

Chapter 5 – The Case of "Jesus Wept"

The Shortest Verse

In the eleventh chapter of the fourth gospel, the words "Jesus wept" comprise verse 35. Having just two words, it is the shortest verse in the Bible. Those words are in the passage that record Jesus' visit to the tomb of Lazarus, and some commonly taught ideas give people a false impression of this event, as will be shown.

Before proceeding, open a Bible and take a few moments to consider the verse in its original context. Make some notes on what you think scripture is teaching us in this passage. Then return to this study and see if the evidence found in scripture is able to correct some common erroneous assumptions about this verse.

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The Case of "Jesus Wept"

A Litmus Test for Truth

The words "Jesus wept" occur in the passage that tells of Jesus' visit to the tomb of his friend Lazarus, which leads many to read various emotions into those words. Doing so causes people to say things like: *'his tears show us he was saddened by death and identified with all of those who have ever lost someone they loved'* or *'he cried because he shared Mary and Martha's burden of grief and he missed his friend Lazarus,'* etc. Is that really why he wept?

Visiting a tomb where mourners are weeping could easily move one to tears. Moreover, the grief of his friends Mary and Martha surely tugged at Jesus' heart. Yet we lean on our own understanding if we assume that is what caused him to weep. If we let scripture teach us to rightly divide the passage, then another view emerges:

"Now a certain *man* was sick, *named* Lazarus, of Bethany ... When Jesus heard *that*, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby. Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was. Then after that saith he to *his* disciples, Let us go into Judea again ... Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him ... Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat *still* in the house. Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died ... she went her way, and called Mary her sister ... Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" (Fourth gospel 11:1-37)

With those words scripture establishes a litmus test for truth and this test lets us know "Jesus wept" cannot be compared to the tears we shed when we go to the funeral of a friend or loved one. Why not? Because unlike us when we attend a funeral, and unlike those who were mourning the death of Lazarus, Jesus was not there for a funeral – he was there to raise Lazarus from the dead!

A Time to Mourn?

The biblical evidence showing why "Jesus wept" and "groaned" and "was troubled" will be presented shortly. However, first it is important to learn how scripture disproves ideas like:

- (A) *'Jesus wept over the death of a friend,'*
- (B) *'Jesus wept as he joined with others in their grief,'*
- (C) *'Jesus wept over the pain death causes,'* etc.

Those ideas fail the test of biblical scrutiny because Jesus knew he, and everyone there, would see Lazarus again in just a few moments. Jesus told the disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." Then scripture says, "Jesus spake of his death." This lets us know Jesus planned to "go" and raise Lazarus from the dead. So, his knowledge of the upcoming miracle cannot be reconciled with the notion of him being sad and missing his friend.

Those who do not take account of the purpose of Jesus' visit make the same false assumption about his tears as did the Jews who saw him cry; "Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!" The

mourners *assumed* Jesus wept because of his love for Lazarus. Yet scripture reveals their inference was made in ignorance because they did not have all of the facts needed to discern the truth, such as the miracle Jesus planned to do.

Moreover, something else Jesus said should keep us from assuming '*Jesus wept because of the death of Lazarus.*' Scripture tells us, "Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. And I am **glad** for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe," and his use of the word "glad" in talking about the death of Lazarus should arrest our attention! Jesus looked forward to what was about to occur because Lazarus' death and his raising of Lazarus from the dead would work together for the good of the disciples ["to the intent ye may believe"]. This alone ought to call into question the idea of Jesus weeping out of sadness because he missed Lazarus or because he identified with the mourners.

A Time to Weep?

"Jesus loved" Lazarus and called him "friend," but he did not cry:

- when he heard Lazarus was sick, nor
- when he said, "Lazarus is dead," nor
- when he met with Martha, nor
- when he met Mary and "saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her."

Still, many assume identification with the mourner's grief is what led him to weep, even though the evidence does not fit that assumption. As the foregoing examples show, subjecting ideas to biblical scrutiny gives us a way to test the truth of biblical beliefs [by looking to see if the evidence in scripture justifies a given idea or contradicts it].

When Did Jesus Weep?

Considering why Jesus did not weep is fine, but the question remains, why did he weep? Jesus was not mourning the loss of his friend, nor did he shed tears when Martha and later Mary came to him weeping. So, what brought on his tears at the point where he finally wept?

Do a search on when Jesus shed tears and you will learn there was only one other time when Jesus publicly shed tears. In Luke 19, Jesus rode into "Jerusalem" on a "colt" and we are told:

"when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Lk 19:41-44).

Why did Jesus weep on this occasion? It was over their ignorance of the time of the "visitation." This means they should have known it (i.e., it was foretold in scripture). They missed the truth and did not realize his presence in Jerusalem on that day was a fulfillment of prophesy. Their lack of knowledge about the things in God's word moved Jesus to tears at that point. Now, let us compare this to the "Jesus wept" passage. Why did Jesus weep at the tomb of Lazarus? What led him to weep when he did? It was the response of the Jews to his question.

Focus on the sequence. Jesus asked, "Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept" (Fourth gospel 11:34-35). Why did their answer to his question move him to tears? Notice what came next: "Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?" (Fourth gospel 11:36-37). How does this help us see why "Jesus wept" in response to their "come and see" answer to his question?

A Necessary Detour

For a moment, let us leave the "Jesus wept" passage and consider a time when Jesus was surprised. Jesus once said, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Mt 8:10, Lk 7:9). What led him to say that? It was hearing the words of a centurion who had asked him to heal one of his servants (cf. Mt 8:5-13, Lk 7:2-10). Jesus was on his way to the centurion's house when he received this message:

"Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof: Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word, and my servant shall be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, having under me soldiers, and I say unto one, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth *it*. When Jesus heard these things, he marveled at him, and turned him about, and said unto the people that followed him, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Lk 7:6-9).

The centurion's solid reasoning and his willingness to act accordingly had an impact on Jesus. The centurion and Jesus had something in common, for he said, "I **also** am a man set under authority." As a man "under authority," his orders were carried out because of the one who gave him his authority (Caesar). Because he recognized Jesus "also" was "a man set under authority," he concluded Jesus could, "say in a word" and his servant would "be healed." His reasoning teaches us how a person would necessarily be drawn to the same conclusion, if their reasoning is built on a consistent respect for truth.

A person seeking to help a sick child physically interacts with the child to provide aid, comfort, medication, etc. However, miracles overcome the things of this world, so physical interaction or nearness are not necessary. The authority to do miracles is not of this world. Therefore, any person who is "under authority" and doing miracles would not be bound by the rules of this world.

Follow the centurion's reasoning through to its logical conclusion and one must conclude Jesus would not have to be physically present to bless someone with a miracle. He would only need to give the order. Still, the centurion's logic is not what moved Jesus, it was his faith – he put that reasoning into action and sent word for Jesus not to come (and this showed he truly respected the power and authority of God).

Why Did Jesus Go to the Tomb?

Jesus did not go to Lazarus' tomb because he had to be close enough for Lazarus to hear him say, "Lazarus, come forth" (Fourth gospel 11:43). Lazarus was dead, so getting closer to his corpse was not going to increase the chance of him hearing Jesus' voice. But if Jesus had not gone there and raised Lazarus in the presence of his disciples, the miracle would not have produced the result Jesus intended.

Before he had even set out for Bethany on that day, Jesus told the disciples why he was going there. "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad **for your sakes** that I was not there, **to the intent ye may believe**; nevertheless let us go unto him" (Fourth gospel 11:14-15). Thus his intent in raising Lazarus was not, first and foremost, to stop the tears of Martha, Mary, and the other mourners, nor was it to give Lazarus more time in this world. It was so those disciples would believe! Jesus raised Lazarus in the presence of his disciples for their benefit, but those disciples were not the only ones who witnessed the miracle.

Jesus had not yet reached the town when Mary and those who were with her went out to meet him. Then we are told:

"Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died? Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave" (Fourth gospel 11:33-38).

When Jesus asked, "Where have ye laid him?" how should the Jews have responded? Their words prove they knew he had the power to stop death. This knowledge should have led them to say, '*you do not need to go there, just say a word and he shall be raised.*' But while their words prove they knew Jesus represented an authority that was not of this world, they did not follow this to its logical conclusion and act in faith (as the centurion had done).

"No, not in Israel"

Faced with a miracle worker, the centurion said, '*no need to come.*' Faced with the same man, the Jews said, "Lord, come and see." The centurion certainly had less data to go on than they did. First off, they had a heritage built on the word of God and he did not. Also, the Jews specifically referred to Jesus opening the eyes of the blind, and they probably were aware of many of his other miracles as well.

From the early days of Jesus' ministry, the people of Jerusalem knew of his miracles; "When he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast *day*, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did" (Fourth gospel 2:23). In addition to the miracles themselves, even the quantity of them made an impression: "Many of the people believed on him, and said, When Christ cometh, will he do **more** miracles than these which this man hath done?" (Fourth gospel 7:31)

There is no telling what miracles of Jesus the Jews at the tomb of Lazarus had heard about (or that may have been witnessed by them or a relative). Beyond the miracles, they had other reasons to know Jesus had been sent by God. In all of Jesus' teaching and in all of his confrontations with religious leaders, he honored the authority of God and those who were obedient to God knew this was so.

One time when Jesus was teaching in the temple, we are told:

"the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned? Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. **If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself**" (Fourth gospel 7:15-17).

Even the men who were sent by the religious leaders to seize Jesus on one occasion (cf. Fourth gospel 7:32) recognized the teaching of Jesus was very different. When they returned without him, the chief priests and Pharisees asked, "Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man" (Fourth gospel 7:45-46).

In spite of knowing what Jesus had done and taught, when he asked, "Where have ye laid him?" the Jews responded, "Lord, come and see" – and only then did Jesus weep! It was a sad moment, but it may be wrong to assume he wept because of *sadness* over their lack of faith. People shed tears for lots of reasons. Some weep for joy at weddings. Indignation moves others to tears at injustices like human trafficking. So, let us take another look to see if scripture has more to say on this.

Overcoming the Language Barrier

The writers of scripture did not write in English. This is why those who use an English Bible can benefit by looking at the Hebrew and Greek words that were used by the writers of scripture. Case in point, in the "Jesus wept" passage the words "groaned" and "groaning" describe Jesus' reaction ("he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled"), *before* he asked, "Where have ye laid him?" After the Jews acknowledged Jesus had the power to prevent death, it says, "Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave" (Fourth gospel 11:38). Yet, if one relates those verses to other verses having the word "groan," they might get the wrong impression if they are not diligent.

Several Greek words were translated as "groan." The one translated as "groaned" and "groaning" in the "Jesus wept" passage was used only three other times in scripture, and none of those times was it translated as "groaned" or "groaning." Twice it was translated as "straightly charged," and once as "murmured against" (Mt 9:30, Mk 1:43, 14:5). The definition of this word includes: to be angry, to be moved with indignation, and to sternly charge.

Both verses where the word was translated as "straightly charged" tell of Jesus giving an order to men he had healed, who then went out and directly disobeyed him (Mt 9:30-31, Mk 1:43-45). This word was used only other time when, "some that had indignation within themselves" had "murmured against" a woman who gave Jesus an expensive gift (Mk 14:4-5). In this verse "indignation" is linked to the word translated as "groaned" and "groaning" in the "Jesus wept" passage, and we need to take account of this if we want to be led by the word of God.

The Conclusion of the Case of "Jesus Wept"

"Jesus wept" right after he heard the Jews' response to his question, and scripture indicates it was their ignorance and/or lack of faith that moved him to tears at that moment. The greatest public miracle of his earthly ministry is, arguably, the raising of Lazarus. Jesus knew it was going to happen before he went to Lazarus' tomb and we are told why he did it. The LORD said, "he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (Jer 23:28). But instead of letting God's word speak for itself, men who think they can say it better prefer to put it in their own words. When people say things like, '*Jesus wept over the death of his friend,*' they are not being faithful to God's word (whether they know it or not).

The end of the Case of "Jesus Wept"