Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

Dr. Jason Thrower

January 31

The Death of a Friend, John 11:38-44

After Martin Marty's wife's death he wrote a book titled *A Cry of Absence*. He could not feel or find God. I suspect too many people have felt like Marty, abandoned by God. Grief and depression have similar symptoms. When we grieve and when we are depressed, we feel distant from the comfort of God. We resist the idea that someone is near or cares. But the picture of Jesus weeping outside the tomb of Lazarus needs to be kept in mind by all believers. Jesus feels our grief and cares to the point of tears. "Cast all your cares upon him, because he cares for you." (1Peter 5:7) The lesson this week invites us to reflect upon our own death and the death of a loved one. Jesus is more than a theological truth, he is fully God and fully man and he is uniquely able to care for us and grieve with us. We are not alone in our grief and sadness over the death of a friend; Jesus is our hope. So as we grieve, let's remember we don't grieve as those who have no hope for our hope is real and lasting through Jesus Christ our crucified and resurrected Lord.

Commentary Lesson

On their arrival at Bethany, Lazarus is found to be already dead four days. In Martha's conversation with Jesus she laments his tardiness, for he could have saved her brother by the power of his prayer (v.21). This power is no less now that Lazarus is dead (v.22). They exchange conventional Pharisee certitudes about the resurrection of the dead. Jesus spoke these weighty transformational words first to Martha - "I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (v.25-26). She says she believes he is "the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (v.27). There has been no faith statement so nearly complete up to this time in the Gospel.

C.S. Lewis wrote that God whispers through our pleasures, but shouts through our pain. Grief over the death of a family member or friend, God can use to draw us closer to him in faith and commitment. Grief is personal and everyone grieves differently. Give yourself permission to mourn. We mourn because of the attachment we shared in this life to our friend. As followers of Christ we are not isolated from hard times. The Christian religion does not promise us that God will step in and save us from hard times; rather, the Christian religion says God will be with us. We have too many conditional disciples. As long as things go well they are faithful. A time of grief like Martha and Mary were going through over the death of their brother, often causes people to question their faith. What is our faith based upon? Are we merely seeking the handouts of God or are we seeking his face?
As disciples do we have a "even if" faith in God? Even if things don't work out the way we had hoped and planned we won't abandon our faith in God. The main idea of our text is immortality. In the Old Testament there is almost nothing said about immortality. The Jews had no teaching on the afterlife. There was no heaven or hell. A human being lived and died and went to Sheol. Sheol was the "abode of the dead" in early Hebrew thought. Sheol was a place of sleep, rest for good and evil Jews after their deaths. Death and Sheol, this is a long way from Jesus' promise of life after death.

In the time between the testaments, sometimes called the interbiblical period (roughly the time from 400BC to Christ) the teaching of immortality appeared in Jewish thought. But not all Jews believed in life after death. The Sadducees still held to the teachings about Sheol and no immortality. The Pharisees were convinced there was a life after death. The text tells us Martha and Mary believed like the Pharisees (11:24). But Jesus took the ideas of the Jews on life after death and built on them. The Christian teaching is much more full and specific than anything the Pharisees believed.

Be sure not to read this text small. If we teach that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead apart from the resurrection of Jesus, we "ensmall" (opposite of enlarge) this text. It is not the resurrection of Lazarus that gives the Christian hope. It is the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead he gave us a foretaste of what would come in John 20:50. This is the Christian hope. And when Jesus showed his power over death in the resurrection of Lazarus and when he confirmed that power in his resurrection, then we take heart as we read it. All who believe in Christ can with good reason hope for their own resurrection. "Our brothers and sisters, we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not be sad, as are those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him" (1Thess.4: 13-14). This is the gospel word, a life-giving word for those who are hungry for hope.

Contact Jason - throwerjason@gmail.com