

**Title:** When Hard Things Happen  
**Scripture:** John 11  
**Windsor Locks Congregational Church**  
**June 6, 2021**

Pray

While our text is **all** of John 11, I've edited what I'm going to read to shorten it. I've not moved anything around, I'll just be jumping over some portions for brevity. I encourage you to read it in the entirety later, to help process today's lesson.

Sermon Text: *"Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, ... So the sisters [Martha and Mary] sent to him [Jesus], saying, "Lord, he whom you **love** is ill." <sup>4</sup> But when Jesus **heard** it he said, "This illness does **not** lead to death. It is for **the glory of God**, ...*

*<sup>5</sup> Now Jesus **loved** Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup> So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he **stayed** two days **longer** in the place where he was. <sup>7</sup> Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again...Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." <sup>12</sup> The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen **asleep**, he will **recover**." <sup>13</sup> Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. <sup>14</sup> Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, <sup>15</sup> and for **your** sake I am glad that I was not there, so that **you may believe**. ...."*

*...So when Martha heard that **Jesus** was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.<sup>21</sup> Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had **been** here, my brother would **not** have died. ...<sup>25</sup> Jesus said to her, "**I am** the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, **though he** die, yet shall he live, <sup>26</sup> and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do **you** believe this?"<sup>27</sup> She said to him, "**Yes**, ...*

*...<sup>32</sup> Now when **Mary** came to where Jesus was ... she fell at his feet, saying ..., "Lord, if you had **been** here, my brother would **not** have died." <sup>33</sup> When Jesus saw her **weeping**, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was **deeply** moved in his spirit and greatly troubled...<sup>35</sup> **Jesus wept**. <sup>36</sup> So the Jews said, "**See** how he **loved** him!" <sup>37</sup> But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man **also** have kept **this** man from dying?"*

*<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, **deeply moved again**, came to the tomb. ... Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, ... said ... "Lord, by this time there will be an **odor**, for he has been dead **four days**." <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you **believed** you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus ... cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, **come out**." <sup>44</sup> The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his **face** wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

*<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, ... believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some ...made plans to put him to death....*

There are **many** truths that can be gleaned from the account in John 11. Today I will be focusing on **four major points**, discussing what people who are **truly** in relationship with Jesus experience when **hard things** come their way.

And, to be sure, hard things **will** come your way. Among the **many** promises we received from Jesus is the promise that

▼ “...in the world you **will** have tribulation; but, take heart; **I** have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The New Living Translation captures this saying, “*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows...*”

As you lean on God through your “*trials and sorrows*” one result is that **God becomes evident**. Oh, not always right **away**. In fact, there are **frequently** periods where you don’t sense him at **all**. Notice, both Martha and Mary said to Jesus, “*If you had been here...*”. They were keenly **aware** of his absence. In fact, since they knew where he was when they sent **word** to Him, and He didn’t come for several days, they may also have been very **hurt**; but, when we remain **faithful** through our “*trials and sorrows*” God becomes **evident** in **three** ways:

First, our convoluted theology gets boiled down to the most essential elements, as **truth becomes distilled**. If you read the full text you’ll see Thomas got all **mystical** about the disciples **dying** with Lazarus. Martha’s conversation with Jesus has her speaking about **eschatology**. But, as much as they were used to Jesus speaking in parables, here he says quite simply, “*Your brother will rise again ... do you believe this?*” On Palm Sunday, April 13, 2003, my wife went out for a morning run, while I got the children ready for church. She didn’t come home. She simply called, telling me to meet her at the hospital. She had been abducted, assaulted, and **barely** escaped with her life. When I got to the hospital, we could only acknowledge one another through a glass wall in the ER, they wouldn’t let me go in. She **was** the crime scene. It was **hours** before we were able to leave and be together. On our way to get the children (who were with our pastor) we stopped for a walk in a park, just to gather our thoughts. It was sunny, we were quiet as we held hands and walked, and eventually prayed. At one point we both agreed (and I don’t know who spoke) that we could be sure of **three things**: **God exists**, He is **good**, and **we can trust Him**. Our minds were swimming with questions of “why” and “what if;” yet, these three pillars sustained us throughout the trial, the immediacy of which lasted years, and the total of which will **never** really go away.

Not only do we see God becoming evident as our **theology is distilled**, but we also see God evident **through His actions**. And **others** see that too. With Mary, Martha and Lazarus, this was both **dramatic** and **public**. Like Jesus said, what happened to Lazarus was “*for the glory of God.*” In her book, “*Tapestry,*” Edith Schaeffer described **incredible** circumstances whereby a home, complete with contents, was given to her and her husband Francis, near to where he was getting cancer treatment, at the Mayo Clinic. Struggling to process her husband’s subsequent death, Edith describes sitting at the home alone, playing the grand piano, with the top in the upright position, staring into space. Her eyes caught a glimpse of a small plaque inside the piano. Welcoming any distraction, she leaned over to read it, only to find that the piano had been **made the year she and Francis were married**. She referred to this as a **whisper of**

*assurance* from her Heavenly Father. My wife's abduction is **filled** with such whispers, the **evidence** of God's presence. One **early** example, the responding officer was a **brother from church**, who had been asked to cover for another officer **just the night before**. Seven months **after** the event we were meeting a group of friends for a weekend in PA. Our host, a pastor at the Hershey Evangelical Free Church, **spontaneously** asked me to speak at a Men's breakfast the next morning (the man who was supposed to speak had not shown up). Having no preparation, I decided to speak on 2 Cor. 1, which says,

▼ *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Cor. 1:3-4),*

in this I would be straightforward, simply sharing what the Lord was **teaching** us through the events of that year. After I spoke, a man came up to me **crying** uncontrollably. Eventually I learned that **the day before** his daughter came home from NYC, having **just** been raped. Distraught, the man was up all night **surfing the internet** for resources to help his daughter. Seeing this men's breakfast, which he had **never** attended before, he came **hoping** to hear from God. That afternoon, and several times later, Jo was able to meet with his daughter. As we walk with Jesus through hardship, **God becomes evident** through His **actions**, even if only in gentle whispers.

Through **distilled truth** and **seeing God in action** in unlimited ways, we learn how **intimately** God cares for us, as He becomes **increasingly evident** through hardship. Mind you, the hardship doesn't go **away**, but he is walking **with us** "*through the valley of the shadow of death.*" There is no **less** hardship, just **more** of Jesus.

When hard things happen, not only does **God become evident**, but **oneness is enhanced**, as there is a communal shift from being **superficial** to being more **authentic**. Individuals grow closer to God, and as the church exercises their gifts, the body becomes more unified. Throughout this story of Lazarus there is intimate dialogue with the disciples, Martha, Mary, and others **hear** it. **Four times** we are told of the **intimacy** of Jesus' **love** for His friends. His delay in going to Lazarus is perplexing; but, this intimacy is **underscored** and recorded for the ages as Jesus wept. Jesus knew Lazarus was dead, and His casual approach to go to His friends seems almost **aloof**. When Jesus was confronted with the death, and at the grave, he got vehemently **angry** (an aspect that commentators agree is lost in translation). Death is an **enemy** God **never** intended to be part of His creation, and it made Him angry. But, when He saw Mary's tears, He **wept**. Have you ever wondered if God cries? Here we see, that at the **same time** He is demonstrating His **diety**, He does cry (apparently crying need not be equated with weakness). Have you wondered what **makes** God cry? God cries when **you** hurt. And what was all this about? Jesus explained, "*So that you may believe.*" Jesus didn't **want** this pain. Yet, He **uses** it to draw us into a **more intimate relationship with Him**. The pain of His children is never wasted. And, as we see in this chapter, hardship **unites** the body of Christ for (as Paul tells us)

▼ *"if one member suffers, all suffer together"* (1 Cor. 12:26).

It is no wonder this chapter concludes with the disciples all staying **together**, out of the limelight with Jesus. This was **intimate**. We learn, in Eph. 4, that when the body of Christ (each with different gifts and roles) works **together** through hardship, we **build each other up in love** (Eph. 4:16), growing and maturing together **through** the hardship...

▼ “... so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about ... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to **grow up in every way** into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the **whole body**, joined and held together by **every** joint with which it is equipped, when **each** part is **working properly**, makes the body **grow** so that it **builds itself up in love**” (Eph. 4:14-16).

Through “*trials and sorrows*” **God becomes evident, oneness is enhanced**, and as these things happen our **orientation is transformed**. We are told that

▼ “if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**. The old has passed away; behold, the **new has come**” (2 Cor. 5:17).

God uses **hardship for** this transformation. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann categorizes the Psalms into Psalms of location, dislocation, and relocation. Dislocation is represented in the Psalms of **complaint** or lament.

▼ “O God, you have **rejected** us...” (Psalm 60:1);

▼ “Why, O Lord, do you stand **far away**? Why do you **hide** yourself in times of **trouble**?” (Psalm 10:1);

▼ “**How long**, O Lord? Will you forget me **forever**? How long will you hide your face from me? **How long** must I take counsel in my soul. and have sorrow in my heart **all the day**?” (Psalm 13:1-2).

These Psalms of complaint represent a form of worship we, in North America, do not embrace; and, as result, we don't **allow** ourselves to **honestly** express our concerns and our needs to our Father. Physicians use a simple acronym to help them stay focused in treating a patient. S.O.A.P. That is, **Subjective** (what the patient describes as wrong), **Objective** (what the doctor observes), **Assessment** (what does further analysis reveal), and **Plan** (what treatment is recommended based on these). It **begins** when the patient answers the question, “And what brings you here today?” **That** is what these Psalms of complaint **are**, and we are poorly accustomed in **talking** to our Father about what **hurts**. In bringing our complaint to God we are **not** showing a lack of faith or disrespect. To the contrary, it is **worship**, as we bring our pain to the one who cares the most, validating our confidence that **He can help**. We need not fear **guilt** or **shame** for feeling rebellion against circumstances where the world is **not** the way God intended it to be, whether through our anger or tears. As we see in Jesus, we are merely agreeing with God, and taking our pain **to** Him.

To Brueggemann, the Psalms of **relocation** express God's healing resolution; however, it is **not** back to the same location. The process of maturation has us moving upward **from** dislocation to **relocation** like climbing a ladder (there will be future dislocation, and more relocation). In this, **our identity changes**. There have been hardships I **struggled** to embrace. I don't **want** to be from a broken family; but, until I embraced my new identity, I was **running** from who **I am**. God gave me the courage to **embrace** that. And in accepting who I am, I have been able to help others. Hardships are often **not** consequences of our **own** choice, but we **must** acknowledge their **reality**. At the beginning of John 11 there is **confusion**. **Why** would God let Lazarus get sick? **Why** the delay in going to him? **Why** go to Judea if the Jews are hostile? **Why** wake up Lazarus if he's getting sleep? **What** is God doing? While the chapter begins with the disciples actively participating in confusion through questions, most of the rest of the chapter they are observing the answers. Jesus challenged Martha's presuppositions; and, in doing so, her **very identity**. And the miracle Jesus performed gave them **all** cause to ponder. As they grew in understanding **Jesus'** identity, it impacted their **own** identity and their **future**. For quite some time my wife struggled with transparency about her abduction (and so did **I**). To some degree this was for privacy; but to a larger degree it was a rebellion of identity. As she has learned to **embrace** the hardship, she has become a **powerful** resource to others. God took what made her a weak victim and **transformed** her to be a strong **warrior**. Joni Eareckson Tada is another example, of different but daunting circumstances transformed into strength.

Through "*trials and sorrows*" **God becomes evident, oneness is enhanced, our orientation is transformed, and division is provoked**. Notice throughout John 11 people are repeatedly challenged to make a decision on **who** Jesus is, and whether **they** will follow Him or not. The hardship provokes people to assess and **take sides**, and they **do**. Martha said, "*Yes Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God...*", while others said, "*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*" After the miracle, **some** believed, **others** sought to kill him. This may sound like a bad thing; however, the hardship forced **clarity of loyalties** and character, **exposing** preexisting vacillating commitment. As much as truth is distilled, **friendships** are distilled too. After my father left our family, he got into a **lot** of trouble. It **hurt**, and as I became an adult, and began to look like my father, I struggled with my own identity through my teens and early 20s. On more than one occasion, friends I counted on (particularly girlfriends, or their parents) **alienated** me upon learning about my father. I had done **nothing** wrong. Yet, while I struggled with how his choices reflected on **my** identity, some seeming friends not only assigned my father's character to me, but were **cruel** in the way they did it, proving that **sometimes** our fear of **vulnerability** is **warranted**. We wonder, "what will they **think** if they **knew**?" And some indeed choose to think the worse. As much as that **hurts**, God uses it; for I don't find myself with people who don't "*bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things*" (1 Cor. 13:7). I could have **married** one of those girls. Instead, God blessed me with a woman of sterling character. She holds me accountable when I'm wrong but has the sense and sensitivity to love me for who I am, even gracious strength to provoke me to be a better man. As I prayed for God to help me avoid the family division of my youth in my **own** marriage, God used the hardships of the past to do it. When our children first went to camp, they came home after a week in a dorm with kids their age **thanking** my wife and I for the strength and integrity of our marriage. **God** did that, **using** the hardship. In recent years a brother in ministry alienated himself from me for the same reason.

While hurtful and sad, the Lord has (once again) used the **hardship** to distill who I am in relationship with, shepherding me **through** darkness using the **hardship** to do it.

If you've been taking notes, you might have noticed a pattern in this outline; for in looking at John 11 we learn that, as we walk with Jesus through our **hardships**:

- ▼
- **G**od becomes evident;
- **O**ne-ness is enhanced;
- **O**rientation is transformed;
- **D**ivision is provoked.

In these four ways we have the acronym, "GOOD." The familiar verse in Romans 8:28 tells us that

▼ "... we know that for those who love God **all** things work together for **good**, for those who are called according to his purpose." Eugene Peterson's *The Message* says, "**every detail** in our lives of love for God is worked **into** something **good**."

That's very **different** from saying "everything is good." We know it is **not**, and I have tried to show that. Some things are **bad**, wrong, hurtful, and we can get angry. We can cry. There are times where anger or tears are the appropriate, authentic response, reflecting no compromise in our faith, just honesty. We can agree with Jesus, as He faced Lazarus' tomb. He knew what He would do. He had the situation under control. He had full confidence in Lazarus' well-being. Yet, at the same time, Jesus could acknowledge the situation as **bad**. It **hurt**. This passage gives us permission to feel the same way, and express our feelings, **without** doubting that **God exists**, He is **good**, we can **trust** Him, and that He will use the **hard situation** to work out and display His goodness. How? How will He use the hard situation for good? God will make Himself more **evident** through it, by **simplifying** our theology and being actively **involved**, even if only in a thousand whispers. **Oneness with** His children, and **between** His children will increase. Our **orientation** will be transformed, as we mature and are strengthened. And He will use the hard situation to **divide relationships**, forcing clarity of who is for Him, and who is against Him, helping us avoid compromising loyalties.

I'll close with this story. Years ago I was a camp counselor in Northern Michigan. Junior High week was starting, and a busload of Junior High boys were on their way up from inner city Detroit. I was **warned** about one boy in particular: Charlie. The seasoned staff explained that he was sweet, but very energetic and required constant and **full** attention. When the bus arrived, after hours on the road, I watched as all the hungry, cooped up boys ran out of the bus to the dining hall. Picking out the difficult energetic one seemed futile. In the dining hall I asked which one was Charlie and was told he wouldn't leave the dorm. My college roommate, Curt, rolled his eyes and said, "Here we go," as he got up and left the dining room. Eventually Curt came back alone, reporting Charlie wouldn't **budge**. Curt's mom, a tough cookie, marched out of the dining room with her jaw set. She too returned alone, and furious. Having finished my meal, I went to the dorm, knowing **one** Jr. High boy was in there alone. And there he was, sitting on the edge of a bed, arms crossed, face scowled, angry at the world, every muscle tight.

“Hi!” I offered. “I’m Dave, you must be Charlie.” Nothing. I tried, and couldn’t get any response, so I just sat there and prayed silently for him. As I did, my quiet time in Acts kept coming to mind, especially my recent observation that the highly educated Paul constantly relied on his **story of transformation** on the Damascus road, **rather** than his clever mind or learning, when presenting the gospel. I began to wonder, should **I** share what God is doing in **my** life, rather than try to work up a clever approach? Despite the ongoing argument in my head, and despite feeling uncomfortable about it, I began telling this 11-year-old boy how my father had left our home, wasn’t writing to me. How his life was not only destructive to himself, it made me **embarrassed**; and, since I saw my father’s attributes in myself, it made me question what kind of **man** I was going to become. I shared how I was learning to trust in **God** as my father, and how He was showing up **repeatedly** and caring for me. As I spoke, Charlie’s body relaxed, he slowly turned to me. His big brown eyes were wide and glued to mine. He was **clearly** listening. And then he spoke, proclaiming, “You **DO** understand!” That was when I learned that Charlie’s dad had just left him and his family, and is also when I learned the **power** of how God uses **even bad things** in my life to **bring Him glory**, and **build my faith**.

The McDaid family is experiencing **hardship** now; and, this hardship is not restricted to **them**. We know it impacts **you** too, their **church**, because “*if one member suffers, all suffer together.*” As much as **Jo and I** have experienced suffering together, we have **also** experienced how we **grow** together, and we will **continue** to pray for you all, as we **have** been, that **through** this dark valley **God would be glorified** and you will collectively be **strengthened in your faith**.