

Take Away the Stone

Jesus Frees Us from Death

A Journey Through John 11

By Alan Sommer



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To God be the glory!

I am filled with gratitude to Jesus Christ, my Savior, for giving me life now and forever. He has opened my heart and mind to the wonders of His grace and given me the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. If you, the reader, find any comfort in this book, it is because of Him. I pray that you also may be filled with the “inexpressible and glorious joy” of His gift of salvation.

I also thank Jesus for my incredible wife, who has supported me, prayed with me, and been a partner now these 15 years of marriage. She is a daily reminder of the Lord’s love for me, and she is a far greater gift than I deserve. I am grateful to her and to our children for their patience as I worked on this project.

Thanks are also due to my parents for consistently teaching their children that every day begins and ends with the Lord. To them and all the family that God has grown through them, thank you.

Thank you to those who proof read, edited, and made wonderful suggestions too numerous for me to count.

Finally, I wish to thank God’s people who have allowed me to witness their faith in Christ even when physical death approached. They helped me to see that the hope Jesus brings is real. May all glory be given to Him, for He is the way, the truth, and the life.

For Cheryl

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Introduction

The Valley



One summer in the mid 1990s, my wife Beth and I loaded up the car and went on a vacation to the southwestern United States. We had an exciting itinerary all planned out. There were friends and relatives in southern California we wanted to visit. One of my wife's college roommates and her family lived in the Phoenix area, and I had a friend from seminary not too far away from them, so we had reason to go to Arizona as well. We had a great time seeing old friends and making new ones, staying up late to have the kind of conversations you wish you could have more often with people you love. We had time to visit museums and walk on the beach in southern California. We even were able to see the Grand Canyon! These were the BC years for Beth and me—Before Children!

But the time came when we had to head home. Because we had ended our visiting in Arizona, our way home led near a very famous valley. Death Valley.

Death Valley has an incredibly harsh climate, with high temperatures in the summer easily exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The animals that live there have adapted to living in extreme heat with very little water. On the National Park Service web page for Death Valley, it says, "*From 1931 through 1934, a 40 month period, only 0.64 inches of rain fell.*" In the summer of 2001, there were 154 consecutive days when the high temperature was over 100° F! The

summer of 1917 had 43 consecutive days at 120° F or above! Now that's hot!

It was a very interesting experience going through the desert. Any time we got out of the car to get gas, take a break, or eat, we were blasted by extreme heat! Even when we stopped at our motel around 9:00 or 10:00 pm that night, it was still around 100 degrees. For a boy raised in the Pacific Northwest, it felt very warm! After checking in we swam in the pool right away, then gratefully slept in an air conditioned room.

There is no way that I would try to cross this desert in the summer on foot. If I had to travel home without modern transportation, maps, and air conditioning, I believe the area would live up to its name: Death Valley. A valley of death.

Every one of us is on a journey called life. There is a lot to enjoy about living on this earth. We delight in seeing God's handiwork in creation, hiking in the mountains or smelling the salt water of the ocean. We savor the aroma and taste of a delicious meal, and listen with joy to music that stirs our souls. We treasure time spent with friends and family and long conversations into the night. We find deep joy and fulfillment in having a life's partner in marriage, in holding our first child, and growing more mature.

But some day this journey will take an inevitable turn toward a valley, called in Psalm 23:4 the "*valley of the shadow of death.*" It is a valley that everyone has to enter, a place no one can avoid. There is no one who escapes this valley.

The Bible teaches us that there is a home prepared for us on the other side of this valley of the shadow of death. But to get there, we must make it through. Is there a way?

God is ready to take us on a journey, so that we might see things from His perspective. And as He does this, we will discover that He addresses some of the deepest longings of the human heart. Into the arid and harsh climate that death brings, God provides answers to some of the biggest questions mankind can ask.

So journey through the eleventh chapter of John with me. You might want to read John 11:1–53 all at once, or just a few verses at a

time, as we work through each section of this book. Let God engage not only your mind but also your heart as you see His response to suffering and death. Travel with me to see a family in crisis, a family dealing first with a terminal illness, then the death of one of their own. See them suffer as a loved one gets sick and dies. Watch one family member, then another, pour out her grief and anguish to God.

You will see your own tears reflected in their weeping. You will hear them ask some hard questions. “God, why didn’t you come in time to spare my brother’s life?” “When I called out, why didn’t you answer?” And these questions probably echo some of your own: “Lord, I’m not hearing you. Are you really there?” “Why did my wife have to die?” “What can I tell my sister after she lost her child?”

These are the questions of a suffering humanity. These are the anguished cries of the human heart when death makes a visit. But God wants to lead us through this dark valley to a place of hope and life.

Chapter 1

9-1-1



Something bad had happened. We weren't supposed to stop in the middle of the highway. I stepped hard on the brakes to avoid the other cars that had stopped in front of us. About a dozen vehicles were stopped right in the center of the freeway in the middle of the afternoon. There were dust clouds from cars driving on the median. My stomach tightened up as I anticipated what we might see.

That warm spring day my wife, Beth, and I were on the way to our local Home Depot. We had loaded our one-year-old daughter into our old Toyota Camry and had just pulled onto the highway near our home. We were thinking about home improvement projects and talking back and forth about what we wanted to do. However, God had a different project in mind for us that day.

We pulled off the highway onto the median with our flashers blinking and saw something horrific. There had been an accident. A large SUV had rolled over and was lying upside down in the road, metal crumpled. There was glass lying on the pavement, reflecting the light of the sun. And there was more.

A woman came running down a 50-foot embankment above the highway so she could help. I saw shocked and frightened expressions on the faces of the people in their cars. People were dialing on their cell phones, calling 9-1-1 for help. And then I saw why.

There were children lying on the pavement. Some were crying, some were lying still. The SUV had been carrying six children, plus

the driver, when it careened out of control, hit the embankment, and rolled over. It was a scene I'll never forget.

There is something about an emergency like this that burns into our memories. We sense that the situation is critical. People are hurt. Lives are on the line. And we dial for help. We dial 9-1-1 when there is an automobile accident. We dial 9-1-1 when someone suffers a heart attack. We dial 9-1-1 when there is a crime committed or there is immediate danger. We dial 9-1-1 when we need help and protection.

9-1-1 is not one of my favorite number combinations. It's the number that most of us use only for emergencies. It's a number that we dial when there is an injury, an accident or a crime. When we dial 9-1-1, with adrenaline running and voices shaking, our worst fears may be materializing right in front of us.

I don't like to dial that number. But there are those times when 9-1-1 is the number we need to call.

9-1-1 is not just an emergency number, it's also a date, a day in history that will not be forgotten for a long, long time. 9-11-2001. September 11, 2001. A tragic day when 9-1-1 must have been dialed a thousand times. A day when thousands of people lifted up prayers to God, asking for help, asking hard questions. "Why did this happen?" "How do I go on?"

We struggle to answer those questions. As a pastor, I have learned some of what the Bible has to say. I have been taught different ways to deal with the question of evil in this world.

But when you experience it first hand, or when you see horrifying images on television, the words of "expert" commentators don't seem to be enough. As I saw the images of people falling hundreds of feet to their deaths, I couldn't say anything. As the twin towers fell in on themselves, killing thousands, I was in shock. To see death on such a massive scale, to see evil directly in action, is enough to close our mouths and silence our tongues. But deep inside, there is a burning question: Why? Why does it have to be this way? Why are there accidents? Why do we have to die?

Why Do We Have to Die?

The sad answer to that question is found in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. In chapters 1–2, we hear the wonderful story of creation. In six days, God created the heavens and the earth and everything that was in them. He rested from his work on the seventh day.¹ After each day of creation, the Bible tells us that God saw what He made, and it was good. After He finished His work of creation, we are told in Genesis 1:31 that “*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.*” The Bible often uses the number seven to describe something that is completed. So seven times the word “good” is used to describe God’s perfect, complete creation.

A perfect humanity was part of that good creation. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, were sinless, just as God had created them. They were stewards of the earth, God’s special creations, designed to be caretakers of the world God had placed them in.

But everything changed when they sinned. In Genesis 3, we read the tragic story of how Adam and Eve rebelled against God. He had placed them in a beautiful garden, the Garden of Eden, full of trees and delicious fruit. They could eat any of it—except for the fruit of one tree: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here is what God told Adam:

“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”²

This tree was a test of faith. It was God’s way of reminding Adam that life came from God. Turning away from God would mean turning away from life.

Now, you would think with such plain language, Adam and Eve would have had no problems being loyal to the Lord. You might think that two perfect people living in one perfect garden on one perfect planet would be perfectly faithful. But this was not the case. Instead of relying on God’s words, they listened to Satan.

*“‘You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”*³

Instead of trusting their perfect Creator, they trusted their own judgment:

*“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”*⁴

The consequences of their actions were devastating:

- Faith in God was replaced by fear (they tried to hide from God when He came looking for them in Genesis 3:8)
- Care for each other was replaced by conflict (Adam tried to blame Eve for his failure in Genesis 3:12)
- Death entered the world. God said to Adam, *“For dust you are and to dust you will return.”*⁵

The New Testament book of Romans puts it this way: *“Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.”*⁶ Adam and Eve had turned away from the God who is life, and they began to die spiritually and physically.

Even the creation itself was put under the curse of sin. Paul writes in Romans 8, *“For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”*⁷

Notice the words and concepts we see in these Bible readings: Fear. Frustration. Bondage. Decay. And the biggest word of all: Death. The Scripture is very clear on this subject. These are the horrible consequences of our sin. Along with Satan, we are to blame

for the problems in our world. Our ultimate enemy, death, is the result of our sinful condition.

And so we witness fatal accidents. A loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness. And eventually, we all end up at the same destination—death. Where can we turn for help in life’s emergencies? Does God have an answer when death invades our lives?

We Are Not Alone

The incredible message of the Bible is that we are not alone as we face sin and death. Even as Adam and Eve hid from God in their sin and shame, He came looking for them. Genesis 3:8-9 tells us part of the story.

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’”

Isn’t that incredible? Adam and Eve had just completely blown it. Yet God didn’t walk away, He walked toward them! Their sin had ushered death into God’s perfect creation, but He didn’t immediately destroy them! Instead, He came looking for them. He still had a purpose for their lives.

My friends, the story of the Bible is not about people looking for God. It is the story of God looking for His lost people. God sees the pain and suffering that death brings. He hears the cries of His hurting people.

When you are blinded by the pain of losing a loved one, God calls out, “Where are you?” When you receive that terrible phone call and your heart is broken, God says, “Where are you?” He is looking for you because He loves you. He will send a friend who will listen to your pain and pray with you. He will bring healing to the deepest recesses of your heart through a Bible passage that comes alive and speaks to you like never before. A Christian song or hymn will touch your soul in a way that brings healing and joy from

God, a joy that you thought you could never feel again. God hears your cry, and He responds.

It's amazing to see how God answers our cries for help. On that warm afternoon when my wife and I witnessed the automobile accident, He began helping immediately.

I ran to the first medical people on scene, identified myself as a pastor, and asked how I could help. I was asked to sit with the woman who had been driving the SUV.

She was sitting on a blanket and had seriously injured her foot. She was shaking. On that warm, comfortable day, she was trembling like it was winter in Minnesota and she didn't have a coat. I held her hand and my arm shook from the force of her trembling. But it wasn't just the pain in her foot that caused her to have tremors. Her pain was as emotional as it was physical. I quickly found out why.

Her three children had been passengers in that car, along with her sister's three kids. And she could hear them crying. My heart was filled with grief for her, as I thought of my own little girl, sitting safely in our car, not a hundred feet away.

We prayed. And we were not alone. God had sent another Christian pastor onto that same highway that same day. We each held one of her hands, and we prayed. We dialed 9-1-1 to God. We prayed for the safety of the children. We prayed for the medical workers on the scene. And we prayed for this dear woman, already racked with guilt and fear, panic stricken at what had happened. God was there, right in the midst of the emergency, bringing help.

God has something to show us here. It is when we are at our weakest that God shows His strength. It is when we have no answers that God's wisdom shines through. He cares about your suffering. The problems of sin and death are not problems that we face alone. When we call out for help to God, He hears us.

So let's take a walk through John 11 together, and see how God responds to the deepest needs of mankind. We won't understand everything. But I promise the journey will be worthwhile. For help is on the way. God has already heard our prayers, heard the prayers of all humanity. And He has sent an answer.

Chapter 2

Statistics Have Names



Some years ago I knew a wonderful hospice worker by the name of Alma. I admired her a great deal, as she tirelessly worked with others, making every effort to help the dying person and his or her family. What was so wonderful was how she treated the people she worked with. To her, they were more than just clients or patients. They were people she grew to know and to love.

Alma is like a lot of the hospice workers I have met over the years. They have been wonderful caregivers. A hospice worker walks into a home where someone is terminally ill, someone who is a complete stranger. From a statistical perspective, the patient is a number, another victim of pancreatic cancer or congestive heart failure. But for people like Alma, that person has a name, a family and a life.

When your family is touched by death, you discover that death is an intensely personal experience. When a close friend receives a diagnosis that is terminal, it is not simply statistical information. The news brings a flood of emotions and a whole range of reactions.

Terminal illness and death affect real people every day. These real people are our neighbors, our co-workers, our fellow students. And they are our family members.

Statistics have names. This is one of the lessons we first learn from John 11. When we begin reading this chapter, we are reminded that death is personal.

*“Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.”*⁸

Oh, it starts off sounding a little impersonal. Literally translated, this verse begins, “There was someone who was sick.” At first, we might think this story is just about showing how Jesus is going to do some miracle again. Maybe I would write it this way: “Some guy was ill.” (I think it’s a good thing I didn’t write John 11 — don’t you?)

That sounds pretty distant, doesn’t it? That sounds a lot like what we hear almost every day. The nightly news begins with 10 or 15 minutes of what I call “the police report”. We hear about the accidents, the murders, the assaults, the rapes, the deaths in war, and the latest terrorist news.

For most of us, it is impersonal. We don’t know the family that was killed in the accident. It wasn’t our cousin who was murdered. And so day after day, death can seem to be distant and far-off. We hear a news report about some new cancer drug, and we don’t give it a second thought. We read about a new treatment for heart disease, and we just skim the article.

But all that changes when someone we love becomes terminally ill or dies. Sickness and death are always remote forces, things that other people have to deal with, until they affect us.

When your mother calls you to say that Dad is having heart problems, you want to know everything. When your brother says that he has prostate cancer, you want to find out what the treatment options are. It’s different when the sick one is in your family. It’s different when the disease strikes home. Suddenly, it’s personal.

And the ultimate “personal touch” of death occurs when we are the ones getting the diagnosis. After the doctor says, “You have pancreatic cancer, and you probably have two to six months to live,” death isn’t a remote force any longer. When you come to the shocking realization that Alzheimer’s or HIV have begun their one way trips to the grave with your body in tow, it hits you right between the eyes.

Everything changes when we face our own mortality. Suddenly, we want to know more about how cancer works and what the chances

for survival are. We start thinking of our loved ones and how this illness will affect them. And we start wondering about how we will die—and if there is any hope for life.

The Context of Death

Chapter 11 of John begins by saying, “There was someone who was sick.” In fact, as we will soon discover, he was more than sick, he was terminally ill. As the story begins, the description of the man seems pretty impersonal. But as we look more closely at verse one, we discover a very personal context.

This man has a name, and his name is Lazarus. He is a real man from a real town called Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. This is a personal story for him. He has a family, two sisters he is very close to. He has a life. He has a home. And this illness is hitting where it hurts.

He and his sisters knew that life was ebbing away. Perhaps he wondered just how many more sunrises he would see. Maybe he worried about who would care for his sisters after he was gone. Did he feel lonely as he became more and more ill, finding himself more and more isolated from his friends? Did he feel useless, like a burden, as he became weaker and weaker, unable to feed himself, eventually unable even to get up and go to the bathroom?

How many times did Lazarus call out to God in prayer, asking for a reprieve, a second chance? How many doctors did he see, hoping that one of them would know of something that could help?

In John 11, Lazarus is not a statistic: he is a man, a brother, and a friend to others. He is a human being traveling through the most difficult place that any of us will go. He is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. He is facing the brutal reality that the Bible teaches us: “*Death has come to all people, because all have sinned.*”⁹ His journey would be a personal one.

Oh, yes, death is very personal. When you go on that last journey, it will, in all likelihood, be the greatest challenge you will ever face. It will be a severe test for your family and your closest friends. And you will want to be ready.

Every day of our lives, we make plans about how to use the time. Some of those plans revolve around our vocations as parents, workers, students. “Today is laundry,” we think, “and tomorrow is grocery shopping.” “I have to get that presentation completed by 3:00 tomorrow afternoon.”

Some of our plans revolve around events. Next week is vacation. Next month is graduation. Next year I am getting married. Other plans focus on the needs of those we love the most. The kids will need new clothes for another school year. The kids will need new loans for another year at college!

And we have our long-term plans, plans for things we hope will happen a long way down the road. So we look over our investments to make sure we are ready for retirement. In every stage of life, we make plans—and that’s good.

But when death comes close to home, suddenly things are different. You probably won’t feel ready, because death is not a statistic any longer, it has become personal. Your friend, your brother or sister, your spouse, your parent or your child is dying. And ultimately you and I will have to take this journey, too.

But let me give you some hope. The very personal journey of death is one that God also takes very personally. You see, in verses two and three of John 11, we see the close connection between Lazarus and his family, and Jesus.

You Matter to Jesus

Jesus was a very important figure in the lives of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He had touched their family in significant ways, and it showed in the way they related to Him.

*“This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick.’”*¹⁰

Mary had shown her faith and devotion to the Lord by pouring expensive perfume on His feet and wiping His feet with her hair.

Now, with their brother in need, the sisters reached out to the One they knew would help. Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus. “*Lord, the one you love is sick,*” they said.

Note how personal this message is: “Jesus, your friend is dying. We are calling out to you.” This doesn’t sound like an HMO request for medication: “Patient number 843-322-22444-111 is requesting authorization for medication 324B.” This is a personal plea for help.

Yes, Jesus was important to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, just as He is important to you. But even better, Lazarus, Mary and Martha were important to Jesus. He would come. He would respond. Their suffering and their sorrow mattered to Him. Lazarus’s illness meant something to Jesus.

To Jesus, Lazarus wasn’t a statistic; he was a friend in need. To Jesus, Lazarus wasn’t a footnote in a news article; he was a child of God who was calling out to his Lord. And his Lord would respond.

Never, ever forget this: you matter to Jesus. Your life is something that He created, something He gave you. He knows the numbers of hairs on your head and the number of worries in your heart. When your mother is dying and hospice has been called, He knows. When you see the signs of age staring back at you from the mirror, Jesus sees them too. When you fear for your children’s future because you know your time is short, your Savior knows the burden of anxiety you bear. And He cares. When you call out to Him, He hears.

There are so many marvelous stories in the Bible that illustrate this. Let me share just one with you, from Mark 10:46-52.

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”

Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked him. The blind man said, "Rabbi, I want to see." "Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

It sure seemed like poor old Bartimaeus didn't stand a chance. He was on the side of the road, begging for whatever he could get. To most people, he was one of the invisible members of society, a poor beggar to be ignored whenever possible. Jesus was surrounded by His disciples and a large crowd. People were talking to Jesus and asking Him questions. Perhaps some of the disciples were debating with several Pharisees. It was crowded and noisy, like a crowded city sidewalk in the middle of the day.

Bartimaeus couldn't see, so he didn't know quite where to aim his voice as he called out. Others told him to be quiet. It appeared as if nobody cared about Bartimaeus and what he had to say. Who could possibly hear him above the noise of the crowd?

Jesus could. In the midst of a large crowd of noisy people, Jesus heard one lone voice. When the world had judged that Bartimaeus was to be quiet, Jesus wanted him to speak up.

Maybe you are young and your health is great. You exercise five times a week, you eat right, and you have strength and energy to spare. But a day will come, and maybe your day isn't too far away, when you will realize that your time on this earth is short. A day will come when all of those plans you made just won't matter anymore. A day when doing laundry is irrelevant and your job won't be a concern. A day when investments in the things of this world will pale in comparison to investments made in eternal things. A day when your retirement won't be needed any longer.

And you will call out to God, and your family will call out with you, "Lord, the one you love is sick." You might wonder, "Does He really love me? Can God still love me, after all those times when I have turned a cold shoulder to Him? Can God still love me, after all the wrong I have done, after all the good I have failed to do?"

Alleluia! The answer of the Savior is an unqualified “Yes!” He does love you—with all of His heart. He does hear you, and He wants you to speak up. Jesus loves you, and because He loves you, He takes death and dying very seriously. And very personally. So personally that He has traveled that dark valley Himself. He has approached His last day, His last hour, and His last breath. Death is very personal for Jesus, for He has experienced it.

Why did He experience death? He did it for you. Romans 4:25 says, “*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*”

You are not a statistic to Jesus. You are not a line item in a report. You are His beloved child. He went to a cross for you. He faced and defeated death for you, because He loves you. And He hears when you call. You have a name—and Jesus knows it.