

The God Who Weeps

John 11:1-44

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus even though he knew he was about to raise him, and concludes from the text itself that grief is not in itself a failure of faith, because God himself has wept.

Catholic Touchstone. The Incarnation. Jesus loved with a human heart (CCC 478). In him, God did not observe our grief from a safe distance; he entered it, stood in it, and wept in it.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Bethany is a village two miles from Jerusalem, home to Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, a family Jesus loved. The sisters send word that he whom you love is ill (v. 3), and John immediately tells us two things in sequence that sit strangely together: Jesus loved this family (v. 5), so he stayed where he was two days longer (v. 6). The delay is deliberate and purposeful (vv. 4, 15), and it is costly: by the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead four days (v. 17). John never dates the death itself; what the text gives us is a Lord who stayed away while his friend was dying or already dead. Both sisters will greet Jesus with the identical wounded sentence, and John lets it stand twice without softening it: Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died (vv. 21, 32).

Watch John's Greek in the tomb scene. Twice he uses forms of the harsh verb *embrimaomai* (vv. 33, 38), a word that elsewhere carries a snort of indignation: Jesus is not only moved, he is roused, almost angry. Then the shortest verse in most English Bibles: *edakrysen*, he shed tears (v. 35), a different and quieter word than the *klaio* John uses of Mary and the mourners. In one scene John shows us indignation and tears together. John never names the object of the indignation, and readers have proposed several; an ancient and widely held Christian reading takes it to be death itself. What is certain is that neither the anger nor the tears is aimed at the grieving.

Notice also where Jesus places one of his greatest self-revelations in this Gospel. I am the resurrection and the life (v. 25) is spoken before the miracle, to a grieving woman, and it ends in a question: Do you believe this? Martha's confession (v. 27) is made while her brother is still four days dead. That is the position every grieving believer occupies, and the Church's tradition counts her Yes, Lord among the great confessions of faith.

Pastoral note for the leader: assume someone in your room is carrying a real loss tonight, recent or old. The aim of this session is not to explain anyone's pain. It is to let them see Christ in tears beside them. Protect the silences; they are in the plan on purpose. If someone's grief is heavy and fresh, a quiet word afterward, an offer to connect them with the parish, a priest, or grief support, and your continued presence will do more than any answer. This study points toward the sacraments and real human accompaniment, never away from them.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The God of Israel is never portrayed as indifferent to grief. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted (Ps 34:18). The psalmist says that God has kept count of his tossings, then asks him to put his tears in his bottle and adds: are they not in your book? (Ps 56:8). Nothing cried before God is lost on God. And Isaiah promises a day when he will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces (Isa 25:8). John 11 shows that promise walking into Bethany on two human feet: the God who kept every tear now sheds his own. The raising of Lazarus is a sign pointing further than itself; Lazarus will die again, so the promise of Isaiah 25:8 stays open, waiting for a greater morning.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine *Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 49 (summary)*

Preaching on the raising of Lazarus, St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that Christ's tears at the tomb were for our instruction: the Lord wept so that we might learn what to do with our own weeping. On the groaning he dwells on something else again: that Christ freely stirred his own human emotion, so that the reality of his human nature would be beyond doubt. The reading that hears in that groaning a confrontation with death as an intruder belongs to the wider patristic tradition, not to this passage of Augustine; our own summary of the scene is that the tears of Jesus are both permission and protest.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux *Sermons on the Song of Songs, Sermon 26 (summary)*

Preaching through the Song of Songs, St. Bernard stopped mid-series when his brother Gerard died, and grieved openly before his monks. He defended his tears: mourning the brother he loved, he insisted, was not rebellion against the God who gave and who took away. The greatest preacher of his age wept in the pulpit and called it faith, not weakness. Our own way of putting his point: feeling the wound is not the same as resenting the Physician.

St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 38 (summary)*

Asked what actually eases sorrow, St. Thomas answers with complete seriousness: pleasure, tears, the compassion of friends, the contemplation of truth, and sleep and baths. Tears themselves, Thomas reasons, give sorrow an outlet: a hurtful thing hurts more when it is kept shut up inside. Our application: grace ordinarily works with our nature rather than around it, so God comforts real bodies through creatures as humble as a friend who shows up and a night of honest sleep.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- CCC 478: the Son of God loved each of us with a human heart. Our application: because the one weeping at Bethany is the divine Son, these are truly human tears, shed by God the Son in the human nature he assumed.
- CCC 994: Jesus links faith in the resurrection to his own person; in raising Lazarus he gives a sign and pledge of it.
- CCC 1009: death is transformed by Christ. The Son of God suffered the death that belongs to the human condition, and by his free obedience turned its curse into a blessing.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

DO NOT REVEAL · TRACK ACROSS SESSIONS

- *The sealed question (plant tonight).* In Send, introduce the question Where is God when we suffer? The write-in box is on tonight's Take-Home sheet. Participants answer privately at home, seal it, and return it next week. Sheets stay sealed until they are opened together in Session 4. Do not discuss answers tonight.
- *The tears thread (plant tonight).* John 11:35 and Ps 56:8 both put tears before God tonight. Tears will reappear every week. The thread resolves in Session 6; do not preview where.
- *The Isaiah seed.* The group discovers Isa 25:8 tonight in Q7. Say nothing about its return. When it is quoted verbatim later in the study, let them catch it themselves.

SESSION GOALS

1. Read John 11:1-44 closely enough to feel the delay, the reproach, and the tears.
2. Discover that Jesus wept while knowing the outcome, and articulate what his tears were.
3. Distinguish grief from faithlessness using the text itself, not slogans.
4. Meet the God of the Old Testament who keeps count of tears (Ps 56:8) and has promised to wipe them away (Isa 25:8).
5. Plant the sealed question and send the sheets home.

THE 90 MINUTES

Opening prayer and settling in	5
Win: two opening questions	12
Build: John 11 in four movements, with the steelman and Q7 discovery	50
Send: two questions, including the sealed question	12
Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer	11

This plan uses the full 90 minutes. If the room runs long, drop in this order: (1) the Dig Deeper box, (2) Win question W1, (3) Send question S1. Never cut the minute of silence after Q6, and never cut S2: the sealed question is the spine of the whole study.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and you love everyone in this room. Some of us come here carrying grief tonight: losses with names, and losses no one else can see. Before we open a page, we hand them to you in silence.

(Pause in silence for those griefs to be named in the heart.)

You are the resurrection and the life. Teach us tonight what you were teaching Bethany. We ask it in your name. Amen.

WIN

W1. When you were a child, who or what taught you what to do when you were sad? What did they do?

W2. Have you run into pressure to be back to normal before grief was finished? What did that pressure look like, in the world around you or in yourself?

BUILD

Read John 11:1-16 aloud.

Q1. Verses 5 and 6 sit strangely together: Jesus loved them, *so* he stayed two days longer. What does the text actually say about why he delayed (vv. 4, 15)? And what would the delay feel like if you were Martha or Mary, counting days?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The text gives God's purpose without softening its cost. Jesus names the purpose: for the glory of God (v. 4), that you may believe (v. 15). And Lazarus dies during the delay. John insists on the love first (v. 5) precisely so we cannot read the delay as indifference; but he also refuses to pretend God's timing does not hurt. Both truths are in the passage on purpose, and the Gospel never scolds the sisters for feeling the weight of the wait.

Read John 11:17-27 aloud.

Q2. Martha's first sentence to Jesus (v. 21) is half reproach and half faith (v. 22). Which half surprises you more? Does Jesus seem offended by the reproach?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He answers neither with rebuke nor with self-defense but with revelation: your brother will rise again (v. 23), and then the deepest thing Jesus says about himself in this Gospel (v. 25). Wounded honesty spoken to Jesus's face gets more of him, not less. Hold onto that; it will matter for the rest of this study.

Q3. Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life (v. 25) *before* doing anything about Lazarus, and then asks a grieving woman, Do you believe this? Why ask for the act of faith before the miracle instead of after it?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The text does not tell us why he sequenced it this way, but notice what the sequence produces. Our application: Martha's position, believing while the tomb is still sealed, is the position a grieving Christian occupies. Her Yes, Lord (v. 27) is made in the dark, with her brother four days dead, and the Church has always heard in it one of the great confessions of faith in the Gospels. Faith before the stone moves is exactly the faith this study is about.

Read John 11:28-37 aloud.

Q4. Mary says the identical sentence her sister said (v. 32). Jesus answered Martha with words. What does he answer Mary with (vv. 33-35)?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

With himself: he is deeply moved and troubled, and he weeps. Scripture shows the Lord meeting two grieving sisters in two different ways. John does not tell us what each sister needed; he shows us that with one the emphasis fell on words and with the other on shared sorrow, and both received Christ. Leaders and friends of the grieving, take note: there is no single script.

Q5. DISCOVERY. In verses 33 and 38 John chooses a strange, strong Greek verb, *enebrimesato*: it carries indignation, almost a snort of anger. At the tomb, Jesus is not only sad. What could the Lord be angry *at* in this scene? Work on it together; then find 1 Corinthians 15:26 and see what Scripture calls death.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Not at the grieving, and not at Lazarus; nothing in the scene points the indignation at them. John does not name its object, so hold this next step as a strong reading rather than the only possible one: the ancient and widely held Christian reading is that he is roused against death itself, the last enemy (1 Cor 15:26), the intruder God did not make for us (see Wis 1:13). Christian grief is allowed to carry that same clean anger: anger at death, not at God, and standing right next to God.

Q6. Jesus wept (v. 35). He knows that within minutes Lazarus will walk out of that tomb. So the tears cannot be despair. What are they? Sit with this one before anyone answers.

Hold a full minute of silence here. Do not rescue the room from it.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

They are what love does at a tomb. The bystanders read them correctly: See how he loved him (v. 36). Jesus's tears settle forever that grief and tears are not in themselves a defect of faith: the person in Bethany with the most faith and the most knowledge is the one weeping. He wept with the sisters before he acted for them, and the weeping was not wasted time on the way to the miracle. It was love.

STEELMAN · BUILD IT, THEN PRESS IT

Build it at full strength. Start where most people meet it, as a sentence at a funeral: If you really believed she was with the Lord, you would not cry like this. Then build the serious version, because a well-catechized Christian would not deny that Jesus and Paul grieved. He would argue about measure: hope is supposed to change grief, Scripture says rejoice always (Phil 4:4) and give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess 5:18), and grief that runs deep, long, or inconsolable may show that hope has not gone all the way down. On this account tears are permitted, but tears like these are a diagnosis. Say it fairly; many in the room have heard a version of it, and some have said it to themselves. Notice that it quotes real verses and wants to honor God.

Press it from the text. First: Jesus wept, with complete knowledge of the outcome (John 11:35). If grief as such contradicted faith, the sinless One could not have grieved, and the depth of his grief here is not slight. Second: the same Paul who wrote rejoice always also wrote that losing his friend Epaphroditus would have been sorrow upon sorrow (Phil 2:27), and he commands the church to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15), a command that means entering someone's sorrow, not merely approving of it from outside. Third: 1 Thessalonians 4:13 does not say do not grieve; it says do not grieve as others do who have no hope. Scripture regulates grief's horizon, not its existence. Concede what should be conceded: grief can curdle into despair or into a refusal of hope, and that is a real danger the objection is right to watch for. But the test is not the volume of the tears; it is whether hope is still held while they fall. What hopeful grief looks like in full is a question this study will keep open a little longer.

Leader reads John 11:38-44 aloud, unhurried, to the words unbind him, and let him go.

Q7. DISCOVERY. Centuries before Bethany, Isaiah saw something. Find Isaiah 25:8. What two promises are there, and which one did Lazarus's tomb just preview in miniature?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The LORD will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces. Bethany previews the first, in miniature only: Lazarus will die again someday, so the promise is bigger than his miracle. The second promise, the wiping of the tears, is still open when tonight ends. Keep your eye on it.

DIG DEEPER (optional)

Find Psalm 56:8. What does the psalmist say God has done with tears, and what does he ask him to do? God has kept count of his tossings; the psalmist asks him to put his tears in his bottle, and then asks: are they not in your book? He prays it as a request precisely because he is sure of the answer. Nothing you have ever cried is lost on God. Let anyone who wishes respond, then move on gently.

SEND

S1. Whose grief have you been tempted to hurry: your own, or someone else's? What would it mean to give it the time Jesus gave Bethany?

S2. THE SEALED QUESTION. On tonight's Take-Home sheet you will find one question and a box: Where is God when we suffer? This week, at home, write your honest answer, tonight's answer, not the churchy one. Fold it, seal it, put your name on the outside, and bring it back next week. No one will read it, including you, until we open them together later in the study.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray Psalm 56 once this week, slowly. At verse 8, name to God one grief whose tears he has kept.
2. Contact one person you know who is grieving, whether the loss was this month or twenty years ago. No advice, no verse, no fixing: presence only. I was thinking of you is a complete sentence.
3. If a tear comes this week, in prayer or anywhere else, do not apologize for it. Say two words instead: Jesus wept.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"Jesus wept."

John 11:35

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you wept at the tomb of your friend, and you have been with us beside every tomb where we have mourned. Take the griefs we named in silence tonight and keep them; we believe they are already written in your book.

You said: I am the resurrection and the life. We answer with Martha, while the stone is still in place: Yes, Lord; we believe. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Read aloud in session

- John 11:1-16; John 11:17-27; John 11:28-37; John 11:38-44 (leader)

Discovery passages (group finds them live)

- 1 Corinthians 15:26 (Q5)
- Isaiah 25:8 (Q7)
- Psalm 56:8 (Dig Deeper)

Cited in answers and steelman

- Wisdom 1:13 (Q5 answer)
- Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (steelman, build)
- Philippians 2:27; Romans 12:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (steelman, press)

Leader background

- Psalm 34:18 (OT Roots); John 11:35 (memory verse)
- CCC 478, 994, 1009