

TONY EVANS

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GOD,  
DO YOU  
REALLY  
CARE?

FINDING STRENGTH WHEN  
HE SEEMS DISTANT



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DO YOU  
REALLY  
CARE?

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TONY EVANS

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*God, Do You Really Care...*

## INTRODUCTION

**O**n Monday, August 29, 2005, a hurricane named Katrina smashed and screamed her way into national history.

An extremely powerful category 4 storm, she barreled out of the Gulf of Mexico and tore her way through the Gulf Coast, laying waste to coastal cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, and virtually destroying the great historical city of New Orleans.

In her wake, the monster hurricane left mind-numbing destruction, death, and suffering. Over 1,100 people lost their lives, and several hundred thousand lost their homes—and everything else that had been a part of their lives before the storm.

It has been called the worst natural disaster in our nation's history.

In addition to the pictures of death and destruction, news reports in the days and weeks following this horrific event showed a shocked world heartrending pictures of human pain and deprivation. People grieving over the loss of loved ones, people walking around in a confused stupor because they had nowhere to go, and people wondering what their futures held—these were just a few of the unforgettable images we saw on our television screens. On more than one occasion, victims and veteran journalists alike broke down in front of the camera over the horror of what was happening.

Most viewers responded to the storm with sadness and sympathy. It was difficult not to be moved, even to the point of tears, at the plight of the men, women, and children who survived Katrina. We knew their suffering wouldn't end overnight, or even in a few weeks or months. We knew that the lives of many people caught up in the storm's path of devastation would never be the same.

As a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I'm often asked after events like this whether God really cares. Does He care when people are sick, injured, and dying? Does He care when they grieve over death—the death of loved ones, the death of their own goals and dreams? Does God concern Himself when people, even people who didn't have much to begin with, lose everything? Is He moved when men and women are confused and lost, picking through the rubble and devastation of their lives?

Why would God allow such suffering? Could He really be the loving heavenly Father He's been made out to be? Doesn't He seem

more like a passive bystander to our pain sometimes? Truth be told, it can sometimes look—within human reasoning anyway—as though God doesn't really care all that much that people are suffering.

I can easily understand thoughts like these boiling to the surface in the hearts of those who don't know God, and who are outside the faith. But I also hear variations of these same questions from the mouths of Bible-believing Christians. In fact, I would go so far as to say that any believer—even the most devoted—who tells you that he or she has never looked at life and its sorrows and wondered whether God cared isn't being truthful.

Yes, we know the Bible says that God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son so that we could have eternal life. We know that. But there are times, perhaps, when we question whether He's really all that interested in our pain, suffering, and confusion *in the here and now*.

Of course none of this is new. As we will see, men and women have questioned God since the beginning of time, even asking Him point blank if He was even concerned about what was happening to them:

Arouse Yourself, why do You sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not reject us forever.

Why do You hide Your face

And forget our affliction and our oppression?

For our soul has sunk down into the dust;  
Our body cleaves to the earth.

P S A L M 44 : 23 - 25

It's not known for sure who wrote this psalm or when, but a few things appear certain: First, the psalmist and his people were enduring some heartbreaking and difficult times, times when they suffered under the affliction and oppression of their enemies. Second, the psalmist himself wondered if God was paying attention to His people's plight.

Hurricane Katrina was far from the first time people have had to endure disaster, hardship, and sorrow, and you can be sure it won't be the last. We live in a fallen world where wars, storms, earthquakes, tsunamis, and other calamities will always be a part of the human landscape—at least until the promised return of Jesus.

Each of us at different points in our lives will find ourselves in a position where we'll wonder if God cares personally about our situation. Sickness, fear, confusion, death, doubt, disappointment—all are common to men and women everywhere. In the midst of these events, we all need the answer to one key question: Does God care when we hurt? I've written this book to answer you unequivocally: *Yes, He cares!*

I want to show you that God is not only aware when we're caught up in the difficulties of life, but that He also has a plan to meet us and speak to us in those times of trial, strengthening us and

teaching us all along the way. But I also want to show you that although He cares, God doesn't always resolve our difficulties in the way we expect Him to.

He *will* answer the heart-cries of His loved ones. But He will do it in His own time and His own way for His own good purposes.

I've based this book on a passage of Scripture that is very near and dear to me. John 11 tells the story of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus from the dead, as well as the events leading up to and following that event. You may be quite familiar with the fact that Jesus raised Lazarus, but in this book I want to take a closer look at these events and what they tell us about how much God cares, and how He may choose to intervene during seasons of difficulty in this life.

We will walk through this amazing story several times—rewinding the tape here and there to focus on some fascinating aspects you might not have considered before. So read on, and you will find your answer to the question, *God, do you really care...?*

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# 1

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## *God, Do You Really Care...* **WHEN I'M SICK?**

**O**ver the course of my ministry, I've spent time with hundreds of believers, whose bodies have been afflicted by illness and injury. In the wake of those physical setbacks and seasons of pain, I often hear questions like these:

- *If God really loves me, why is He allowing me to suffer this way?*
- *Is God paying attention? What is He going to do for me now that I'm sick?*
- *Where is God when I'm sick and need Him most?*
- *Why doesn't God just step in and heal me?*

When we or a loved one is sick, it's easy to question whether God cares because, frankly, it's at those times when it seems He doesn't. In our human thinking, if He was truly concerned about us, He wouldn't allow us to go on suffering that way.

So does God care when we are sick? Absolutely! In fact, I'd say that when we are suffering—be it from physical illness or any other painful situation—He expresses His tender care for us more than ever.

The Bible is filled with declarations of God's loving, caring heart for those who suffer. But I want to focus our attention on an account in which Jesus demonstrates over and over just how much He cares for those He loves. It's the account of the sickness and physical death of a man named Lazarus—and the stunning miracle Jesus performed on his behalf and on the behalf of his sisters, Mary and Martha.

### JESUS LOVES ME, YET...

The story of Lazarus begins in the New Testament book of John, chapter 11.

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with

her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.”

V V. 1 – 3

John, you’ll notice, goes out of his way to tell us that Jesus loved Lazarus. This wasn’t just brotherly love for a fellow human being, but a personal, heartfelt love. Jesus loved Lazarus with the love of God, the one and only perfect love—what the Bible calls *agape* love.

Yet Lazarus wasn’t just sick; he was gravely ill. In the original language of John’s Gospel, the word *sick* refers to a sickness leading to death. In other words, Lazarus was dying.

This demonstrates something we all need to keep in mind: It is possible for Jesus to love us and for us to love Him in return and still get sick—even deathly sick. Not only that, there are times when God allows us to become sick for specific purposes in His great (and often incomprehensible) plan.

We live in a time when some believe that those who love Jesus should never be sick, and that if they do experience illness their faith is enough to repel any affliction that befalls them. It’s a nice thought, but that is not a sound reading of God’s Word. The Bible gives us several examples of people God loved going through problems of all kinds— including persecution, injury, *and* physical illness.

In the case of Lazarus, someone Jesus loved had fallen deathly

ill. And it was a situation that was going to get a lot worse before it got better.

## FROM BAD TO WORSE

Faced with a problem beyond their ability to fix, Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus. This is a simple but beautiful example of what prayer really is: taking our problems or situations to the Father through Jesus Christ, and humbly asking Him to provide the remedy we could never provide.

Obviously, Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come to Bethany right away and heal their brother. To them, it was a simple formula of Jesus' love and their request equaling healing for Lazarus.

But it didn't happen that way.

Jesus did not drop everything He was doing and go to Lazarus immediately, but stayed two more days where He was—in Perea. The Gospels call Perea “the land beyond the Jordan.” It was about forty miles from Bethany, which was about two miles east of Jerusalem. Instead, of coming immediately, Jesus sent these words of assurance: “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it” (John 11:4).

Meanwhile, Lazarus didn't get well. In fact, his condition only worsened. And Jesus wouldn't show up in Bethany until it was—in

Mary and Martha's minds anyway—too late. By the time He would arrive, Lazarus would have been dead and buried.

In our human thinking, that doesn't sound very much like a Savior who cared when His close friend became sick, does it? Jesus had already proven over and over that He had the supernatural ability to do something about Lazarus's sickness.

So...He had the ability. He loved Lazarus. He loved Mary and Martha. The sisters had exercised simple faith in asking Him to come. But He did nothing, and their beloved brother was slipping away.

When we are faced with sickness, we tend to believe—probably as Mary and Martha did—that if God truly cared He would step in and do something about it. But it doesn't always happen that way. In fact, our situation may stay the same—or even become worse.

Certainly God has the ability to heal us in an instant, but just as certainly there are many times when He doesn't. *But that doesn't mean He doesn't care*, and Jesus' words for Mary and Martha's messengers demonstrate that fact.

We live in a fallen world corrupted by sin—where sickness, physical death, and heartbreak are part of our lives. But as believers, we never have to view our illness as a “waste of time” or a “worthless experience.” In fact, we can be sure that God has allowed our illness for His eternal and spiritual purposes. In light of that biblical truth, we should never ask, “Why me?” in our suffering, but instead, “For what purpose has God allowed this?”

Jesus had already told Mary and Martha that Lazarus's sickness was "for the glory of God." But God uses our physical sicknesses for another eternal purpose, and it's for correction and personal growth in our lives.

## DISCIPLINARY SICKNESS

This is so incredibly difficult for us. I believe that one of the biggest weaknesses in the church today is our inability to make spiritual connections between what we're going through physically and what God wants to teach us and do in us through those things.

Yes, our God is a God of love. John tells us that *God is love*.

But He is also a Father who, in His love, corrects His children.

The Bible is very clear that there are times when God uses physical sickness in the lives of His children as a means of discipline or correction. The apostle Paul gives us an example in his first letter to the Corinthian church:

For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:29-32

The Corinthian church had a simple but very serious issue: They were taking communion, the meal commemorating the sacrificial death of Christ, without first addressing personal sin. Because of that, God's hand of discipline was upon them, and many of them suffered physically.

God cares when we are physically sick, but He is even more concerned that our lives be free of sin.

Those of us who are parents know that no matter how much we love our children, there are times when it's necessary for us to go to the "rod of correction." The very same is true of our heavenly Father. He has identified Himself as the God who loves tenderly and compassionately, and His love compels Him to correct us, sometimes using difficulties in our lives, including physical illness.

## SICKNESS FOR GOD'S GLORY

While God sometimes allows illness to inflict our bodies in order to correct us, He also has another purpose in mind: to bring Himself glory.

We see an example of that in John's Gospel, just a few chapters before the story of Lazarus. Jesus and the disciples had encountered a man born blind begging near the Temple in Jerusalem. The disciples, who obviously didn't understand that God often had a higher

purpose for people's illnesses and disabilities, asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" (John 9:2).

Jesus didn't correct the disciples' notion that sin could bring this kind of calamity into a person's life, but instead told them that this man's blindness was part of God's plan to focus the world's attention on the Father and the Son. This, He told them, had nothing to do with anyone's sin, but had happened so that the power of God could be put on display that day.

And that's just what happened! It wasn't long after Jesus healed this blind beggar that news of this miraculous healing began to spread throughout Jerusalem. Some greeted this miracle healing with skepticism, while others were sure this was the same man they had for years seen begging near the Temple.

When the former blind man was brought before the Jewish religious leadership and grilled about what had happened, all he could tell them was, "The man who is called Jesus made clay, and anointed my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash'; so I went away and washed, and I received sight" (John 9:11).

This beggar's blindness had nothing to do with sin and everything to do with God glorifying Himself before an unbelieving world. The very same is true of Lazarus.

So we find ourselves ill...with some physical affliction in our body. Did God allow it as a correction in our lives to help us grow, or is it solely to bring glory to His name? That's an important ques-

tion. When we don't know which it is, it's difficult for us to pray and act rightly toward our situation—just as a doctor would find it difficult to prescribe a right treatment for a physical problem without a careful diagnosis.

But how can we know the difference?

We have to ask Him.

It's simply a matter of asking God for the answer, then waiting for a personal word from Him.

### A PERSONAL WORD

Jesus didn't give Mary and Martha the immediate solution they had asked in faith to receive. But He didn't remain silent about it either. He didn't leave His friends “twisting in the wind.”

Jesus demonstrated how much He cared about Mary and Martha—as well as their sick brother—when He gave them something God wants to give each of us today: a personal word.

When Jesus told these ladies, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it,” He wasn't talking about sickness in general. Jesus started out His promise to Mary and Martha with the phrase “*This* sickness,” meaning that He was speaking specifically to *them* and to *their* situation.

The same is true for us today.

When you are sick and hurting, it's vitally important to hear what God has to say to you in the midst of your situation. In other words, you need to hear a personal word from God. While many Christians today hear the Word *of* God, I wonder how many really hear a word *from* God. By that I mean that while they may know the Bible well and are fully aware of God's promises, they have never personalized it, never taken the time to read and study it, and then ask God, "What are you saying to *me personally* through Your Word?"

It has been said that the Bible is God's love letter to a fallen world. But it's much more than that. It's His love letter to each and every one of us personally and individually. All we need to do is make it *our* personal message from Him.

Every Sunday, I stand up in front of our church and deliver a sermon based on the Word of God. You might come to visit us someday. (I hope you do. You would be welcome.) If you walked through the doors of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas, Texas, on most any given Sunday, you would hear my sermon to the whole congregation. But what if you and I were to go out to coffee, and across that little table, I gave you the essence of my message face-to-face?

That's a different dynamic, isn't it? Then it would become a personal message to you and you alone.

That is very much how God speaks to us personally through His Word. When we simply read it and understand it, it is still the

Word of God to us; but when you read it as a personal God-to-you message (and it is), then you receive a personalized word from Him.

You need to have a passion to hear, know, and understand the written Word of God because that is how you can hear a word *from* God. If you don't have the Word of God written in your mind and heart, you're hindered from hearing what He wants to say to you in your suffering. But when you know the Word of God, you can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit more clearly—at the very time when you so desperately long for answers.

Many of us in our personal Bible studies take fluorescent yellow pens and highlight particular verses or passages of Scripture so that they will “jump out at us” later on. But the Holy Spirit goes much further than that, actually taking a verse or passage we read and making it jump off the page and into our minds and hearts.

This is why it's so important for us to go to the Scriptures regularly—and especially when we need more than ever to hear from God. When we make it our habit to consistently and regularly devote ourselves to the reading and studying of the Bible, we will have more confidence that we're truly hearing God's personal word to us.

But what about those times when we're so sick or weak or in despair that we have difficulty even reaching out to God and asking for a personal word? Then we can receive yet another great gift of our God: the overflow and blessing of God's love and communication to brothers and sisters who daily walk with Him.

## CARING FOR US THROUGH OTHERS

Even though Lazarus was sick to the point of physical death, he wasn't alone in his illness. On the contrary, he faced his sickness within the context of a caring earthly family and a caring spiritual family—an earthly family because his sisters were with him and a spiritual family because they loved Jesus.

Lazarus didn't need to send for his Friend and Lord in his illness; Mary and Martha took care of that. And the message they sent to Jesus in Perea was based on two things: their love for their brother...and their belief that Jesus loved them and could do something about it.

How do we know these things about Mary and Martha?

The answer to that is found in John 11:2, which tells us something about Mary that at first might escape our attention. She is specifically described as the one who “anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair.”

John wrote his Gospel several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, and when he tells us that Mary was the one who had anointed Jesus with oil, he was referring to an incident recorded one chapter later, just days before Jesus would finally enter into Jerusalem for the final time.

In the culture of that time and place, anointing someone's feet was an outward expression of adoration, even worship. When Mary anointed Jesus' feet, she was expressing her love and adoration, an

act He not only allowed but encouraged (see John 12:7–8). This shows us something about Mary's relationship with Jesus: She had a special connection with Him, and she didn't care what others thought as she openly worshiped Him.

When we are sick or hurting and can't make a "prayer connection" with God, He uses others to demonstrate how much He cares for us. It is during those times that we need to be close to somebody who knows how to get close to Jesus, someone who regularly sits at His feet and worships Him.

That is what the apostle James was referring to when he wrote:

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

JAMES 5:14–15

Why should we call the elders to pray for us? Because when we are sick, it may be difficult if not impossible for us to pray for ourselves. Beyond that fact, if sin is the root cause of our sickness, we may be blinded from even seeing it. In that case, it is good for us to be able to call on those who, like Mary, are in close fellowship with God, those who sit at His feet and know what to ask Him for.

When we are in sick or in need, God wants to give us a personal

word. But as we study God's *written* Word and seek His *personal* word to us in our situations, we need to understand that He may not tell us everything we want to know in advance.

### WHEN GOD DOESN'T TELL US EVERYTHING

The Lord's personal word to Mary and Martha was a message of great comfort and assurance. After all, this was Jesus talking. Mary and Martha both knew Him well and knew all about His teaching and His miracles. If anyone's words concerning their brother could be trusted, they were His.

But if we look at the timing of Jesus receiving word of Lazarus's illness, combined with the timing of His departure from Perea to Bethany (a good two-days' journey), it appears almost certain that Lazarus was already dead by the time the two sisters received His word. Not only that, it's entirely possible that Lazarus was dead by the time Jesus received word of the illness.

I can't help but wonder at the confusion Mary and Martha felt when they received Jesus' personal word that "this sickness is not unto death." Those words must have rung just a little bit hollow! I can just imagine them hearing that message, then looking at their brother's dead body and wondering if Jesus knew what He was talking about...or if He really cared about their predicament.

The fact is, while Mary and Martha had a personal word from Jesus, they did not have access to all the plans in His heart. No human being has that. The sisters couldn't know the particulars of how Jesus was going to work in their brother's situation. He didn't tell them that He knew about the death in advance. He didn't tell them that their brother's physical death would only be temporary. He didn't tell them He would arrive on the scene only after Lazarus's body had begun to decay in the tomb. And He didn't tell them His plan to personally raise their brother from the dead.

That's how hearing a personal word from God sometimes works, even today. As we pray for a word from God or for an outright healing or deliverance, we need to understand that there will be times when God's response leaves lots of blanks on the page. The understanding He gives us may be "part one" of ten parts...or a hundred parts. In other words, He may want us to receive enlightenment in a step-by-step or progressive way.

That's how God has always revealed Himself throughout history. The Bible wasn't written instantaneously, but progressively, starting with the basics of creation and the fall of humankind, moving through the process of redemption, and ending with the "end times" story found in the book of Revelation. We have the complete Bible available to us now, but it took more than fifteen centuries and forty-odd different writers to complete this one blessed Book.

God didn't reveal Himself all at once for the same reasons He so often doesn't reveal to us every aspect of how He handles our physical sicknesses or other difficulties.

First of all, God in His infinite wisdom knows that we wouldn't be able to handle knowing everything He had planned for us all at once. We might find ourselves tempted to move out ahead of Him—to accomplish by ourselves what He has planned to do for us.

Second, if He revealed everything to us up front, that would keep us from learning to trust Him and to have absolute faith that He is in control.

I believe that is partly why Jesus didn't fill in the blanks when it came to what He planned to do about Lazarus's sickness. Had He told Mary and Martha from the beginning that Lazarus would die, be buried, and then be raised from the dead, it is likely that they wouldn't have learned the lessons about faith that you'll read about as you continue on in this book.

Jesus wanted these two, dear, grieving women to learn to trust Him fully and completely. They already loved Him. He knew that. But they also needed to trust in His ability to control everything that happened to their little family.

When God gives us a personal word in our suffering, we don't *need* all the details up front. It's enough to know that the great Creator of the universe cares enough to speak to us *individually*.

BUT WHY JUST A WORD?

Jesus had sent Mary and Martha a personal word, and it was a personal word designed to expand and strengthen their faith and trust in Him. But that leaves us with some important questions: Why didn't Jesus just go to Bethany immediately and do for Mary and Martha what they had requested—and expected?

When Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, a bitterly disappointed and grieving Martha greeted Him at the outskirts of town and cried, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21). In Martha's mind—and in the mind of her sister, who a short time later said the very same thing—it was too late for Jesus to do anything about her brother's sickness.

But within the realm of the heavenly Father's perfect plan, Jesus arrived right on time—not one moment too early, not one moment too late.

You see, there was more to be done in this story than a simple healing or resurrection. Jesus wanted to teach some people He loved very dearly what it meant to trust and obey Him, even in the worst of situations. And for Him to have come to Bethany before He did would have thwarted that plan.

We must remember that although Jesus loves each of us more deeply than we can fully comprehend and cares deeply when we are sick or hurting, everything He does and says is governed by a higher principle: doing what the Father calls Him to do when He

calls Him to do it and in the manner He tells Him to do it.

Jesus was (and is) committed to the will of His Father, and that meant that His every decision was based on the Father's purposes and timetable for fulfilling that will. For example, He knew from the very beginning that His ultimate mission on earth was to give Himself over to the hands of those who wanted Him gone and to die a horrible death on the Cross. But He also knew that the Father had His own perfect timetable for that to happen. That is why the Gospels tell us repeatedly that although the Jewish religious authorities wanted to have Him killed—and appeared to have had chances to do just that—His time had not yet come. That event would only happen when the Father gave the green light.

When we or one of our loved ones is sick and hurting, we want God to move, and we want Him to move *right now*. It's quite natural to pray that way, and I don't think it's a bad thing to do so. But it's important that when we pray for God to move for us that we also pray like Job, who endured more than his share of suffering and who said, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15). Jesus Himself, at His very moment of truth prayed, "Not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36).

Jesus had told the anxious sisters that their brother's sickness would not end in death. While He didn't fill them in on the specifics of His plan, and didn't arrive right away like they wanted Him to, He let them know that He was in control and knew how the situation was going to end.

When we or a loved one is going through tough times of illness or other difficulties, we need to keep our eyes on two things: He knows what we're going through, and He knows how our situations will end...for our good and for His glory.

This Lazarus situation wasn't over—not by a long shot. Jesus had promised Mary and Martha that their brother's sickness would not end in death, and it was a promise He was on His way to keeping in a spectacular, miraculous way.



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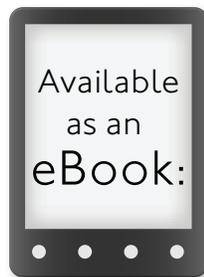
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