

Romans 8:18

Dear Friends in Christ,

There isn't much in life that causes more grief than an untimely death. In our readings this morning we heard about two families who were facing the grief caused by an untimely death.

The first was the death of a young boy just old enough to go out to the fields with his father. While he was there he came to his father complaining of a headache; we think maybe heat stroke. His father sent him home to his mother and he died while sitting on her lap. That's sad enough, but there is more to the story. This woman and her family had built a room onto their home so that Elisha would have a place to stay whenever he was in the area. To show his gratitude for all they had done for him, Elisha had promised this barren woman that she would have a son. This was that son who had been born as a result of the promise given by the prophet of God. That's why when she went to tell Elisha about the death of her son she expressed her grief the way she did. When she finds Elisha she says, **Did I ask for a son? Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes.'**? She implies that it would have been better if Elisha had never made the promise and her son would never have been born, then she wouldn't be experiencing such grief and suffering.

The second is the well-known story of Lazarus. Like this woman from Shunem and her family, Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, had often opened their home to Jesus and his disciples. If Jesus was in the area, if he was attending one of the festivals at the temple in Jerusalem, he stayed at their house in Bethany which was just a few miles from Jerusalem.

By this time in the ministry of Jesus opposition from the Jewish leaders had grown so strong that Jesus had left the area. He knew they were plotting to kill him but his time had not yet come. While he was gone his friend Lazarus became deathly ill. His sisters sent word to Jesus to come, knowing Jesus had the power to heal. But Jesus didn't arrive in time. In fact, by the time Jesus arrived in Bethany Lazarus had already been dead for four days.

We see the grief that Mary and Martha were experiencing at the death of their brother. When Jesus finally arrives Mary doesn't even come out of the house to meet him. The first words out of Martha's mouth are **if you had been here my brother would not have died.**

Maybe you have had a similar experience. Maybe you know someone who has experienced the grief caused by an untimely death of a loved one. I remember being with a couple when they were told that their 18 year old son had just been killed in a car accident. I remember being the one who was asked by the Sherriff to inform a grandmother and a wife that their grandson and husband who was in his early 20's had been hit by a truck along the freeway and had died instantly. You don't forget the grief that people experience when they hear such news. But God knows how to remove our grief.

In the case of the Shunammite's son, Elisha followed his mother home where she had laid her son's dead body on the bed in the room they had built for Elisha. He prayed to the Lord. He stretched himself out on the boy's body, and the boy was raised from the dead! God removed the woman's grief by giving her son back to her.

In the case of Lazarus, Jesus followed Martha to the tomb. He asked that the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb be rolled away. He prayed to his Father and gave the command, **Lazarus, come out.** To everyone's amazement, the one who had been dead for four days came out of his tomb alive. In fact, the words of John's gospel seem to picture his body

floating to the doorway of the tomb where people unwrapped his body so that he could rejoin his family. Jesus removed Mary and Martha's grief by raising their brother from the dead.

But, we all know that these are exceptions to the rule. You don't even need all ten fingers to count the times that God restored a dead person to life in the history of the world. And, in every case that he did raise someone from the dead, at some point, that person died again and was not raised to life. The Shunammite's son is not still living on the earth, nor is Lazarus. The two young men I mentioned earlier were not raised from the dead. How can people; how can Christians handle the sufferings of this present age, the pain, the sickness, the persecution, the hatred, the untimely loss of a loved one, or anything else that causes grief and suffering?

Paul answers the question by reminding us of what God has in store for us. He calls it the **glory that will be revealed in us.**

Martha knew about this future glory. As she talked with Jesus she confessed, **I know he (Lazarus) will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.** The resurrection of all the dead is taught throughout the Bible. Job was confident that his body would be raised from the dead; that even though worms would destroy it, **in his flesh, with his own eyes, he would see God.** Daniel talked about the fact that multitudes that are sleeping in the dust of the earth will awake on the last day. Jesus talked about the time when the **dead would hear his voice and all who are in their graves would come out.** Paul spends a whole chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, talking about the resurrection of the body. The raising of the Shunammite's son and of Lazarus are simply reminders that God has the power to raise the dead as he promised he will. But on the last day the dead are not raised to die again as these two did. On the last day all the dead are raised to live forever.

Those who believed in Jesus as their savior during their earthly life will be raised to live forever, body and soul, in glory. But, what does that mean? What is the glory that will be revealed in us? The Bible is a little sketchy on what heaven, glory, is like. This is probably because we couldn't comprehend it if God did tell us all the details. But the Bible does give us some hints as to what it is like.

As Paul compares our current sufferings to the glory that will be ours he points to a difference in duration. Whatever pain or grief or suffering we endure now in this life, even if we live to be 100, is like nothing compared to an eternity in glory. If you know that something bad is only going to last a little while it's easier to get through it. We tell a child, "this shot will sting a little for a while, but it will make you feel better soon."

The word glory in the Bible usually has to do with the presence of God. On the last day, after our bodies are raised from the dead, they will be like Jesus' resurrected, glorified body. What that means we don't know fully—children like to imagine being able to fly, which isn't likely. But what is told us is that the old order of things, the things we experience because sin is in the world, suffering, grief, pain, sickness and death, these things will be gone. We will no longer be subject to such things. We will be able to stand in the presence of God and being where God is means that there is nothing bad there. There will be no crime to worry about, no wars or earthquakes or storms or famines. We can eat all we want from the tree of life. God provides everything we need, including light. That's just the tip of the iceberg, the little that we can grasp. The rest is beyond our ability even to imagine, but God assures us that it is beautiful and wonderful. It is glory.

This **inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade**, is what Jesus came to purchase for us. He purchased it by coming to earth himself and experiencing suffering, grief and pain just as we do. He wept with Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus. He knows the kind of suffering that our bodies can be subject to. He was whipped and beaten and nailed to the cross. But, for **the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God**. Through Baptism and the word he has sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts so that we believe all that the Scriptures say about him, that he is our savior who has won for us eternal glory. Through faith we trust that he has forgiven all our sins and made us children of his Father so that we are heirs, **heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ** of the glory that is already his and the glorious mansion he is preparing for you and for me.

Sometimes it seems as if time passes very slowly, especially when you are filled with grief or facing some kind of suffering in life. But Paul reminds us to hold on. He encourages us to never give up our faith; to remember that the glory that Jesus has won for us will make any kind of suffering we experience in this life seem insignificant. Through faith in Jesus you too can say **I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.**