EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B. A.,
CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,
VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;
Author of "Home Truths," etc.

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JOHN XI. 30-37.

30 Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him.
31 The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there.
32 Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.
33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping, which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.
34 And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.
35 Jesus wept.
36 Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!
37 And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

NOT many passages in the New Testament are more wonderful than the simple narrative contained in these eight verses. It brings out, in a most beautiful light, the sympathizing character of our Lord Jesus Christ. It shows us Him who is “able to save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him,” as able to feel as He is to save. It shows us Him who is One with the Father, and the Maker of all things, entering into human sorrows, and shedding human tears.

We learn, for one thing, in these verses, how great a blessing God sometimes bestows on actions of kindness and sympathy.

It seems that the house of Martha and Mary at Bethany was filled with mourners when Jesus arrived. Many of these mourners, no doubt, knew nothing of the inner life of these holy women. Their faith, their hope, their love to Christ, their discipleship, were things of which they were wholly ignorant. But they felt for them in their heavy bereavement, and kindly came to offer what comfort they could. By so doing they reaped a rich and unexpected reward. They beheld the greatest miracle that Jesus ever wrought. They were eye-witnesses when Lazarus came forth from the tomb. To many of them, we may well believe, that day was a spiritual birth. The raising of Lazarus led to a resurrection in their souls. How small sometimes are the hinges on which eternal life appears to depend. If these people had not sympathized they might never have been saved.

We need not doubt that these things were written for our learning. To show sympathy and kindness to the sorrowful is good for our own souls, whether we know it or not. To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, to weep with them that weep, to try to bear one another’s burdens, and lighten one another’s cares,—all this will make no atonement for sin, and will not take us to heaven. Yet it is healthy employment for our hearts, and employment which none ought to despise. Few perhaps are aware that one secret of being miserable is to live only for ourselves, and one secret of being happy is to try to make others happy, and to do a little good in the world. It is not
for nothing that these words were written by Solomon, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting.” — “The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.” (Eccl. vii. 2, 4.) The saying of our Lord is too much overlooked: “Whosoever shall give to drink to one of these little ones a cup of cold water only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you he shall in no wise lose his reward.” (Matt. x. 42.) The friends of Martha and Mary found that promise wonderfully verified. In an age of peculiar selfishness and self-indulgence, it would be well if they had more imitators.

We learn, for another thing, what a depth of tender sympathy there is in Christ’s heart towards His people. We read that when our Lord saw Mary weeping, and the Jews also weeping with her, “He groaned in the spirit and was troubled.” We read even more than this. He gave outward expression to His feelings: He “wept.” He knew perfectly well that the sorrow of the family of Bethany would soon he turned into joy, and that Lazarus in a few minutes would be restored to his sisters. But though he knew all this, he “wept.”

This weeping of Christ is deeply instructive. It shows us that it is not sinful to sorrow. Weeping and mourning are sadly trying to flesh and blood, and make us feel the weakness of our mortal nature. But they are not in themselves wrong. Even the Son of God wept.—It shows us that deep feeling is not a thing of which we need be ashamed. To be cold and stoical and unmoved in the sight of sorrow is no sign of grace. There is nothing unworthy of a child of God in tears. Even the Son of God could weep.—It shows us, above all, that the Saviour in whom believers trust is a most tender and feeling Saviour. He is one who can be touched with sympathy for our infirmities. When we turn to Him in the hour of trouble, and pour out our hearts before Him, He knows what we go through and can pity. And He is One who never changes. Though He now sits at God’s right hand in heaven, His heart is still the same that it was upon earth. We have an Advocate with the Father, who, when He was upon earth, could weep.

Let us remember these things in daily life, and never be ashamed of walking in our Master’s footsteps. Let us strive to be men and women of a tender heart and a sympathizing spirit. Let us never be ashamed to weep with them that weep, and rejoice with them that rejoice. Well would it be for the Church and the world if there were more Christians of this stamp and character! The Church would be far more beautiful, and the world be far more happy.

NOTES. JOHN XI. 30-37.
30.—[Now Jesus was not yet come, etc.] The Greek word for “come” in the preterperfect tense. The sentence, translated literally, would be, “Jesus had not yet come into the town,” when Martha left Him to tell Mary, but was still waiting or remaining in the place outside
Bethany, where Martha at first met Him. The word “town” would be more correctly rendered “village,” according to our present acceptation of the word. Yet it is fair to remember that words change their meaning with lapse of time. Even at this day a little Suffolk village of 1,400 people, is called a “town” by many of its inhabitants.

Calvin thinks that Jesus remained outside Bethany by Martha’s request, that His life might not be endangered.

31.—[The Jews then...comforted her...saw Mary...followed her.] It is probable that the persons here mentioned formed a considerable number,—as many as could crowd into the house. “Comforted” in the Greek is the present participle, and implies that they were actually employed in comforting Mary. Concerning the manner of comforting on such occasions, we know nothing certain. People who only talk common places are miserable comforters, and far worse than Job’s friends, who sat for seven days saying nothing at all. It may be that among the Jews the mere presence of courteous and sympathizing people was thought a kind attention, and soothed the feelings of the bereaved. The customs of nations differ widely in such matters.

It is evident these Jews did not hear Martha’s message, and knew nothing of Jesus being near. Some of them, perhaps, had they known it, would not have followed Mary; not knowing, they all followed without exception, and unexpectedly became eye-witnesses of a stupendous miracle. All they knew was that Mary went out hastily. They followed in a spirit of kind sympathy, and by so doing reaped a great blessing.

Rupertus shrewdly remarks that the Jews did not follow Martha, when she ran to meet Jesus, but did follow Mary. He conjectures that Mary’s affliction was deeper and more overwhelming than Martha’s, and her friends devoted themselves more to comfort her, as needing most consolation. Yet the simpler reason seems to be that when both sisters had left the house, the friends could hardly do anything else but go out and follow.

[She goeth...grave...weep there.] We must suppose from this sentence, that weeping at the grave of dead friends was a custom among the Jews in our Lord’s time. In estimating such a custom, which to most thinking persons may seem as useless as rubbing a wound, and very likely to keep up pain without healing, it is only fair to remember that Old Testament views of the state after death were not nearly so well lighted and comfortable as ours. The removal of death’s sting, the resurrection and paradise, were things not nearly so well understood even by the best saints before Christ, as they were after Christ rose again. To most of the Jews, in our Lord’s time, we can well believe that death was regarded as the end of all happiness and comfort, and the state after death as a dreary blank. When Sadducees, who said there was “no resurrection,” were chief rulers and high priests, we may well suppose that the sorrow of many Jews over the death of friends was a “sorrow without hope.” Even at this day, “the place of wailing” at Jerusalem, where the Jews assemble to weep over the foundation-stones of the old temple, is a proof that their habit of weeping over crushed hopes is not yet extinct.

32.—[That when Mary, etc.] We see in this verse that as soon as Mary met our Lord, the first thing she said was almost exactly what Martha had said in the twenty-first verse, and the remarks made there need not be repeated. The similarity shows, at any rate, that throughout the illness of Lazarus, the thoughts of the two sisters had been running in one and the same direction. Both had built all their hopes on Jesus coming. Both had felt confidence that His coming would have saved their brother’s life. Both were bitterly disappointed that He did not come. Both had probably kept saying the same words repeatedly, “If our Master would only come, Lazarus would not die.” There are, however, one or two touches of difference between the two sisters, here as elsewhere. Let us note them.

Mary “fell down” at our Lord’s feet, and Martha did not. She was made of softer, fee-
bler character than Martha, and was more completely crushed and overcome than her sister.

Mary fell down at our Lord’s feet when she “saw” Him. Up to that moment probably she had borne up, and had run to the place where Martha told her Jesus was waiting. But when she actually saw her Master, and remembered how she had longed for a sight of Him for some days, her feelings overcame her, and she broke down. The eyes have a great effect on the feelings of the heart. People often bear up pretty well, till they see something that calls up thoughts.

I do not perceive any ground for thinking, as Calvin does, that this “falling at our Lord’s feet” was an act of worship, a recognition of our Lord’s divinity. It is much more natural and reasonable to regard it as the mere expression of Mary’s state of feelings.

Trapp remarks that the words of Mary in this verse and of Martha in the former one show that we are all naturally disposed to make too much of Christ’s bodily presence.

33.—[*When Jesus therefore saw her, etc.*] This is one of those verses which bring out very strongly the real humanity of our Lord, and His power to sympathize with His people. As a real man, He was specially moved when He saw Mary and the Jews weeping. As God, He had no need to hear their plaintive language, and to see their tears, in order to learn that they were afflicted. He knew perfectly all their feelings. Yet as man He was like ourselves, peculiarly stirred by the *sight* of sorrow; for human nature is so constituted that grief is eminently contagious. If one in a company is deeply touched, and begins to weep, it is extremely likely that others will weep also. This power of sympathy our Lord evidently had in full possession. He *saw* weeping and He wept.

Let us carefully remark that our Lord never changes. He did not leave behind Him His human nature when He ascended up into heaven. At this moment, at God’s right hand, He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and can understand tears as well as ever. Our great High Priest is the very Friend that our souls need, able to save as God, able to feel as man. To talk of the Virgin Mary feeling for sinners more than Jesus is to say that which is ignorant and blasphemous. To teach that we can need any other priest, when Jesus is such a feeling Saviour, is to teach what is senseless and absurd.

[*He groaned in spirit.*] There is considerable difficulty about this expression. The word rendered “groaned,” is only used five times in the New Testament. In Matt. ix. 30, and Mark i. 43, it is “straitly charged.” In Mark xiv. 5, it is “murmured.” Here, and at the thirty-eighth verse above, it is “groaned.” Now what is precisely meant by the phrase?

(a) Some, as Ecolampadius, Brentius, Chemnitius, Flacius, and Ferus, maintain firmly that the notion of anger, indignation, and stern rebuke, is inseparable from the word “groaned.” They think that the latent idea is the deep and holy indignation with which our Lord was moved at the sight of the ravages which death had made, and the misery sin and the devil had brought into the world. They say it implies the stern and righteous wrath with which the deliverer of a country tyrannized over and trampled down by a rebel regards the desolation and destruction which the rebel has caused.

(b) Some add to this view the idea that “in spirit” means that our Lord groaned through the Holy Ghost, or by the Divine Spirit which dwelt in Him without measure, or by the power of His Godhead.

(c) Some, as Chrysostom, Theophylact, and Euthymius, think “groaned in spirit” means that Christ rebuked His own natural feelings by His Divine nature, or restrained His trouble, and in so doing was greatly disturbed.

(d) Some, as Gomarus and Lampe, consider that our Lord was moved to holy sorrow and indignation at the sight of the unbelief even of Martha and Mary, (expressed by their
immoderate grief, as if the case of Lazarus was hopeless,) as well as at the sight of the unbelief of the Jews.

(e) Some, as Bullinger, Gualter, Diodati, Grotius, Maldonatus, Jansenius, Rollock, and Hutcheson, consider that the phrase simply expresses the highest and deepest kind of inward agitation of mind, an agitation in which grief, compassion, and holy detestation of sin’s work in the world were all mingled and combined. This agitation, however, was entirely inward at present: it was not bodily, but spiritual; not in the flesh, but in the spirit. As Burgon says, the “spirit” here means Christ’s inward soul. I prefer this opinion to the former one, though I fully admit it has difficulties. But it is allowed by Schleusner and Parkhurst, and seems the view of Tyndall, Cranmer, and the Geneva version, as well as of our own.

[And was troubled.] This expression is to my mind even more difficult than the one which immediately precedes it. It would be literally translated, as our marginal reading has it, “He troubled himself.” In fact, Wycliffe translates it so. Now what can this mean?

Some maintain that in our Lord’s mysterious Person the human nature was so entirely subordinated to the Divine, that the human passions and affections never moved unless influenced and actuated by the Divine nature, and that here, to show His sympathy, He “troubled Himself.” Thus Rupertus remarks that “if He had not troubled Himself, no one else could have troubled Him.” I confess that I regard this view with a little suspicion. It seems to me to imply that our Lord’s human nature was not like ours, and that His humanity was like an instrument played upon by His divinity, but in itself dead and passive until its music was called out. To my mind there is something dangerous in this.

I prefer to think that our Lord as man had all the feelings, passions, and affections of a man, but all under such perfect control that they never exceeded as ours do, and were never even very demonstrative, excepting on great occasions. As Beza says, there was no “disorder” in His emotions. Here I think He saw an occasion for exhibiting a very deep degree of sorrow and sympathy, partly from the sorrowful sight He beheld, and partly from His love to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Therefore He greatly disturbed and “troubled Himself.”

It still admits of a question whether the phrase may not be simply a Hebraism for “He was troubled.” (Compare 1 Sam. xxx. 6, and 2 Sam. xii. 18.) Hammond says it is a Hebrew idiom.

When all has been said, we must not forget that the phrase touches a very delicate and mysterious subject: that subject is the precise nature of the union of two natures in our Lord’s Person. That He was at the same time perfect God and perfect Man is an article of the Christian faith; but how far the Divine nature acted on the human, and to what extent it checked and influenced the action of human passions and feelings, are very deep points, which we have no line completely to fathom. After all, not the least part of our difficulty is that we can form no clear and adequate conception of a human nature entirely without sin.

One thing, at any rate, is abundantly clear from this passage: there is nothing wrong or wicked in being greatly moved by the sight of sorrow, so long as we keep our feelings under control. To be always cold, unfeeling, and unsympathizing may appear to some very dignified and philosophical. But though it may suit a Stoic, it is not consistent with the character of a Christian. Sympathy is not sinful, but Christ-like.

Theophylact observes that Christ “teaches us by His own example the due measure of joy and grief. The absence altogether of sympathy and sorrow is brutal: the excess of them is womanly.”

Melanchthon observes that none of Christ’s miracles seem to have been done without
some great mental emotion. (Luke viii. 46.) He supposes that here at this verse, there was a
great conflict with Satan in our Lord’s mind, and that He wrestled in prayer for the raising
of Lazarus, and then thanked God afterwards that the prayer was heard. Calvin takes much
the same view.

Ecolampadius observes that we must not think Christ had a human body only, and not
a human soul. He had a soul like our own in all things, sin only excepted, and capable of
all our feelings and emotions.

Piscator and Trapp compare the trouble of spirit which our Lord went through, to the
disturbance and agitation of perfectly clear water in a perfectly clear glass vessel. However
great the agitation, the water remains clear.

Musculus reverently remarks that after all there is something about this “groaning in
spirit and troubling Himself,” which cannot be fully explained.

34.—[And said, Where have ye laid him?] We cannot suppose that our Lord, who knew all
things, even to the moment of Lazarus’ death could really need to be informed where Laz-
arus was buried. He asks what He does here partly as a kind friend to show His deep symp-
athy and interest in the grave of His friend, and partly to give further proof that there was
no collusion in the matter of Lazarus’ burial, and that He had nothing to do with the choice
of his tomb, in order to concert an imposture about raising him. In short, those who heard
Him publicly ask this question would see that this was no prearranged and preconceived
miracle.

Quesnel remarks: “Christ does not ask out of ignorance, any more than God did when
he said, Adam, where art thou?”

[They said...Lord, come and see.] Who they were that said this, we do not exactly
know. It was probably the common saying of all the party of mourners who stood around
while Jesus talked with Mary. They did not know why our Lord wished to see the grave.
They may possibly have supposed that He wished to accompany Mary and Martha, and to
weep at the grave. At any rate the question and answer secured a large attendance of com-
panions, as the disciples and our Lord went to the place where Lazarus was buried.

35.—[Jesus wept.] This wonderful little verse has given rise to an enormous amount of
comment. The difficulty is to select thoughts, and not to overload the subject.

The Greek word rendered “wept” is not the same as that used for “weeping” in the thir-
ty-third verse, but totally different. There the weeping is a weeping accompanied by
demonstrative lamentation. Here the word would be more literally and accurately rendered
“shed tears.” In fact it is the only place in the New Testament where this word for “weep”
is used.

There are three occasions where our Lord is recorded to have wept, in the Gospels:
onece when he beheld the city, (Luke xix. 41,) once in the garden of Gethsemane, (Matt.
xxvi. 39, and Heb. vi. 7,) and here. We never read of His laughing, and only once of His
rejoicing. (Luke x. 21.)

The reasons assigned by commentators why our Lord wept here, before He raised Laz-
arus, are various and curious.

(a) Some think that he wept to see the ravages made by death and sin.

(b) Some, as Hilary, think that He wept to think of the unbelief of the Jews.

(c) Some think that He wept to see how weak and feeble was the faith of Mary and
Martha.

(d) Some, as Jerome and Ferus, think that He wept at the thought of the sorrow Lazarus
would go through by returning to a sinful world.
(e) Some think that He wept out of sympathy with the affliction of His friends at Beth-
any, in order to give an eternal proof to His Church that He can feel with us and for us.
I believe this last opinion is the true one.

We learn the great practical lesson, from this verse, that there is nothing unworthy of a
Christian in tears. There is nothing unmanly, dishonourable, unwise, or feeble, in being
full of sympathy with the afflicted, and ready to weep with them that weep. Indeed, it is
curious to gather up the many instances we have in Scripture of great men weeping.

We may draw great comfort from the thought that the Saviour in whom we are bid to
trust is one who can weep, and is as able to feel as He is able to save.

We may learn the reality of our Lord’s humanity very strongly from this little verse. He
was one who could hunger, thirst, sleep, eat, drink, speak, walk, groan, be wearied, won-
der, feel indignant, rejoice, like any of ourselves, and yet without sin; and, above all, He
could weep. I read that there is “joy in the presence of the angels of God.” (Luke xv.,) but I
never read of angels weeping. Tears are peculiar to flesh and blood.

Chrysostom remarks that “John, who enters into higher statements about our Lord’s
nature than any of the evangelists, also descends lower than any in describing his bodily
affections.”

36.—[Then said...Jews...Behold...loved him.] This sentence is the expression partly of sur-
prise, which comes out in the word “behold;” and partly of admiration,—what a loving and
tenderhearted Teacher this is! It gives the idea that those who said this were the few un-
prejudiced Jews who had come to Bethany to comfort Mary and Martha, and afterward
believed when they saw Lazarus raised.

Let us observe that of all graces, love is the one which most arrests the attention and in-
fluences the opinion of the world.

37.—[And some of them said, etc.] This sentence sounds to me like the language of enemies
determined to believe nothing good of our Lord, and prepared to pick a hole or find a fault
if possible, in anything that He did. Does not a sarcastic sneer ring throughout it? “Could
not this Man, if He really did open the eyes of that blind person at Jerusalem last autumn,
have prevented this friend of His from dying? If He really is the Messiah and the Christ,
and really does work such wonderful works, why has He not prevented all this sorrow? If
He really loved Lazarus and his sisters, why did He not prove His love by keeping him
back from the grave? Is it not plain that He is not Almighty? He cannot do everything. He
could open the eyes of a blind man, but He could not prevent death carrying off His friend.
If He was able to prevent Lazarus dying, why did He not do it? If He was not able, it is
clear there are some things He cannot do.”

We should note that “the blind” is a word in the singular number. It is evidently the
blind man at Jerusalem whose case is referred to.

Let us note that nothing will convince, or satisfy, or silence some wicked men. Even
when Christ is before them, they are cavilling, and doubting, and finding fault. What right
have Christ’s ministers to be surprised if they meet with the same treatment?

Musculus remarks on the Satanic malice which this sentence displays. It is the old
sceptical spirit of cavilling and questioning. Unbelief is always saying why? and why? and
why? “If this Man was such a friend of Lazarus, and loved him so much, why did He let
him die?”