

I. Introduction

- A. Welcome to Neighborhood and to part 2 of our mini-series called Trouble. Last time we talked about Trouble and Faith. Today our Topic is Trouble and the Plan of God.
- B. The Bible is loaded with trouble, and today we're looking at a story of trouble from the gospel of John.

II. Text

- A. *Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." (John 11:1-3, NKJV).*
 - 1. I love Bible stories for a lot of reasons. They're interesting, they're surprising, they're memorable, and they're fun.
 - 2. But my favorite thing about Bible stories is this: every story is carefully crafted to be a portal to truths that are really deep. They are designed to teach theology.
 - 3. Each story is a window to theology. That means, it was written to communicate something deep about your God, your life, your world, and how you all intersect.
 - 4. The story is crafted. It is word-smithed. It is structured and molded to lead the reader of the word of God to deep stuff about God and life with him.
 - 5. The setting of this story is a place called Bethany, with friends of Jesus and siblings of each other named Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and a situation called sickness...
 - 6. And don't miss that when Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, they don't say Lazarus is sick. No. They say "he whom you love is sick."
 - 7. So what do we have?
 - 8. We have that the driving force in the story is that a man is sick. So there's your trouble.
 - 9. And we can trace that trouble back to a deep truth. I am saying that this story is going to teach us something about Trouble and the Plan of God. So here's our first deep truth:
 - 10. 1. The SETTING: this fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.
 - a) A man is sick. He is going to die. Jesus is in a remote part of the country, because in Jerusalem, the religious leaders are hunting for him to kill him. There is bad stuff happening.
 - b) The two most self-authenticating truths in all of Christian theology are that people are sinful, and this fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.
 - c) You don't have to work hard to prove it. It's self-authenticating. Only a person who has never suffered would argue with either of those truths.
 - d) Sickness happens. Poverty happens. Conflict happens. Pain happens. Death happens. Fire happens. Fighting happens. Hatred happens. Sin happens.
 - e) God did not create it so. This was not his plan. It was our plan. We brought bad stuff into the world, collectively speaking, under the influence of the devil. God created perfection; humans messed it up.
 - f) Don't get me wrong. I'm not being pessimistic, doom and gloom, life stinks then you die. No. Not at all. There is great beauty in the world. There is great nobility in the human heart. There is wondrous beauty all around.
 - g) So don't think I'm hating this world.
 - h) But the simple fact is it's all tarnished. The devil's acid spit has rained down, and that is the mother of all our grief.
 - i) This fallen world is a morally broken pain machine.
 - (1) That's the setting of the story... but there's one more theological truth woven into this setting.
 - 11. Who is it that is sick? Lazarus.
 - 12. But they don't yet call him by name. What do they call him?
 - a) "He whom you love."
 - b) Someone Jesus loves as a brother and a friend is sick and about to die.
 - 13. Mix that little factoid with with our first theological truth, and you get a second theological truth:
 - a) 2. REALITY CHECK: Being a child of God does not exempt you from the heartbreaks of the Giant Pain Machine.
 - 14. It isn't news to anybody that Christians suffer too. It doesn't make you bad. It doesn't make you a failure. It doesn't make you inferior, unlucky, or unloved.
 - a) The Pain Machine is an equal opportunity oppressor, and Christians aren't immune.
 - (1) But there's one more important point not to miss. The place where Lazarus was sick was only two miles away from the place where the rulers were looking for Jesus to execute him.
 - (2) For Jesus to go to Lazarus was to go toward his death.
 - 15. So there is the setting of the story. Then what happens.
- B. *When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. (John 11:4-6, NKJV)*
 - 1. This is where the story falls apart for me.
 - 2. When I come to Jesus, I need him now. Jesus, emergency. Stat. Let's go. Jesus, no, no. Don't put me on hold. No, I won't hold for a minute. No, two days is one day, twenty-three hours, and fifty nine minutes too long.
 - a) Jesus, I'm in trouble! It's a crisis situation. Jesus, Mayday, Mayday. Did you hear me Jesus?
 - (1) I did.
 - b) Great. Thanks for hearing me Jesus. Because I know you're going to take care of it.
 - (1) I am...
 - c) Thank you Jesus.
 - (1) ...in a couple days. ???
 - d) No. I don't think you understand. Jesus, I need your help now. Right now. I don't have a couple days.
 - (1) Jesus says, I know. See you soon.
 - 3. Because what's your job? Faith.
 - 4. What's God's job? Outcomes.
 - 5. Your job is faith, God's job is outcomes. And every single one of us wants to be in charge of outcomes.
 - 6. How do you think that would go down...

7. Your cell phone rings.
 - a) Hello?
 - (1) Hi. This is God.
 - b) God?
 - (1) Yeah. Hey, I'm going on vacation, and I'm leaving you in charge.
 - c) What? Huh? What?
 - (1) You're in charge of everything. Do a good job.
 - (a) One part of your brain is screaming in fear...
 - (b) But there's this other part that's thinking lottery tickets and a Caribbean island.
 - (2) Hey... I might like this gig!
 - d) Okay God, I got it.
 - e) God says, "Hey, one more thing. Don't forget to keep all the electrons in orbit. Oh, and don't let the devil mess things up. See you soon. Bye."
8. Putting you and me in charge of the universe would be like putting my mom in charge of the Internet.
 - a) The whole thing's coming down.
 - b) 3. HOPE: Nothing inside the Pain Machine can thwart or stop the perfect plan of a sovereign God.
9. Last time we went through the attributes of God. Today, let's run through some names of God:
 - a) God, you are...
 - (1) Yahweh — the LORD (all caps), the uncreated, self-existent, non-contingent being. Everything depends on you, but you do not need to depend on anyone. (Isaiah 42:8)
 - (2) Yahweh Shammah — the Lord who is there. All of you fills all of space, and you've never left me alone. (Ezekiel 48:35)
 - (3) Yahweh Rohi — the Lord is My shepherd. You lead me, guide me, and protect me. I can rest secure in your care. (Psalm 23:1)
 - (4) Yahweh Yireh — the Lord who provides. You have provided everything I need for my present happiness, and your abundance never fails. (Genesis 22:14).
 - (5) Yahweh Tsabaoth — the Lord of Hosts, the Lord of Armies. This is your fighting name, and you go to war against the forces of darkness on my behalf. (1 Samuel 17:45)
 - (6) El Gibbor — The Almighty God.
 - (7) El Olam — the Everlasting God.
 - (8) El Elyon — God Most High.
 - (9) El Shaddai — Almighty God.
 - (10) Adonai — the Lord (not all caps), the Master and Commander of the Universe.
 - (a) And what we all need to know all the way down to our bones is this:
 - (b) That if Yahweh Shamma, Rohi, Yireh, Tsabaoth, El Gibbor, Olam, Elyo, Shaddai, Adonai says "I'll be there in two days," it's going to be okay in ways you can't even begin to imagine.
 - (c) You've got to know it. You've got to believe it. You've got to understand.
10. In 1873 an elderly British woman wrote a hymn. Her name was Dorothy Greenwell. The words to her hymn were picked up a few years ago and the tune was modernized.
11. I think these words capture the confusion that we all feel sometimes:
 - a) I am not skilled to understand,
What God hath willed, what God hath planned,
I only know at his right hand,
Is one who is my Savior.
12. God, I don't get things a lot of times. And the more questions I have, the more I don't know, the more I have to lean on the beautiful fact that sitting at your right hand is the Savior who loved me so much he bled and died for my sins.
13. That, I know, even if everything else is a question mark.
14. Some of you here today are stuck in that two-day limbo.
 - a) Help is coming but it's not here yet.
 - b) Deliverance is on its way, but the roads have traffic control.
 - c) God will bring back your wayward son, but the process is agonizing to watch.
 - d) You think the new business will fly, but you don't know yet.
 - e) You're hoping the guy will ask you out, but the phone isn't ringing.
 - (1) Whatever it is, no matter how big or how small, you've got to know your God enough to know that two days or two thousand days will ever pose a problem for him.
- C. In the next paragraph, Jesus says four things. I'll just summarize.
 1. He says, Let's go back to Judea... There are two relevant cities in this region: Bethany, where Lazarus is clinging to life, and Jerusalem, where the religious leaders want to kill him. Hold that.
 2. Then he says, Lazarus is not sick unto death. Hold that one too.
 3. Then Jesus says, our friend, Lazarus is sleeping.
 4. And, the fourth thing he says is, "Our friend, Lazarus, is dead."
 - a) Wait. Didn't you tell me the sickness was not unto death? Yep!
 - b) And didn't you say Lazarus was asleep? Yep!
 - c) Now you're telling me he's dead. Yep!
 - d) I'm confused! Yep.
 - (1) Listen.
 - (a) 4. TRANSCENDENCE: If your God is small enough for you to understand, he isn't big enough to be your God.
 5. God is an archer, you are the bow, and your dreams and hopes are the arrow. He notches the arrow in the bow, and draws it back. You say, that's kind of stretchy God. Just aim for something close. Something humble. Don't pull back too far.
 6. He pulls farther.
 7. You say... God, just aim at something close. Something little. Something that doesn't take too much.
 8. But that's not his plan.

- a) He is aiming at your eternal glory.
- b) He is aiming at your exceedingly great riches.
- c) He is aiming at your overwhelming fullness of joy.
- d) He is aiming at you being whole and holy and more happy than you can handle in this present earthly body.
- e) He is drawing back the bow to hit the target of Ephesians 2:7:
 - (1) *That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)*
9. You want a comfortable retirement: he wants for you an overwhelming eternity.
10. You want a problem fixed: he wants the root of all problems yanked away and burned.
11. His aim is higher, better, farther, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine.
 - a) God is the archer, your dreams are the arrow, and YOU are the bow.
 - b) So he notches the arrow and draws back the bow, and when you think you can't take any more, he draws it back farther. And farther again. And then some more.
 - c) And when he lets it fly... what you get is what Lazarus gets, which is beauty from ashes and life from the dead.
 - (1) His plan is better than yours and always will be.
12. So Jesus and his disciples travel to Bethany. They roll into town. Word spreads fast. Sister one, Martha comes to see him. Lord, she says, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Sister two Mary comes. Lord, if you had been here on time, my brother would not have died.
13. See, they were thinking that death was the final frontier. It was the point of no return.
14. Jesus was about to give them another thought.
- D. *"But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. "And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." (John 11:22-27)*
 1. The core of this is what Jesus says about himself: I am the resurrection and the life.
 2. Death is an enemy.
 3. Jesus defeats it.
 4. All who believe in him will rise again to eternal life.
 5. But understand this: victory over death is not mainly a physiological battle — though it is that.
 6. Above all else it is a moral battle. The cause of death was sin, and sin demanded a payment. The scales just needed to be balanced. The grave needed satisfaction. Satan needed to be shown what a liar he is, and Jesus Christ, in himself, the resurrection, and his life, did all these things and more.
 - a) 5. REDEMPTION: The plan of God delivers us from evil not by smashing the evil that holds us down, but by pulling it up by the roots.
 7. We are triumphant because we are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; we are not redeemed because we are triumphant. Listen, a person coming back from the grave, like Lazarus is awesome, but in the grand scheme of things, it's no big deal.
 8. But a person coming back to life from death, clothed in Christ's triumph over sin, over death, or Satan, over hell, and over every power of darkness — that's a big deal we will shout and dance and laugh and click our heavenly wine glasses for all the ages long.
 9. So Jesus is there. Martha is crying. Mary is crying. His friend is dead.
 - a) This was a really heavy moment for Jesus...
- E. *Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him!" (John 11:33-36)*
 1. What do you see here?
 2. You see the heart of Jesus.
 3. You see the emotion of Jesus.
 4. You see the true human nature of Jesus. Fully God. Fully human. Even though Jesus knows the pain machine is temporary. Even though he knows he will defeat it. He still feels the heaviness of it, and so do we.
 5. God has not called us to pretend everything is fine.
 - a) When you suffer loss, it's okay to not be okay.
 6. Being a Christian does not exempt you from the stages of grief. Every soul grieves its losses, and you can't skip that without hurting yourself and others. It's not unspiritual to grieve. You don't have to slap on a happy face.
 7. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. I think I'm in the anger state right now. You've been warned. Steer clear. I think Mary and Martha were in the depression stage.
 8. And I think Jesus was in the anger stage.
 - a) He was angry at the pain machine.
 - b) Ticked off at the devil.
 - c) Sick and tired of the wages of sin.
 - d) Beyond ready to reverse the cursedness of planet earth, and now he's going to do something about it.
 - (1) But first, he gives a preview.
 9. Jesus asks a strange question: "Where have you laid him?" He already knew. So why did he ask?
 10. Because it's a question he always asks.
 - a) That dream God gave you, where have you laid it?
 - b) That book you started to write, but never finished?
 - c) That business plan that you couldn't get off the ground?
 - d) That thing you hoped for and loved but has turned into dust... where have you laid it?
 - (1) The deep dreams and desires in your heart are a calling and a gift from God... (Ps 37:4). They are designed by God to kick the devil in the teeth and bring blessing into the realm of death.
 - (2) Where have you laid your fondest loves and hopes and dreams. It's time to pick it up, dust it off, and bring it to God. God, I thought it was over. I gave up on you. But I declare right now, you've got the power to bring life from the dead, even to my fondest ambitions and hopes and dreams.
 - (a) If Lazarus proves anything, he proves God can do all things, and you should never give up on him.
 - i) 6. PURPOSE: God weaves your pursuit of your heart's desire into his cosmic plan to silence Satan forever.
 - ii) Your job is faith, God's job is outcomes.

(1) It is better to fail with faith than to give up out of fear. Faith is the victory.

(3) So Jesus comes to the tomb...

F. *Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. "And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." (John 11:39-42, NKJV).*

1. Lesson one: God loves smelly people. I tried to make that fancy with theological language, but I couldn't. Even if the smell is the smell is the smell of death.
2. Lesson two: Faith is the victory. "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"
3. So Jesus prays.
 - a) Jesus doesn't need any of this. He's putting something on display, because he wants to give birth to something in the hearts of everybody gathered there.
 - (1) Faith.
 - (2) Faith in God above.
 - (3) And faith that Jesus was sent from God above to do for everybody what he is about to do for Lazarus.
 - (4) So he prays out loud, for their sakes...
 - b) That's what he means when he says, "but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me."
 - c) 7. REVERSAL: God hijacks evil, spins it around, and uses it against its will to bring about faith in the people of God.
 - (1) This is the omniscience of God plus the omnipotence of God plus God's sense of humor.
 - (2) It is the wisdom of God to step into the cesspool of evil, spin evil around till it'd dizzy enough to puke, and then and bring about faith in the people of God.
 - (a) 8. GLORY AND GRACE: Trouble mixed with faith yields glory to God and grace to you.
4. So they roll back the stone. And do you know what comes out?
5. No, not Lazarus. Not yet.
6. The stink comes out.
 - a) That's first. He is truly and really dead.
 - (1) There is the hillside with the cave in it.
 - (2) A few scrubby bushes here and there.
 - (3) Over there you have the people scattered, looking for a show.
 - (4) The religious leaders are there too, in their robes and hats and long curly ringlets... looking for a reason to arrest Jesus.
 - (5) Over here is Martha, arms around Mary... weeping, weary, clueless, hopeful, a jumble of emotions. Trouble personified.
 - (6) And there is the cave. Just a shallow depression, not very big, and a rock that's been rolled away.
 - (7) In the shadowy recesses you can barely see the outline of the mummified remains of a man.
 - (8) The sky is blue. The sun is shining. The birds are chirping. It's a weird contrast to the smell of death.
 - (a) And deep in the shadows of that cave, the devil is trembling in his boots.
 - (9) And over here is Jesus, angry at the devil and hacked off at Mr. Death.
 7. He knows perfectly well what his next actions will trigger... his arrest, and trials, and death.
 8. But everyone is in place. And the time has come.

G. *Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go." (John 11:43, 44)*

1. This is both a miracle and a sign.
2. As a miracle, it's amazing and mind-blowing and really kind of cool. It's a wonder.
3. As a sign, it's a miracle that makes a point. The point is that God will do for you what he has just done for Lazarus if you are saved, the resurrection power of Jesus is guaranteed for you some day.
4. Imagine Lazarus. He's dead. He's a believer. He's been in in heaven four days. It's really nice up there.
5. Peter comes up, taps him on the shoulder. Laz, we need to talk. It's gotta be fast.
6. Meanwhile, back on earth, Jesus calls out, Lazarus, come out and come forth!
7. In that instant, the soul and spirit of Lazarus, come flying out of heaven, he slams into the putrifying body in that grave. And he's back.
8. He's wrapped up.
9. He's dissolving.
10. He's smelly.
11. But he's alive.
12. He gets up, walks out, and Jesus does an awesome Jesus thing: "Rip those band-aids off, and set that guy free."

III. Conclusion

- A. Life from the dead.
- B. It's not a thing he does. It's the thing he is. I am the resurrection and the life.
- C. All I can say today in our time of trouble is this:
- D. If Jesus can raise the dead, he can raise your hopes and dreams too. He can raise our city. He can raise our county. He can restore what the fire took away.
- E. I am not skilled to understand... but this I know with all my heart.
 1. 9. ABSOLUTE VICTORY: The Plan of God cannot be stopped by circumstance or trouble, so I will trust in him.
- F. So I will trust in him.