

## JESUS WEPT

A mere two words: *Jesus wept*.

That sparse sentence is considered the shortest verse in the Bible. It is also likely known to many in other religious traditions and even some who would claim no faith and no interest in faith. If the shortest verse is famous, the longest is obscure. Meandering for eighty-three words in the Revised Standard Version's (RSV) English translation, Esther 8:9 is like a wheelbarrow overflowing with nouns and verbs. But it seems mostly remembered as trivia; *Jeopardy* might place it into a Bible category to stump contestants.

A player gets the longest verse question right or wrong and the game continues.

However, the shortest verse may reveal how our very lives will continue.

Two thousand or so years after Jesus shed those tears in John 11:35 as a reaction to his friend Lazarus' death, a church member who came to see his pastor also wept.

I was the pastor.

The visitor arrived at my cramped office adjacent to the sanctuary. He had made the appointment the day before. We represented the stereotypically taboo subjects to avoid if you hope to keep the conversation polite: religion and politics. In the small town where we lived, I served as the minister of a church. He was one of that zip code's movers and shakers in local government, a guy whose "yes" or "no" meant a project would succeed or be stuck in committee hell.

I had no idea why he wanted to see me for a lunchtime meeting. Wasn't he supposed to be at work?

Though I would never break confidentiality, it doesn't matter. I can't recall what he shared with me. Now retired, thousands of folks in various churches preceded or followed him into my office. And yet I can still hear his sobs. Within moments of settling into the metal folding chair across from me, he was a wreck. Tears swept in from a storm deep within his soul. I can see his body shaking and hear his sentences abruptly end as if tumbling from a ledge. None of us like to be out-of-control. But there he was, weeping and trembling.

He needed to confess.

Or seek solace.

Or be honest.

Or share.

Or rage.

Or all of the above.

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In any casual or scholarly theological debate about Jesus' divinity and humanity, his tears always add points to the human side of the scorecard. John 11:35's absurdly simple passage is vulnerable and compelling. In the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the verse was stretched to four words: *Jesus began to weep*. As a kid raised in a 1950s-era Baptist Church, I attended Sunday school with the old RSV's sparser translation: *Jesus wept*.

Gospel brevity.

Lazarus, Jesus' pal, the beloved brother of two doting sisters, and probably an all-around nice guy, had died.

Jesus Wept

Jesus wept.

Sure, we could hurry to the good stuff, the amazing miracle of bringing Lazarus back among the living, breathing, and complaining humans. But I prefer to pause at the shortest speed bump of a verse in the Bible.

Life overwhelms us.

Death overwhelms us.

Tears are the liquid equalizers. The rich can't buy any product that prevents their tears of sadness. The poor witness a glorious sunset or are handed a few bucks by a stranger and they weep for joy. The wise and the foolish bawl their eyes out over a kind gesture. We spontaneously chuckle and unexpectedly sob. We want to share the best or worst news that has just happened with the perfect explanation, but all we can manage is blubbering. Once, when I made the hardest professional decision of my life—leaving work as a hospice chaplain to become the pastor of a troubled church—I went over to my best friend's home to tell him of my decision. I could hardly get any words out.

I wept.

Was I happy with my decision?

Or *not* happy?

Maybe both.

The tears were the truth of the confusion, of the hopes, of the fears.

Thank God the writer of John had the chutzpah to show that the Prince of Peace, the miracle worker of Nazareth, the Son of Humanity, the child of Mary and Joseph, the Christ of history and Mystery, was staggered by a friend's death. Imagine the willingness to follow Jesus'

demanding, love-your-neighbor-without-exception path, without John 11:35 as part of Christian tradition. I know my faith would be less if the RSV's two words were absent.

Life staggers us.

Our face floods.

Tears make us beggars all, dismal and in need of comfort.

In my ministry—as a hospice chaplain, church pastor, and campus minister—it was humbling to hold another's hand when their tears flowed. Every drop is a liquid mirror to our most essential feelings: joy, dread, loss, transformation, futility; the shedding of the old, the embracing of the new. How true writer Frederick Buechner was when he claimed: "Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention."

That mover and shaker in the isolated village we shared left my office that day. Probably back to work. Back to pressures. Back to failures. Back to successes.

I had grasped his hand as he trembled and wept.

Did I help him? Comfort him? Challenge him?

All I know for sure is that I was there for and with him.

Some of my best ministry had little to do with words.