

God, Pain, and Suffering - Part I

By John D. Wilsey

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read Luke 7:36–50. Then read the comments related to John 11:1–3 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: Who was Mary, the sister of Lazarus?

Assignment Two

Read the comments related to John 11:4–10 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: Why did Jesus wait two days to go to Bethany?

Assignment Three

Read the comments related to John 11:11–15 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What was Jesus's ultimate goal in going to Bethany to be with Lazarus's family?

Scripture to Memorize

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live." John 11:25

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand how Jesus is the answer to the problem of pain and suffering.

John D. Wilsey is assistant professor of History and Christian Apologetics at Southwestern Seminary. He is author of *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (IVP Academic, 2015) and *One Nation under God: An Evangelical Critique of Christian America* (Pickwick, 2011). He is editing an abridged edition of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* for Lexham Press for release in 2016. He blogs at johndwilsey.com. John thrives in a romantic relationship with his wife, and together they are raising two dear children.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

Imagine you are experiencing a great loss in your life—the death of a close friend. This friend died in the prime of life and you are struggling with grief and perplexity. Perhaps you are beginning to doubt the goodness and the power of God. How does the ministry of Christ in the death of Lazarus apply to your experience of profound loss and the pain and suffering that accompany that loss?

Read John 11:1–15 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Verse 2. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment. Jesus had a close relationship with Lazarus and with his family. Mary and Martha were his sisters. Someone other than Jesus' disciples rarely appeared a second time in the Gospel narrative. Here we see Mary, the woman who adored Jesus in the Pharisee's home as reported in Luke 7, in the context of the death of her brother (see Luke 7:37–38).

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share an answer to the following question: Who was Mary, the sister of Lazarus?

Discussion Question

If you had the ability to heal someone and you knew that person needed you, what would you do?

On Your Own

Think of a time when your prayers were not answered according to your timetable. In the space below, briefly write what you were thinking as you waited on God to answer your prayers.

Studying the Passage

Verse 4. so that the Son of God may be glorified. Jesus had a specific purpose in mind for the situation Lazarus and his family were experiencing. Jesus wasn't surprised, He wasn't confused, and He didn't need any advice on what to do. He knew exactly what He was doing.

Verse 5. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. We are reminded of the kind of relationship Jesus had with these people. That reminder is helpful because we are about to see something that might go against our intuition, given that Jesus loved this family.

Verse 6. He stayed two days longer. Why would Jesus delay for such a long time when He knew that His friend was sick, that his family had sent for Him, and that He loved them so? Jesus loved the family, so the fact that He delayed seemed counterintuitive. Jesus was not delaying because He didn't care or was powerless. He delayed because He had a specific

purpose in mind.

This doesn't mean we can directly apply this story in every detail to our experiences of pain and suffering, but it does mean we can rule out the possibility that Jesus doesn't love us, is powerless, or both.

We can know that if the Lord delays and allows us to suffer for a time, His love for us is still real, and He still intends to glorify Himself in all situations. We may not know any further details, but our love and trust in Him teach us that His grace is sufficient for us no matter the circumstances (see 2 Corinthians 12:8–10).

Verse 8. are You going there again? Clearly the disciples don't get it. More often than not when we are suffering, we will not understand what God is doing. We are not the only ones ever to experience this kind of perplexity and confusion when we are going through a painful circumstance.

Verse 9. Are there not twelve hours in the day? Jesus taught the disciples to seek Him while they had the opportunity. The opportunity to seek the Lord may not always be open, so we seek Him while we can (see Isaiah 55:6–7).

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share an answer to the following question: Why did Jesus wait two days to go to Bethany?

Discussion Question

What do you do when you don't understand God's ways in a particular situation? Do you give up on God, cease believing and look to your own resources? Or do you persevere in trusting Him?

On Your Own

In the space below, write a brief prayer to Jesus, asking Him for grace to remain faithful to Him even when you are experiencing confusion and perplexity.

Studying the Passage

Verse 11. Has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him. Jesus used a common euphemism for death—falling asleep. He also made clear what His intentions were. He was going to wake him up—that is, raise him from the dead. This is what Jesus does for those who put their trust in Him. He comes to us when we are in our most helpless state and raises us up. This is a picture in the present of what Jesus promises He will do in the future (see John 6:40).

Verse 13. they thought He meant taking rest in sleep. Sometimes in our confusion, ignorance and perplexity concerning God's ways, we follow wrong assumptions and move

forward with those wrong assumptions. The disciples clearly didn't get it. Furthermore, they went on the only knowledge they had, which was limited and tainted with ignorance and probably some unbelief.

We need to acknowledge our limited resources when we are experiencing pain and suffering. We don't have God's perspective, but we can always trust that He knows what He is doing, that He is able to deliver us, and that He loves us with an everlasting love.

Verse 15. For your sake I am glad. Jesus was glad He wasn't there to heal Lazarus—not because He couldn't do it and not because He didn't love him. He was glad because He wanted to fulfill a larger purpose. The disciples didn't know that larger purpose, but they didn't need to know all the details. All they needed to do was follow Him. So it is with us.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share an answer to the following question: What was Jesus' ultimate goal in going to Bethany to be with Lazarus' family?

Discussion Questions

What we do with doubt, confusion and perplexity is sometimes one of the most important applications of our will. What do you do with doubts? Do you end up trusting the Lord, despite the doubts?

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** at the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Give the group this update: “In our last session I made a commitment to. . . I want to let you know how that turned out. On that same issue I think the Holy Spirit now is leading me to . . .”

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Disciples can agree on a way to hold one another accountable. Confessing faults with other disciples allows them to offer grace, insights, and encouragement. Even more important is confession to Christ, the source of true forgiveness and cleansing.

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

At Home: Nail It Down

Because we live in a fallen world, we all experience pain and suffering. Why would God allow His children, the ones He loves, to experience pain and suffering? Shouldn't God put an end to all of that if He really loves us?

Clearly not. In our culture, we tend to think God's love demands that He shield us from anything that would threaten our happiness. That is not biblical. God allowed Lazarus to die. He allowed Lazarus' family to go through a most profound loss, but He did so for a larger purpose.

Does that mean God's purposes are always the same for every situation? Of course not. We cannot always know His purposes, but we can be certain He is not surprised by bad circumstances as we are; He is not afraid of bad circumstances as we are; and His love is not defeated by bad circumstances. We can still trust Him, knowing He loves us. No matter what, the answers to our questions about pain and suffering are always found in the person and work of Jesus.

This is part 1 of a two-part series on the question of pain and suffering. We will continue to explore this question from the events surrounding the sickness and death of Lazarus in John.

Follow up Question

How do you handle doubts when you are experiencing pain and suffering?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.