
The Bereavement and Jesus' Sympathy In John 11:31-36 And Its Relevance to the Christian Leaders

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Abstract

The issue of death has been an argumentative matter in different fields of study. To the philosophers of religion, death is being viewed as evil. Evil can be seen as an occurrence that destroys or hinders the purpose of one in life more often than not bringing pains to him. Therefore, anything that brings pain to man is considered evil. The existence of evil has posed serious problem for theist to contend. The problem is how to reconcile the claim of the existence of God as an omnipotent and all-good with the existence of evil which this existence of evil which this God cannot eliminate. To explain this, series of theodicies had been formed viz-a-viz: Augustinian theodicy, Irenaean theodicy etc to supply answer to moral and natural evils. Irenaeus said, natural evil (which death is amongst) in the world are not only casually necessary for spiritual development, but equally logically necessary to acquire virtues such as; patience, generosity, courage's sympathy, bravery. Solomon says, 'it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter...'. (Eccles. 7:2-3a) These verses reveal the thrust of this paper as pertaining to the reaction of people to the bereaved. The paper discusses the illness of a man called Lazarus who was a close friend to Jesus with his sisters Mary and Martha. Most especially it draws our attention to the shortest verse in the Bible "Jesus Wept". (John 11:35). What is the Significance of his visit and weeping at Bethany to the Nigerian Christian Leaders when their members are bereaved? Should bereavement serve as a source of income or means of siphoning money today? Should every death be seen as a joyful occurrence for the contemporary Christians? All these questions are logically attempted in this paper through hermeneutical study of the passage and its application. The writer used primary source for his findings and practical experience as a clergy. He recommends that; bereaved family should be sympathized with, funeral service should not be turned to fund raise service, it should not be turned to medium of siphoning, people time should not be wasted, during the bereavement, the family should not be taxed to go and pay huge amount of money before the service could be held. The service should be used to save souls and not to be commercialized. Church leaders should not in the name of raising death use charm. If all these recommendations are followed, time of bereavement would bring consolation to the family and glory to God.

Keywords: Death, Bereavement, Sympathy, Siphon, Christian Leader.

Introduction

The issue of death has been an argumentative matter in different fields of study. To the philosophers of religion, death is being viewed as Evil. Evil can be seen as an occurrence that destroys or hinders the purpose of one in life more often than not bringing pains to him. Therefore, anything that brings pain to man is considered evil ¹. The existence of evil has posed serious problem for theist to contend. The problem is how to reconcile the claim of the existence of God as an omnipotent and all-good with the existence of evil which this existence of evil which this God cannot eliminate ². To explain this, series of theodicies had been formed viz-a-viz: Augustinian theodicy, Irenaean theodicy etc. In his own view, Augustine opines that, the presence of evil in the world is the end result of the misuse of man's free will ³. This seems to answer the prevalent of moral evil. What of natural evil? In his own theodicy, Irenaean is of the opinion that, God did not create a hedonist's paradise as the atheist would want to see it as free from all evils. Rather, the evil should be seen within the context of training man to develop genuine moral standards. He said, natural evil in the world are not only casually necessary for spiritual development, but equally logically necessary to acquire virtues such as; patience, generosity, courage's sympathy, bravery etc ⁴.

Philosophically, the problem of evil continues to constitute serious difficulties for the theists of natural evil. Then, we need to ask ourselves, is death evil? Going by the biblical record in Genesis 2:16-17, God instructed Adam to eat every tree of the garden freely, but they should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because the day they eat it, they would surely die. Unfortunately, Eve ate the fruit and gave it to her husband to eat due to the deceit by serpent that they would not die. (Gen.3:4) Do we hastily agree with the serpent that the woman and the man did not die as serpent said? Was the serpent right after all? P.A. Oguntoye submits that, physical death is part of the penalty of sin ⁵. He also quotes Moberly who says, the consequence of sin is death for the man and woman. And this is primarily seen in the separation and alienation of the man and woman from the garden from each other and from God ⁶. Coincidentally, the first family on earth was the first family to experience bereavement. The incident took place when Cain killed Abel his brother in the field (Gen 4:8). Since then, the concept of death and bereavement continue to appear in many pages of the Scripture from Old Testament to the New Testament. More so, is death a thing of joy or sorrow till date remains a controversial issue. Yet, when it brings joy for some, reverse is the case to others.

Humanly speaking, the death of the wicked man may bring joy to the society while that of wise and kind man brings sadness. In the wisdom of the preacher, He says, "it is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men, and the living will lay it to his heart. Sorrow is better than laughter..." (Eccles.7:2-3a) These verses reveal the thrust of this paper as pertaining to the reaction of people to the bereaved. The paper discusses the illness of a man called Lazarus who was a close friend to Jesus with his sisters Mary and Martha. Jesus was informed when his sickness grew worst but he could not go there until his death and burial. Was this a sign of sympathy? Was this intentional? What did Jesus want to teach us? Why did he not go there before the death of Lazarus? All these questions would be answered in the paper. Most especially our attention would be drawn on the shortest verse in the Bible "Jesus Wept". (John 11:35). What is the Significance of his visit and weeping at Bethany to the Nigerian Christian Leaders when their members are bereaved? Should bereavement serve as a source of income or means of siphoning money today? Should every death be seen as a joyful occurrence for the contemporary Christians? All these questions would be logically attempted in the paper through hermeneutical study of the passage and its application.

Background to the Study

Bereavement in Judaism (Hebrew, *avelut*, mourning) is a combination of *minhag* and *Mitzuah* derived from Judaism's classical Torah and rabbinic text. The details of observance and practice vary according to each Jewish community.⁷ In Judaism, the principal mourners are the first-degree relatives; parent; child, siblings, and spouse. Upon receiving the news of the passing, the following blessing is recited: *Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melek ha'olam, dayan ha-emet* meaning "blessed are you, Lord, our God, king of the universe, the judge of truth" There is also a custom of rendering one's clothes at the moment one hears of a passing. Another prevalent custom is to shed tear at the funeral so that the procedure is done properly.⁸ Before a corpse is buried in the land of Israel, there are three major stages to preparing the body for burial:-Washing (*rechizah*), ritual unification, (*tahamah*) and chasing burial clothing (*tachrichim*). As ash carnets is mapped round the clothing and tied in form of the Hebrew letter Israel *shim*, representing one of the names of God.

In Israel, casket is not used at all with exception of military and state funerals. Also, burial is intended to take place in as short and internal of time after death as possible. Displaying of the body prior to burial does not take place.⁹ Judaism does not have a place for private undertakers arranging burials for profit. The functions of an undertaker are carried out by a voluntary communal organization known as the "chevra" "kadish" (holy society). There are no 'paupers' funeral' in Judaism. Rich and poor receive identical burials, and the higher fees paid by those can afford them contribute towards the cost of funerals for those who cannot. Burial takes place on the day of the death or the next day, unless it is a Sabbath or holy day. Before burial, it is customary for the next of kin to tear or cut an outer garment as a sign of grief (2 Samuel 1-11). This torn garment is worn for a week.

Before the funeral a service is held in a Jewish hall. The funeral service itself takes place at the graveside.¹⁰ Once, the burial has taken place; the mourner observes a phase of mourning that lasts for seven days from the funeral. This period is called 'shwa' ('seven') and during the period, the mourners stay at home sit on low stools and retrain from wearing leather shoes. Friends and relatives of the deceased gather at the mourners' homes, to hold daily services in the morning and for evening. After the seven days of laws of mourning are relaxed, but mourners still practices a degree of restraint-keeping away from place of amusement parties, etc. for 30 days from the funeral. If one is mourning a parent, these restrictions continue for 11 months.¹¹

Though, reactions to the bereaved and burial service differ in Nigeria as a whole. However, there are some customs in Israel which resemble burial services in some tribes in Nigeria, most especially Yoruba land. In Yoruba land, the family members of the deceased mourned him or her. The fact is not farfetched that washing of corpse are part of practices in Yoruba land and some tribes in Nigeria. While some bury the corpses within few hours of his/her death, other may embalm the corpse at home or morgues (mortuary) in order to prepare for elaborate burial.

In the ancient days they used to display their corpse for some days before burial. But, in the contemporary time corpse is displayed for few hours or minutes before taken to cemetery or grave. When there were not undertakers in the ancient days, the corpse was been carried by young men in the community or the in laws (son-in-law). Contrary to this at the contemporary time, undertakers are being used for carrying corpse's casket. Sometimes, they play with it to earn money from the family members. As Jews used to hold burial services at their hall, service could be held at the house of the deceased (under canopy) or inside the church for some

denominations that practice that. The days of the morning are also observed in some tribes, they do observe three days, forty one days and a year. While in another place it is seven days, forty one days and a year. This is established to prove that bereavement, morning and showing of sympathy are being done in Nigeria like Jews. But, do Nigeria Christian leaders do that today? This is the concern of this paper

Hermeneutical Study of John 11:31-36

The gospel of John is perhaps the most intriguing of the four accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ found in scripture. More of a theological treatise than a historical narrative, John puts the challenge of the incarnation before his readers- God in human flesh.¹² The gospel of John was written towards the end of the first century AD by someone referred to, as “the beloved disciple” (21:20,24). It is likely that this person was John the son of Zebedee. The purpose of the book is spelled out in 20:30-31. These (signs) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.¹³ In agreement with the purpose of the gospel, the concept of believe or faith is found in John 11. There are four major characters in this passage; namely: Lazarus, Mary, Martha and Jesus Christ. Lazarus was sick and his two sisters (Mary and Martha) sent to Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus loved all three of them.¹⁴ Most especially, Lazarus as confirmed by the scripture:

Therefore the sisters sent to him saying “Lord” behold, he whom you love is sick (John 11:3). Then, verse 5 says, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Jesus’ love towards the family was very obvious to his disciples. This is evident in verse 11 when Jesus said to them that “... Our friend Lazarus sleeps but I go that I may wake him up”. The Greek word used for ‘friend’ is *philos* which denotes, ‘loved one, beloved, affectionate friend. The verb is *phileo*, which describes a love of emotion and friendship.¹⁵ *Philo* also means dear or friendly.¹⁶ This explains the close relationship between Jesus and the family. Mary had poured perfume on the feet of Jesus and wiped them dry with her hair. (12:3, cp 11:2) The sister must have known about the healings Jesus had done in Jerusalem, which was less than three kilometer from Bethany.¹⁷ Therefore, their belief was that, if Jesus could come promptly, their brother would not die. This they confessed when Jesus later arrived Bethany; “Lord, If you had been here, my brother would not have died” (11:21, 32).

Unfortunately, he had left Jerusalem far beyond the Jordan, which was about eighteen miles (Thirty kilometers) away from Bethany despite their awareness of the distance, they still sent for Jesus. To our surprise, Jesus stayed two more days in the place before informing the disciples about the illness of Lazarus. Ordinarily, because of the attempt to kill him before (11:7 – 8) but, when they were informed of the illness of Lazarus and that he had even died, they were ready to risk their lives and go there. In fact, Thomas as doubtful as he was, said, “let us also go that we may die with him” (11:16). This statement shows the kind of intimacy with the man-

Lazarus. David S. Dockery opines that, Jesus two days delay was probably to ensure that the miracle he was about to bestow would be clearly understood to be a resurrection from the dead, not a resuscitation from a severe illness.¹⁹ He even said, the illness was not unto final death rather temporal which is meant for the glory of God (11:4). It is also said, Jesus’ delay of two days underscores what he had taught consistently, namely that his marching orders came excessively from his father. Neither the need of his closest friends nor the fury of his enemies determined his actions.²⁰ Looking at the interval of days when Jesus was sent for and the day he later got to Bethany (four days later), the journey who have taken them two days. Both

Martha and Mary had loosed hope in the earthy resurrection of Lazarus. Yet, they still believed in the resurrection at the last day (11:24). This implies, they have not forgotten the eschatological teaching of Jesus Christ on life after death. Their reaction showed a sign of maturity to their friend who they were expecting to come and heal their brother before his demise. Their hope of Lazarus coming alive could be because Jesus did not come while Lazarus was at the stage of comma. Also there was a common belief that the soul remained near the body for three day after death hoping for an opportunity to return. But after that, it left for good, leaving the person irrevocably dead. Lazarus would have been known by all to be truly dead.²¹

According to their custom the Jewish mourners had followed the women to mourn (to weep) [11:19, 31, 33] and to comfort them. Often, they used to follow the bereaved to weep at the tomb. They did this when Mary rose up to meet Jesus at the entrance of the town thinking she was going to tomb to weep. Adam Clarke says, Jesus was not yet come into the town – As Jewish burying places were without their cities and villages, it appears that the place where our Saviour was, when Martha met him was not far from the place where Lazarus was buried.²² As earlier said, it appears that it was the custom for the nearest relatives of the deceased to go at times, during the three days of weeping, accompanied by their friends and neighbors, to mourn near the graves of the deceased. They suppose that the spirit hovered about the place where the body was laid for three days, to see whether it might be again permitted to enter, but when it saw the face change it knew that all hope was now past. It was this ground that the seven days of lamentation succeeded the three days of weeping.²³ Humanly speaking, Jesus had come on the day when hope has been lost to have Lazarus back alive. They just began the weeping or lamentation days. How did Jesus react to this? This would be treated in the next topic.

The Concept of Bereavement and Jesus Sympathy in The Passage

Death (Heb. Mawet; Gk. Thanatos) is the Cessation of Natural or Animal Life, the state of having ceased to live; that separation, whether violent or other life, of the soul from the body whereby live as an organism is ended. So, death has been variously defined as: “disunion of body and soul”²⁴. Death is the cause of bereavement and sorrow and it is inheritable in life. Ecclesiastes has this to say;

“To everything there is a season, a time to born, and a time to die, a time to weep, and a time laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 2 & 4).

Unequivocally, time of bereavement is a time to weep and mourn the deceased. It is a time to show sympathy to the bereaved. This passage narrates the bereavement of the friends of Jesus, Martha and Mary which led to their incessant weeping that moved Jesus emotionally. The Bible Records; therefore, “when Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He grieved in the spirit and was troubled” (vs. 33). This is one of the most moving scenes in the life of Jesus (the death of Lazarus). Here we see not only the power of Jesus to raise the death, but the emotions of Jesus being moved by the grief of those around him.²⁵ Here the blessed Jesus shows himself to be a truly man; and a man too who notwithstanding his amazing dignity and excellence, did not feel it beneath him to sympathize with the distressed and weep with those who wept.²⁶ The least verse in the bible yet inferior to none is taken from this passage, “Jesus Wept” (John 11:35). Another place where Jesus wept was over Jerusalem in (Luke 19:41). Jesus’ weep was so obvious that the Jews said, “See how he loved them!” The weeping of Jesus came after he had been led to the tomb. This raised question among the Jews, “could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind also have kept this man from dying. “(11:37) through the maliciousness of their hearts, this Jews considered the tears of Jesus as a

proof of his weakness.²⁷ Alas! This was not. The action reveals Jesus sympathy with his friends. He also grieved in his spirit. The Greek word usually used for “grieving” which is *embrimaomai* is usual used to express anger (Mark 14 : 5), to indicate a speaking or acting with deep feeling (John 11:33, 38) and for stern admonishment (Matt 9:30; Mk 1:43). This could be interpreted as Jesus showing deep feeling for Martha and Mary who were weeping amidst the mockers (vs. 37). They were looking at faces of the mourners as lovers but not all of them were mourners rather mockers. For the mockers to recognize the power and ability of God to resurrect the dead, He commanded the stone to be removed and restored Lazarus back to life. Though many of Jews who witnessed Lazarus’ resurrection put their faith in Jesus (11:45), others went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done (11:46). Can we see the categories of people staying with Martha and Mary? They were group of mourners and mockers.

The Relevance of the Passage to the Nigeria Christian Leaders

Nigeria is one of the blessed countries in the whole world that has produced many Christian Leaders. Christianity came to Nigeria in 15th Century through Benin, but it could not survive as a result of slave trade. Later on 24th September 1842 through Thomas Birch Freeman, who was a Methodist missionary, Christianity came to Nigeria through Badagry. Since then, it has started spreading to the nooks and crannies of the country even beyond the country.²⁸ Christians in Nigeria comprise an estimated 49.3% of the population. Christians are dominant in the Southern and Central region in Nigeria. According to the Pew Research Centre, Nigeria has the largest Christian population of any country in Africa, with more than 80 million persons in Nigeria belonging to the Church with various denominations.²⁹ Christians has produced many leaders into every work of life be it, Politics, Economy, Traditional, Educational and Religious sector, specifically, Christianity. At this context the Christian Leaders refer to the Church Leaders which comprise of two categories; the laity (for instances, Elders, Deacons, Deaconess, Lay Preacher, Church Warden etc.) and the clergy which includes Pastor, Prophet, Reverend, Bishop, Shepherd, Apostles to mention but few).

These Christian leaders are expected to ensure that they communicate the standards of strong Christlike character.³⁰ And the character discusses in this paper is the act of sympathy for the bereaved. Do Nigeria Christian Leaders display that? While few do, majority do not exhibit it. The attitude of some Christian Leaders during bereavement is a challenge in the contemporary Church. The Pastors who ought to show heart of sympathy to the bereaved family like Jesus have turned bereavement to source of income.

The time of burial and funeral service that ought to be a sympathetic service and soul lifting to the kingdom of God and rebuke sinners to repent of their sins due to inevitability of death has turned to merriment time. The writer does not against celebration of life well spent for the departed Christian souls. But, he is frown at obnoxious acts that take place during the burial which are not Christlike characters. These include:

1. **Billing:** The Pastor charges the children or family of the bereaved some amount of money to be paid before the burial could be conducted. Is this sympathetic? Gifting should be voluntarily if the need be and not compulsion.
2. **Siphoning Money:** The Church Leaders use the funeral service to siphon the bereaved family. The writer attended a funeral ceremony; several monies were collected or raised which include: building project fund, missionary fund and uncountable

thanksgivings. It got to a stage everybody was groaning and complaining. In fact, some left the service before closure.

3. Mis-management of Time: Due to fund raising that funeral service has turned to, people's time is being wasted. The time to sympathize with the family through word of condolence and comfort would be used for commercial purpose. The service which ought to bring sinners to the repentance does not achieve its purpose any longer.

4. Misunderstanding: Fracas comes after funeral service sometime between the laities and clergy in term of sharing formula of the money raised. It could be as a result of lack of proper accountability from either of the sides. Bill Rahedi states, prudent accounting and sound financial management are to be found at the core of good stewardship, which is one of the critical practical aspects to meaningful worship.³¹

Lawrence Darmani opines that, as far as money and the last day prophecies are concerned, we can testify that it's being fulfilled fairly and regularly. The love of money has been the root cause of many upheavals in Christendom. Hardly is there a major conflict among Christian Leaders in the same denomination or para-church organization whose Centre is not money, not so much about its acquisition as about its distribution.³²

Aside burial service, the unsympathetic acts include; human ritual and commercializing of the ministerial gift or spiritual gift. For instances; a Pastor in Oyo State, identified as Alimi Isaiah has been caught with a human skull, a buffalo horn and charms.³³ Some Nigerian Christian Leaders (Pastors) are caught burying charm in the Church, Crusade ground. A Pastor called Moses Abiodun from Christ Apostolic Church was arrested for burying something suspected to be human head inside his Church. They do this to attract more members and keep them, for more money, for fame, to perform signs and wonders, to meet up with expectations, to control people, and to the thrill of being idolized.³⁴

These people do not resemble Jesus who showed sympathy to the bereaved and also performed miracle of restoring the dead without collecting money or gift. Whereas, some Nigerian Pastors have become heartless to the extent of terminating lives, how can such people have sympathy for anybody? Some Church members who ought to stay with the bereaved in order to console them have no time probably due to the nature of their job or nonchalant attitude.

A woman lost her husband few years ago, when Pastor (the writer) went there to sympathize with her, he did not meet any family member nor church members with her. This is not good enough. Jesus was not like that, even though some members are mockers, they still registered their condolence. Though, this should be discouraged in the time like this.

Recommendation and Conclusion

Having discovered the way Jesus sympathized with the bereaved in his time and the lackadaisical attitude of many church leaders and members today leaving the bereaved without condolence visit and sympathy. Then, it is pertinent to give these recommendations to Nigeria Christian leaders on the expectations from them during the time of the bereavement.

i. Church leaders are to live an exemplary life like Christ (that is sympathy and free of charge miracle). Many Pastors preach good sermons but live bad lives. What a contradiction indeed!

³⁵ The Bible says "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Romans:

12:15). Pastors may not weep (they could also weep even publicly if the need be) like Jesus, but they should show sign for sympathy. On hearing the death of a member of the church (or family members), the pastor should contact the family as soon as possible to comfort, pray for and otherwise assist them. When they have been comforted, he will then help them to plan the burial and funeral service bearing in mind the Age of the deceased and the capacity of the family.

ii. They should desist from unnecessary fund raises during the burial / funeral service. This would help them to manage their time. The writer is not saying the family of the deceased should not donate voluntarily to the Church.

iii. Burial service should be used to save souls through the world of exhortation and other activities.

iv. Miracle should be performed divinely as Jesus did and gave us. Pastor should not use any charm or power to raise dead or performs miracles.

End Notes

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