

# Crocodile Tears?

March 2023

Here's a Biblical question for you!

What is the longest verse in the Bible?

And to save you looking through the Bible page by page – verse by verse – let me tell you.

Either Esther Chapter 8 verse 9 (with 72 English characters) or Revelation Chapter 20 verse 4 (with 71 English characters),

Mind you it depends a little upon which translation you are using and whether we are talking about the original Hebrew and Greek – but it's a very close call!

There's no confusion however about the shortest verse in the Bible; and it was right in the middle of today's very long reading from John - namely

“Jesus wept”

And most people would know this answer Jesus wept.

And I want us to spend a little time this morning considering the ramifications of this tiny verse; and they are vast!! We can learn a lot about the true character of Jesus just from this simple verse.

Today we read a very familiar story – that of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. It is so familiar that it has become part of the English language – and we talk about people “doing a Lazarus”. In fact some time ago Kim Beazley was called the Lazarus politician as he once again took over the reins of the Labor party.

This was not the only time that Jesus raised someone from the dead – there was Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain. This story of Lazarus however is the most complete account and one which has a few perplexing issues about it. And so I want to focus attention on it for a few moments this morning.

And in so doing I want to ask 3 questions

- Why did Jesus wait?
- Why did Jesus cry?
- What does this story mean to us today?

The home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus at Bethany was a home away from home for Jesus in his itinerant life. One gets the impression he was always welcome there and felt comfortable there whenever he visited. And there is little doubt that he loved that little family and he loved Lazarus dearly.

So why did he wait around for two extra days when he heard of Lazarus' illness? Both Mary and Martha and even the bystanders say effectively the same thing "If you had come earlier he needn't have died". Mary and Martha are almost scolding Jesus for his tardiness!

Maybe he was frightened. The disciples certainly were "If you go there they will kill you!" they said – and by implication "and they will kill us too!"

Maybe he was praying for courage to undertake this venture. But then, in all the accounts of Jesus there is no sign of fear when confronted with violent storms, angry crowds, mocking bystanders, interrogation from the Jewish and Roman authorities and a cross and an agonizing death looming large on Calvary. There is no sign of fear, almost as if he had a constant connection with his heavenly Father to give him constant courage. He was certainly praying for courage and strength in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The Biblical account says that Jesus was waiting around so that Lazarus would be well and truly dead so that the miracle would be all the more astonishing and people would have to acknowledge that he was indeed the Son of God with miraculous powers. Many analysts feel however that this was an editorial comment added by John – not unreasonable since John's Gospel is full of editorial comments. If this were indeed the reason it would seem to go against the character of Christ who eschewed the chance to be showy in the temptations and often told people he had healed to go away and say nothing about it.

Maybe he was waiting for God's guidance and the particular path he was to follow was not clear to Jesus at the start. Maybe he needed some time with his heavenly father to reinforce his plan of action with conviction and assurance. Maybe Jesus' prayer at that time was "Not my will but thine be done".

Maybe it was all three of these in some measure – for Jesus was human after all!

So now to my next question - why did Jesus weep? As we all know, this is the shortest verse in the Bible “Jesus wept”.

Certainly, Jesus was often moved by the plights of those people who came to him. He could identify with them and their pain and distress – and maybe he saw the distress of Mary and Martha and was moved to tears for they loved Lazarus so much.

But here’s the question

If he knew in advance that Lazarus would soon be healed and all would be well and all would live happily ever after – why the tears? Were they for show? To give the impression of someone who cared? Crocodile tears? Surely not!

I think this tiny verse, the smallest verse in the Bible, gives us an invaluable insight into Jesus and his day to day relation with his father. Maybe Jesus was proceeding in faith and didn’t know for sure the outcome at that moment. Maybe there was the possibility even then that Lazarus – his beloved friend would stay dead. Maybe there was the possibility that it was partly Jesus’ fault for not coming earlier!

I think in this one small verse we see Jesus’ true humanity – he was overcome by the grief of the whole situation.

We also see Jesus’ complete faith in his Father for he was willing to proceed and go out on a limb to follow his father’s will. Yes, go out on a limb for how foolish would he look and with all those people watching – if Lazarus had indeed stayed dead!

And yet, a few verses later on we see Jesus fired up by God’s assurance and power. No weak uncertain dithering or hedging here!

“Roll the stone away!”

“But Lord, he’s been in there 4 days!”

“Roll the stone away”

“Lazarus, come forth”

No doubts here, just total authority – the total authority that comes from being aligned with God’s will.

If in the previous verses we were viewing something of Jesus’ humanity we are seeing him now in a new light with the authority and assurance that comes from being God’s only Son.

What does the Lazarus story mean to us today? We may not be physically dead but like Lazarus, we may need a lease of new life. Like Lazarus, Jesus loves us dearly and he is somewhere close calling out to all of us “Come Forth”

Don’t get depressed! Don’t feel overly burdened! Don’t feel hopeless for I am near. God’s help is near. God’s power is near. Come forth!

Maybe he is talking to us as individuals, that we are to be proud of our faith as we encounter daily life with all its risks and challenges. Maybe he is talking to us as a church –a gathering of so many talented and committed people. What a change we can make in St Ives and in the world generally! Come forth I am offering you a lease of new life!

It is probably no accident that the story of Lazarus is the lectionary reading for the Sunday just before the Easter period. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday. For Easter is the time of miracles, it is the time of new life, it is a time for new visions and a new confidence.

It is also probably no accident that there are some puzzling aspects to this story for, as we have seen, in this story we are simultaneously confronted with both the humanity and the Godliness of Jesus. Christ was the person like you and me who grew up in a family, learned a trade, attended weddings and dinner parties, loved to mix with all sorts of people and truly appreciated the beauty of the world of nature around him. He was a person like you and me who sometimes got tired, and frustrated and disappointed. He was a person who had a sensitivity and compassion for all to see. He was someone who cried!

But Christ was also the One who seemed to have access to a power far beyond what we would call normal. He tamed the elements, healed the sick, even raised the dead, had an authority that was awesome and a seeming ability to see into the future.

We could talk for quite some time about the miracles of Jesus – but maybe we should leave this for another time. Suffice it to say that Jesus was a channel close to God, closer to God than any of us could ever be and God's power could flow through this channel and amazing things happened

Jesus was indeed man – Jesus was indeed the Son of God. And we have seen all of this in the story of Lazarus – no wonder we are a little perplexed when confronted with all of this!

May we be fired up by the Holy Spirit and may we respond gladly when he beckons us to come forth – to step out and proudly proclaim the power of His love, what it has done for us already and the wonderful and exciting future it offers us.

Amen.