becomes less certain and may become bent and even broken. We have the choice to restrain evil in performing Godly action, or to focus on that which we desire without concern for what is right and honoring to God.
 - c. Without this freedom of choice, there is no free will for humanity... and without the right to choose it is hard to argue we are the responsible agents for our actions. If we deny free will, then it can be argued that humanity cannot be held culpable for our actions. The extreme development of this concept would hold that God then becomes the author of evil, which is an untenable conclusion, and one that Job and King David and a myriad of Biblical characters unilaterally refused confirming God's Goodness and His Sovereignty.
- vii. Theodicy plays out in the context of humanities rebellion revealed in Genesis chapter 3, and in living out our lives as Fallen men and women on Fallen and cursed earth. As God's redemptive plan plays out:
 1. Messiah's First coming and His death and Resurrection solved the problem of the sin-curse which separated humanity and God. This resolved the sin barrier to our personal relationship with God which is now removed.
 2. Messiah's Second coming at the end of the Church age God will solve the problem of the sin-curse on earth. When Jesus comes back He will make a New Heaven and

earth where goodness, peace and joy are experienced all the time.

3. From God's perspective, the problem with humanity being without free will is that we become nothing more than an "animaton"... a puppet-like creature that has no choice but to follow a carefully scripted and prescribed course of action. Such a creature is incapable of freely giving and receiving love. Scripture teaches that God desires us to become His friends... and to voluntarily submit and obey Him out of love and personal devotion to Him. He desires that we choose to do what is right and resist what is wrong, expecting that the consequences of our motives and actions will be worked out... not necessarily now, but certainly in eternity.
 4. God's redemptive plan necessarily means humanity must choose, and choice means free will, and free will means we are free to choose to do what is good or what is evil. And evil choices mean collateral damage, both in our own bodies and in the life of others will occur. Heavenly judgment involves settling the account for free will in the Presence of God. For those who are in Christ and sealed by the Spirit, we pass out of judgment into freedom; for those who refuse God's offering or redemption in Christ and submittal to His will and Spirit, judgment will bring condemnation and loss.
 5. The problem with our notion of Theodicy is the misunderstanding that in God's economy individuality and personal choices are critically important... so important that God allows human caused evil rather than force all action to be good. In other words, the freedom to do right or wrong is a greater good than the compulsion of strict conformity to God's will.
- d. **CONCLUSION** – The message of Jesus weeping as written by John, involves God's entering into the pain and suffering of those who were experiencing personal pain and loss... which would later be turned to joy and celebration. Just as Lazarus' mourners sorrow turned to joy and amazement, and just as Jesus followers sorrow at His crucifixion was turned to joy at Jesus resurrection, so will all those who do what is right through the ages find joy and amazement in eternity. This message was a great comfort for John's contemporaries and is also a great comfort for us now. It is a reminder that we are never alone, and that God feels our pain and suffering. It is also a picture of what will happen at the end of the age when Jesus returns and takes us into our perfect eternal home... where all pain and suffering will be swallowed up in joy.

THEODICY DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- a. READ 1 Corinthians 15:49-58 – How should this reframe our thought in an age of identity confusion where people are more concerned with "what they have" than "who they are?"
- b. READ James 1:2-4 – what does it mean for Jesus so real to you that you can consider trials as joy knowing they are perfecting our faith?
- c. READ Romans 8:31-39 presented here in the Living Bible Translation –

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“What can we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won’t God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? Will Christ Jesus? No, for he is the one who died for us and was raised to life for us and is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, pleading for us. Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? Even the Scriptures say, “For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.” No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels can’t, and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is the logical conclusion for the problem of Theodicy... and the hope that transforms suffering into joy. What pain are you carrying that you need to be transformed? What fears do you have that prevent you from being more committed as a disciple of Jesus?

Share and pray over these in faith believing, and ask for the increase of faith and wisdom which God desires to provide. And decide to get involved in a Journey Group where the ongoing fellowship will encourage you to grow deeper in your Journey with Christ.

- Outline of John as the Book of Signs – 1:19-12:50 – this documents most of Jesus public ministry.

There are 7 signs that occur in John’s Gospel:

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| i. 2:1-11 | water changed to wine. |
| ii. 4:46-54 | healing of centurion’s son |
| iii. 5:1-17 | healing at the Bethesda pool |
| iv. 6:1-14 | feeding of the 5,000 |
| v. 6:15-25 | walking on the water |
| vi. 9:1-12 | healing a man born blind |
| vii. 11:1-46 | raising of Lazarus |
- Transition – 12:20 – Greeks [non-Jews] are seeking Jesus – now Jesus’ time has come.
 - Book of Glory – 13:1-17:26 – mostly documents Jesus’ private ministry to His disciples.
 - Book of the Passion – 18:1-20:31
 - Epilogue – 21:1-25