

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
11:30-37

30. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him. 31. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She is going to the tomb to weep there. 32. Then when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying to him, Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 33. Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled. 34. And he said, Where have ye laid him? They said to him, Lord, come and see. 35. Jesus wept. 36. Then the Jews said, Behold how he loved him! 37. And some of them said, Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?

30.--[*Now Jesus had not yet come, etc.*] The Greek word for "come" is in the preterperfect tense. The sentence, translated literally, would be, "Jesus had not yet come into the town" when Martha left Him to tell Mary, but was still waiting or remaining in the place outside Bethany where Martha at first met Him. The word "town" would be more correctly rendered "village" according to our present acceptation of the word. Yet it is fair to remember that words change their meaning with lapse of time. Even at this day a little Suffolk village of 1,400 people is called a "town" by many of its inhabitants.

Calvin thinks that Jesus remained outside Bethany by Martha's request, that His life might not be endangered.

31.--[*Then the Jews...followed her.*] It is probable that the persons here mentioned formed a considerable number, as many as could crowd into the house. "Comforted" in the Greek is the present participle and implies that they were actually employed in comforting Mary. Concerning the manner of comforting on such occasions, we know nothing certain. People who only talk commonplaces are miserable comforters, and far worse than Job's friends who sat for seven days saying nothing at all. It may be that among the Jews the mere presence of courteous and sympathizing people was thought a kind attention and soothed the feelings of the bereaved. The customs of nations differ widely in such matters.

It is evident these Jews did not hear Martha's message and knew nothing of Jesus being near. Some of them, perhaps, had they known it, would not have followed Mary; not knowing, they all followed without exception, and unexpectedly became eyewitnesses of a stupendous miracle. All they knew was that Mary went out hastily. They followed in a spirit of kind sympathy, and by so doing reaped a great blessing.

Rupertus shrewdly remarks that the Jews did not follow Martha when she ran to meet Jesus, but did follow Mary. He conjectures that Mary's affliction

was deeper and more overwhelming than Martha's, and her friends devoted themselves more to comfort her, as needing most consolation. Yet the simpler reason seems to be that when *both* sisters had left the house, the friends could hardly do anything else but go out and follow.

[*She is going to the tomb to weep there.*] We must suppose from this sentence that weeping at the grave of dead friends was a custom among the Jews in our Lord's time. In estimating such a custom, which to most thinking persons may seem as useless as rubbing a wound and very likely to keep up pain without healing, it is only fair to remember that Old Testament views of the state after death were not nearly so well lighted and comfortable as ours. The removal of death's sting and the resurrection and paradise were things not nearly so well understood even by the best saints before Christ, as they were after Christ rose again. To most of the Jews in our Lord's time, we can well believe that death was regarded as the end of all happiness and comfort, and the state after death as a dreary blank. When Sadducees, who said there was "no resurrection," were chief rulers and high priests, we may well suppose that the sorrow of many Jews over the death of friends was a "sorrow without hope." Even at this day "the place of wailing" at Jerusalem, where the Jews assemble to weep over the foundation stones of the old temple, is a proof that their habit of weeping over crushed hopes is not yet extinct.

32.--[*Then when Mary, etc.*] We see in this verse that as soon as Mary met our Lord, the first thing she said was almost exactly what Martha had said in the twenty-first verse, and the remarks made there need not be repeated. The similarity shows, at any rate, that throughout the illness of Lazarus the thoughts of the two sisters had been running in one and the same direction. Both had built all their hopes on Jesus coming. Both had felt confidence that His coming would have saved their brother's life. Both were bitterly disappointed that He did not come. Both had probably kept saying the same words repeatedly, "If our Master would only come, Lazarus would not die." There are, however, one or two touches of difference between the two sisters, here as elsewhere. Let us note them.

Mary "fell down" at our Lord's feet, and Martha did not. She was made of softer, feebler character than Martha and was more completely crushed and overcome than her sister.

Mary fell down at our Lord's feet when she "saw" Him. Up to that moment, probably, she had borne up and had run to the place where Martha told her Jesus was waiting. But when she actually saw her Master and remembered how she had longed for a sight of Him for some days, her feelings overcame her, and she broke down. The eyes have a great effect on the feelings of the heart. People often bear up pretty well till they see something that calls up thoughts.

I do not perceive any ground for thinking, as Calvin does, that this "falling at our Lord's feet" was an act of worship, a recognition of our Lord's divinity. It is much more natural and reasonable to regard it as the mere expression of Mary's state of feeling.

Trapp remarks that the words of Mary in this verse and of Martha in the

former one show that we are all naturally disposed to make too much of Christ's bodily presence.

33.--[*Therefore, when Jesus saw her, etc.*] This is one of those verses which bring out very strongly the real humanity of our Lord and His power to sympathize with His people. As a real man, He was specially moved when He saw Mary and the Jews weeping. As God, He had no need to hear their plaintive language and to see their tears in order to learn that they were afflicted. He knew perfectly all their feelings. Yet as man He was like ourselves, peculiarly stirred by the *sight* of sorrow; for human nature is so constituted that grief is eminently contagious. If one in a company is deeply touched and begins to weep, it is extremely likely that others will weep also. This power of sympathy our Lord evidently had in full possession. He saw weeping, and He wept.

Let us carefully remark that our Lord never changes. He did not leave behind Him His human nature when He ascended up into heaven. At this moment, at God's right hand, He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities and can understand tears as well as ever. Our great High Priest is the very Friend that our souls need, able to save as God, able to feel as man. To talk of the Virgin Mary feeling for sinners more than Jesus is to say that which is ignorant and blasphemous. To teach that we can need any other priest when Jesus is such a feeling Savior is to teach what is senseless and absurd.

[*He groaned in the spirit.*] There is considerable difficulty about this expression. The word rendered "groaned" is only used five times in the New Testament. In Matt. 9:30 and Mark 1:43 it is "straitly charged." In Mark 14:5 it is "murmured." Here and at the thirty-eighth verse following, it is "groaned." Now what is precisely meant by the phrase?

(a) Some, as Ecolampadius, Brentius, Chemnitius, Flacius, and Ferus, maintain firmly that the notion of anger, indignation, and stern rebuke is inseparable from the word "groaned." They think that the latent idea is the deep and holy indignation with which our Lord was moved at the sight of the ravages which death had made and the misery sin and the devil had brought into the world. They say it implies the stern and righteous wrath with which the deliverer of a country, tyrannized over and trampled down by a rebel, regards the desolation and destruction which the rebel has caused.

(b) Some add to this view the idea that "in spirit" means that our Lord groaned through the Holy Ghost, or by the Divine Spirit which dwelt in Him without measure, or by the power of His Godhead.

(c) Some, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius, think "groaned in spirit" means that Christ rebuked His own natural feelings by His Divine nature, or restrained His trouble and in so doing was greatly disturbed.

(d) Some, as Gomarus and Lampe, consider that our Lord was moved to holy sorrow and indignation at the sight of the unbelief even of Martha and Mary (expressed by their immoderate grief as if the case of Lazarus was hopeless) as well as at the sight of the unbelief of the Jews.

(e) Some, as Bullinger, Gualter, Diodati, Grotius, Maldonatus, Jansenius, Rollock, and Hutcheson, consider that the phrase simply expresses the highest and deepest kind of inward agitation of mind--an agitation in which grief, compassion, and holy detestation of sin's work in the world were all mingled and combined. This agitation, however, was entirely inward at present; it was not bodily but spiritual, not in the flesh but in the spirit. As Burgon says, the "spirit" here means Christ's *inward* soul. I prefer this opinion to the former ones, though I fully admit it has difficulties. But it is allowed by Schleusner and Parkhurst, and seems the view of Tyndall, Cranmer, and the Geneva version, as well as of our own.

[*And was troubled.*] This expression is, to my mind, even more difficult than the one which immediately precedes it. It would be literally translated, as our marginal reading has it, "He troubled Himself." In fact, Wycliffe translates it so. Now what can this mean?

Some maintain that in our Lord's mysterious Person the human nature was so entirely subordinated to the Divine that the human passions and affections never moved unless influenced and actuated by the Divine nature, and that here, to show His sympathy, He "troubled Himself." Thus Rupertus remarks that "if He had not troubled Himself, no one else could have troubled Him." I confess that I regard this view with a little suspicion. It seems to me to imply that our Lord's human nature was not like ours, and that His humanity was like an instrument played upon by His divinity, but in itself dead and passive until its music was called out. To my mind there is something dangerous in this.

I prefer to think that our Lord as man had all the feelings, passions, and affections of a man, but all under such perfect control that they never exceeded, as ours do, and were never even very demonstrative excepting on great occasions. As Beza says, there was no "disorder" in His emotions. Here, I think, He saw an occasion for exhibiting a very deep degree of sorrow and sympathy, partly from the sorrowful sight He beheld, and partly from His love to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Therefore, He greatly disturbed and "troubled Himself."

It still admits of a question whether the phrase may not be simply a Hebraism for "He was troubled." (Compare 1 Sam. 30:6 and 2 Sam. 12:18.) Hammond says it is a Hebrew idiom.

When all has been said, we must not forget that the phrase touches a very delicate and mysterious subject. That subject is the precise nature of the union of two natures in our Lord's Person. That He was at the same time perfect God and perfect Man is an article of the Christian faith, but how far the Divine nature acted on the human, and to what extent it checked and influenced the action of human passions and feelings, are very deep points which we have no line completely to fathom. After all, not the least part of our difficulty is that we can form no clear and adequate conception of a human nature entirely without sin.

One thing, at any rate, is abundantly clear from this passage: there is nothing wrong or wicked in being greatly moved by the sight of sorrow, so long as we keep our feelings under control. To be always cold, unfeeling,

and unsympathizing may appear to some very dignified and philosophical. But though it may suit a Stoic, it is not consistent with the character of a Christian. Sympathy is not sinful but Christ-like.

Theophylact observes that Christ "teaches us by His own example the due measure of joy and grief. The absence altogether of sympathy and sorrow is brutal; the excess of them is womanly."

Melancthon observes that none of Christ's miracles seem to have been done without some great mental emotion (Luke 8:46). He supposes that here at this verse there was a great conflict with Satan in our Lord's mind, and that He wrestled in prayer for the raising of Lazarus, and then thanked God afterwards that the prayer was heard. Calvin takes much the same view.

Ecolampadius observes that we must not think Christ had a human body only and not a human soul. He had a soul like our own in all things, sin only excepted, and capable of all our feelings and emotions.

Piscator and Trapp compare the trouble of spirit which our Lord went through to the disturbance and agitation of perfectly clear water in a perfectly clear glass vessel. However great the agitation, the water remains clear.

Musculus reverently remarks that, after all, there is something about this "groaning in spirit and troubling Himself" which cannot be fully explained.

34.--[*And he said, Where have ye laid him?*] We cannot suppose that our Lord, who knew all things--even to the moment of Lazarus' death--could really need to be informed where Lazarus was buried. He asks what He does here partly as a kind friend to show His deep sympathy and interest in the grave of His friend, and partly to give further proof that there was no collusion in the matter of Lazarus' burial and that He had nothing to do with the choice of his tomb (in order to concert an imposture about raising him). In short, those who heard Him publicly ask this question would see that this was no pre-arranged and pre-contrived miracle.

Quesnel remarks: "Christ does not ask out of ignorance any more than God did when He said "Adam, where are you?"

[*They said...come and see.*] Who they were that said this we do not exactly know. It was probably the common saying of all the party of mourners who stood around while Jesus talked with Mary. They did not know why our Lord wished to see the grave. They may possibly have supposed that He wished to accompany Mary and Martha and to weep at the grave. At any rate, the question and answer secured a large attendance of companions as the disciples and our Lord went to the place where Lazarus was buried.

35.--[*Jesus wept.*] This wonderful little verse has given rise to an enormous amount of comment. The difficulty is to select thoughts and not to overload the subject.

The Greek word rendered "wept" is not the same as that used for "weeping" in the thirty-third verse, but totally different. There the weeping is a

weeping accompanied by demonstrative lamentation. Here the word would be more literally and accurately rendered "shed tears." In fact, it is the only place in the New Testament where this word for "weep" is used.

There are three occasions where our Lord is recorded in the Gospels to have wept: once when He beheld the city (Luke 19:41), once in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39 and Heb. 6:7), and here. We never read of His laughing and only once of His rejoicing (Luke 10:21).

The reasons assigned by commentators why our Lord wept here, before He raised Lazarus, are various and curious.

(a) Some think that He wept to see the ravages made by death and sin.

(b) Some, as Hilary, think that He wept to think of the unbelief of the Jews.

(c) Some think that He wept to see how weak and feeble was the faith of Mary and Martha.

(d) Some, as Jerome and Ferus, think that He wept at the thought of the sorrow Lazarus would go through by returning to a sinful world.

(e) Some think that He wept out of sympathy with the affliction of His friends at Bethany, in order to give an eternal proof to His church that He can feel with us and for us.

I believe this last opinion is the true one.

We learn the great practical lesson from this verse that there is nothing unworthy of a Christian in tears. There is nothing unmanly, dishonorable, unwise, or feeble in being full of sympathy with the afflicted, and ready to weep with them that weep. Indeed, it is curious to gather up the many instances we have in Scripture of great men weeping.

We may draw great comfort from the thought that the Savior in whom we are bid to trust is one who can weep, and is as able to feel as He is able to save.

We may learn the reality of our Lord's humanity very strongly from this little verse. He was one who could hunger, thirst, sleep, eat, drink, speak, walk, groan, be wearied, wonder, feel indignant, rejoice--like any of ourselves, and yet without sin; and above all, He could weep. I read that there is "joy in the presence of the angels of God" (Luke 15), but I never read of angels weeping. Tears are peculiar to flesh and blood.

Chrysostom remarks that "John, who enters into higher statements about our Lord's nature than any of the evangelists, also descends lower than any in describing His bodily affections."

36.--[*Then the Jews said, Behold, how He loved him!*] This sentence is the expression partly of surprise, which comes out in the word "behold," and partly of admiration, "What a loving and tender-hearted Teacher this is!"

It gives the idea that those who said this were the few unprejudiced Jews who had come to Bethany to comfort Mary and Martha, and afterward believed when they saw Lazarus raised.

Let us observe that of all graces, love is the one which most arrests the attention and influences the opinion of the world.

37.--[*And some of them said, etc.*] This sentence sounds to me like the language of enemies determined to believe nothing good of our Lord and prepared to pick a hole or find a fault if possible in anything that He did. Does not a sarcastic sneer ring throughout it? "Could not this Man, if He really did open the eyes of that blind person at Jerusalem last autumn, have prevented this friend of His from dying? If He really is the Messiah and the Christ and really does work such wonderful works, why has He not prevented all this sorrow? If He really loved Lazarus and his sisters, why did He not prove His love by keeping him back from the grave? Is it not plain that He is not Almighty? He cannot do everything. He could open the eyes of a blind man, but He could not prevent death carrying off His friend. If He was able to prevent Lazarus dying, why did He not do it? If He was not able, it is clear there are some things He cannot do."

We should note that "the blind" is a word in the singular number. It is evidently the blind man at Jerusalem whose case is referred to.

Let us note that nothing will convince, satisfy, or silence some wicked men. Even when Christ is before them, they are caviling, doubting, and finding fault. What right have Christ's ministers to be surprised if they meet with the same treatment?

Musculus remarks on the Satanic malice which this sentence displays. It is the old skeptical spirit of caviling and questioning. Unbelief is always saying, "Why, why, why?". "If this Man was such a friend of Lazarus and loved him so much, why did He let him die?"