

## Death of a Friend

John 11:1-16, 28-37

Steven Hawking was undoubtedly one of the most intellectually advanced men in the world, before he died this past Wednesday. He was a theoretical physicist, and an atheist. He is quoted as saying this, “Before we understand science, it is natural to believe that God created the universe. But now science offers a more convincing explanation.”

Hawking had said this in a 2010 interview, “What could define God [is thinking of God] as the embodiment of the laws of nature.” He writes in one of his books of the quest for a unifying theory of the universe: “It would be the ultimate triumph of human reason — for then we should know the mind of God.” And he explained himself, “What I meant by ‘we would know the mind of God’ is, we would know everything that God would know, if there were a God, which there isn’t. I’m an atheist.”

So he believes that science has a more convincing explanation of the universe than God does! And this profoundly intelligent man lived with a relentless pursuit of a unifying theory of the universe, determined to believe not only that belief in God unnecessary, but also to choose to disavow the very existence of God as if he had the ability and the knowledge to do that. “My goal is simple,” he said. “It is a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all.”

Yet ultimately, Steven Hawking lost the power over his own life. Actually, he had lived his entire adult life with no such power. Born in 1942, he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease at age 21. He lived for over 50 years with the increasingly debilitating effects of that disease, gradually paralyzed and eventually unable to speak. He died this Wednesday at age 76. No

accomplishment of human reason or intelligence could defeat the ugly disease to took away his life one day at a time for 50 years. It is the same process that each one of us endures, his was just much more visible and pronounced. And no achievement of human reason could give him hope of any other destiny besides death. He lived and died, helpless and hopeless, despite having possessed one of the keenest minds mankind has even known within a body that was virtually useless. Helpless and hopeless. That’s the story of Steven Hawking, a story not about the death of a great man but the story of the wasting of a great mind on the folly of unbelief. “Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing,” he writes. “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe.” Nothing more foolish has ever been written. As Paul writes in,

Rom. 1:20 “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 “Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man.”

This morning we come to another story of another man who lived and died, one who lived and died quite differently. And with much more wisdom. His name was Lazarus. Here are the similarities between Lazarus and Steven Hawking—he was loved and his death was grieved. And both men suffered the grievous effects of their own mortality. But that’s about it. Everything else

was different between these two men. But let's begin with the similarities. The similarities, actually, that exist among all men, everywhere and in every time. That similarity can best be described as,

### **I. THE REALITY OF TROUBLE IN THIS WORLD.**

Actually, ultimately, that trouble means death.

Jesus says it so plainly,

John 16:3 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

That trouble includes sickness, sickness unto death. For death has entered the world through the sin of Adam, as the curse and condemnation of God for sin. I read earlier in this service,

Gen. 2:6 "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Rom. 5:12 "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

The reality is that people get sick, and they die.

#### **A. Sickness and death are the normal, ordinary experiences of human life.**

It's personal. It's not clinical. We're not talking about statistics, nor about generalities. We're talking about people. People die. Real people with real names. Like Lazarus.

v.1-3

This is normal. And we like to pretend that it isn't. We like to think that we should be able to live without such trouble. And sometimes the existence of trouble because a great stumbling block, it becomes a crisis of faith, it can become unsettling even to the disruption of your whole life. And my point here at the outset is the point Peter is attempting to proclaim in,

1 Peter 4:12 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you."

Do not think it strange! Don't be unsettled. Don't be disrupted, in life or in faith. God's goodness, God's mercy, isn't defined by the removal of trouble. God's goodness and his lovingkindness is not contradicted by his allowing and permitting the existence of suffering in your lives. For we live in a fallen world, and until Jesus returns in triumph and glory, that is the reality for each one of our lives.

Only in heaven will such sorrow be removed,

Rev. 21:1 "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

The point of that for today is that the former things have not yet passed away. So, how many of you find yourself enduring

trouble? How many of you know the grief of suffering? The sadness and the sorrow of living in this world, a world still subject to the curse of death? How many of you have tasted that suffering in a very specific or personal way this week?

I'm not belittling that experience, nor being insensitive or uncompassionate in any way, but that experience of trouble is normal. Enduring grief is normal. Common. As long as we live in this fallen world.

Sometimes we are compelled to cry out in anguish,

Ps. 13:1 "How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? 2 How long shall I take counsel in my soul, Having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me? 3 Consider and hear me, O Lord my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death; 4 Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him"; Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved."

Sometimes it feels like God actually hides his face, so great is the trouble and so deep is the grief. And see how that is expressed in this passage,

v.21 "Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

v.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."

They were weeping. And Jesus wept with them, for this is a family Jesus knows well. These are people he loves, in his humanity. These are people who have shown their love to him, in his humanity. Mary and Martha. And their brother Lazarus.

v.33 "Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was

troubled. 34 And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!"

Why are we told that Jesus' wept? Many people today would be unwilling to follow his example. Many people today are hardened in their emotions, hardened in their reactions. And some of them actually think that is godly and mature. Some people actually think its wrong to cry, or at the very least immature. If you had strong faith, you wouldn't grieve, they might say. That's nonsense!

### **B. The pain and sorrow of grief are the normal, ordinary experiences of human life.**

v.28-31

We try to avoid pain. We try to "be strong" and act as if pain doesn't exist. But Jesus doesn't. Jesus wept. Jesus encountered death, in the person of his good friend, Jesus saw the grief of Mary and Martha, and he wept with them. He wept for them. The troubles of this world hurt.

Sometimes we are too quick to move on to what is my second major point today, namely the promise of hope that we have in the gospel. By too quick, I mean we think it's a trait of godly maturity to act as if you aren't in pain, to act as if you really didn't have any sorrow. And we try to protect ourselves and others from that sorrow.

In my own sheltered upbringing, there were many things I am thankful for, but I will always marvel at this one thing, that the first funeral service I ever attended was a service I officiated as a minister of the gospel. I grew up as if death didn't really didn't exist, at least the pain of death. And the trouble with that is that it

is entirely unrealistic. “In the world you will have tribulation.” I had to learn that!

“Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.” I had to learn that.

James 1:2 “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

I had to learn that as an adult. And I am still learning that, even as the Lord continues to bring various trials into my life. This is normal. Sometimes I feel like I have more trials than average. Sometimes I see the lives of other people who force me to conclude that my trials aren't that significant by comparison. But either way, no matter what the specific circumstances, you must fully acknowledge and comprehend in the deepest part of your soul the reality of the existence of trouble in this world. And realize that is normal, that the pain and grief you feel belong to the very definition of what life in this world is all about.

Now, if I were Steven Hawking, that's really all I could say about the subject. If I were an atheist, that's the deepest answer I could offer. And if I stopped here this morning, I would be failing in my responsibility to preach the gospel to you. Point one is the reality of trouble and death in this world. But point two is the promise of hope.

## **II. JESUS GIVES US THE PROMISE OF HOPE IN THE MIDST OF THE REALITY OF TROUBLE IN THIS WORLD.**

Most especially, most specifically, hope in the face of death. And that's what this text is all about. This passage is all about the resurrection. It is all about,

### **A. The hope of power over death.** v.4

A couple thoughts there. First, Jesus is not stating something that is inaccurate or untrue, as if he were thinking that Lazarus really isn't physically dead. But life and death take on a fuller meaning in the context of the gospel, namely an eternal perspective. So “life” is not simply the 70 or 80 years you live on this earth with your mortal flesh and blood. No, life is a reference to an eternity spent in the presence of God, life means eternal life. And in a corresponding way, death means eternal death.

So this sickness of Lazarus is not unto death. He's just sleeping, Jesus says, which is to say, he will wake up! What Lazarus has experienced, Jesus says, will not bring about eternal death. There is the hope, so plainly stated. And it is a hope that Jesus will declare outright in the verses we will study next week, v.25 “Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

So your troubles in this world will lead up to and include death. That doesn't mean God is unfaithful, nor even that his goodness is somehow absent or lacking. Instead, the point is that we can live with and confront all our troubles knowing this hope. “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.”

These aren't empty words. I have no intention of being simplistic, or callous toward those who suffer. Just the opposite.

Because what Jesus also gives to us, even in the midst of suffering, is,

**B. The hope of the experience of being beloved by God.**

Don't miss that here in John 11. This passage isn't just about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It's about the love of Jesus, the personal love for a human friend. Look at the words again, v.33-37

There are lots of useful words in the commentaries about the phrase, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled." The basic idea of the word for groaning is to snort as an expression of anger. There is a sense in which Jesus' response was of anger directed at the presence of death, death which was the final enemy he would eventually destroy. But we shouldn't merely think of it as anger, particularly as we experience anger ourselves. More, it was the unsettledness of deep frustration and sorrow. As some define it, "the phrase simply expresses the highest and deepest kind of inward agitation of mind, an agitation in which grief, compassion, and holy hatred of sin's work in the world, were all mingled and combined.

The same word is used again in verse 38.

Perhaps more simply, we also find in verse 33 the word for "troubled," which means literally to shake or be disturbed, greatly disturbed. Even to physically shudder.

Perhaps the best way to translate these words is to say that Jesus was deeply moved in the spirit. Deeply moved. There was no stoic stiff upper lip. There was no cold or distant attempt to portray a dignified appearance. No, Jesus shook with agitation and wept very real tears when he confronted death. Because of his love for the members of this family.

Jesus wept. He poured forth tears of deep affection, made painful for him by the personal involvement of a dear friend, whose family would receive the fullness of his compassion. And that really is to be your hope as well, the hope of the experience of being beloved by God in just such a way.

There is still more hope to be found here as well, what I define as,

**C. The hope of the revelation of the glory of God.**

Jesus says something right at the outset that doesn't seem very compassionate. It is easy to misunderstand, easy to misapply. So don't forget what we've already stressed, particularly that simple short verse 35, "Jesus wept."

In the context of such personal affection and grief, we read, v.4

Please don't misuse these verse, by thinking somehow that we have to spiritualize or minimize all our struggles such that they don't really exist or aren't very painful. And don't let these words degenerate into some sort of fatalistic cliché or platitude that make light of the actual suffering of life. Jesus' wept for the sorrow which came to his dear friends. And, he gave them the hope that nonetheless, despite their grief and sorrow, God would be glorified through it.

The sickness is for the glory of God. How? Jesus says that this sickness is not unto death, even though Lazarus would die in the flesh. He wasn't mistaken. He wasn't in error or misinformed, so how would this sickness, which would bring about the physical death of Lazarus, be used by God for his own glory?

There is a straightforward answer to that very difficult and penetrating question. And however you put it, the answer is that

God's ultimate purpose is to give to his people the gift of eternal life. God's ultimate purpose is to remove the curse of death, and to raise us up unto life. In other words, the glory of God is revealed by the evidence of the power of God to raise us up from the dead. The glory of God is revealed by the power of the resurrection!

And that's why Jesus waited to visit Lazarus until he had been in the tomb four days. Because he wanted to give his dear friends the hope of the resurrection.

And the fulness of the glory of God is displayed by the work of Jesus who was raised from the dead himself for our justification. Jesus waited until Lazarus was dead so that he could raise him from the dead! The revelation of that glory is what this passage is all about!

Jesus, the son of God, would be glorified through the physical death of Lazarus because there was a good and greater purpose than merely healing a sick man. There was the hope of the gospel itself! So Jesus acted intentionally, deliberately, for a good and greater purpose, in delaying his visit to the home of these friends,

v.5-7

And so Jesus will restore Lazarus to life, and do so in a way by which we gain,

**D. The hope of the assurance of the protection of life.**

Interesting, Jesus is going to perform a miracle, the his disciples were still worried about his safety.

v.8-11

For Jesus, it is always light. He always walks in the light of

the day. And he never stumbles. "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble." Jesus is the life, he comes to give life, and here he acts such that the protection of life is assured.

He would go to Lazarus.

v.11 "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."

That's how God would be glorified!

So what about the troubles of your life? For some of you, I know some of what those troubles are. For some of you, I have shared those troubles with you on a human level, and even sought to help. And while I hope and believe that sort of relationship between a pastor and a congregation is helpful, there is something far more helpful for you. Namely, Jesus endured the struggles of human life himself, even unto death. Jesus endured the sufferings of this world, so that he could give us the promise of hope.

John 16:3 "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

That's really what gives you hope, you who must endure the sufferings of this world. Jesus often doesn't removed that suffering, but he does declare to us, "I am the resurrection and the life."

So, back to Peter,

1 Peter 4:2 "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; 13 but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy."

Rejoice, people of God, for we shall share in his glory, the glory of the resurrection!

1 Cor. 15:51 “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 54 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

How can I say that to you? Why is that true? Because,  
1 Cor. 15:20 “...Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”