

“Lazarus Has Died”

The Thirty Fifth in a series on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 11:1-16; 1 Kings 17:17-24

Even Jesus could not keep his friend Lazarus from dying—or so it seemed. All of Jesus’ disciples eventually died, as have all Christians since the time of Jesus down to the present day (including Lazarus, a second time). This raises the question as to whether or not the curse has the final word and whether death ultimately wins in the end. At times it sure looks that way. If Jesus truly is the resurrection and the life, as he claims, then he must decisively defeat death and the grave. When Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, we see the unmistakable proof that death does not win in the end. Although his body has been in the tomb four days, when Jesus steps up to Lazarus’ tomb and commands “Lazarus, come out!” (and the dead man does) we get a brief glimpse of what will happen on the last day, when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. The story of Lazarus is not only a critical turning point in the Gospel of John, this is proof that Jesus is who he claims to be, and the events surrounding the raising of Lazarus set the stage for Jesus’ own death and resurrection, soon to come.

We return to our series on the Gospel of John, and we come to the next section of John’s Gospel—the literary bridge between Jesus’ messianic mission to Israel, and the events which occurred during the Passover and Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem. This literary bridge includes the materials in John 11 (the account of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead) and chapter 12 (Mary anointing Jesus at Bethany, before Jesus speaks of the necessity of his being “lifted up”—a reference to his suffering upon the cross). This two-chapter bridge prepares the way for the extended Upper Room Discourse in chapters 13-17, in which Jesus instructs his disciples about his soon-coming death, resurrection, and ascension, and when he promises to send the blessed comforter, the Holy Spirit.

Then, in chapters 18-20, we come to John’s Passion narrative, in which we read of Jesus’ death for our sins, and his bodily resurrection from the dead. Unlike the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the first half of John’s Gospel is devoted to his messianic mission, while the entire second half is devoted to the Passover and the final week of our Lord’s earthly ministry. We are entering that last half of John’s account of the word made flesh, and we will spend much of our time covering events which occurred during the last week of Jesus’ messianic mission, shortly before his death as the true Passover Lamb and his resurrection from the dead—the guarantee of our final victory over death.

Every preacher faces the same dilemma when preaching through John’s Gospel. Throughout this gospel, there are long teaching discourses, like the 44 verses in John 11 dealing with the resurrection of Lazarus. These discourses are best covered in one sitting because one event is being recounted. Yet, these discourses (like that the “Bread of Life” discourse of John 6, and the “Good Shepherd” discourse of John 10) are so rich in content, that if we are to do John justice, we would spend about two hours covering chapter 11. Given the shortness of the human attention span, the rhetorical skills of your preacher, the weakness of the human gluteus maximus, and the nature of our pews, unfortunately, we must divide John 11 into a number of sub-sections which we will treat over a four week period. You will help me out, and you will get far more out of these next few sermons on John 11, if you read through this entire chapter several times in the coming weeks so as not to lose the forest for the trees.

This week, we will meet Lazarus, described by John as a “friend of Jesus,” and we will speak of his

illness and death. Earlier in John's Gospel (chapter five), Jesus spoke of how the Father had given him authority to raise the dead. *"For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."* Jesus said he give life to the dead, now what will happen when someone whom Jesus knows personally dies?

As we have seen from our time this gospel, Jesus performed a number of miraculous signs—six key signs in John so far (although John will go on to say that Jesus performed so many miracles that they cannot all be recorded). All of which proves that Jesus is the Son of Man, Israel's long-expected Messiah, and the eternal Son of God. So when someone dies, whom Jesus knows well and loves dearly, then we would expect Jesus to immediately come to his friend's aid and prevent this horrible thing from happening. Instead, Jesus waits two days, and then tells his disciples that he has a much bigger purpose in mind when responding to his friend's death.

Lord willing, next time we will consider Jesus' statement that he is the resurrection and the life, before looking at Jesus' reaction to the sight of Lazarus' tomb—Jesus wept (actually he raged against death), before we take up the account of Jesus actually raising Lazarus from the dead. Then, in the final verses of the chapter, we will deal with the outcome of this seventh and most dramatic miraculous sign in John's Gospel. The Jews intensify their plot to kill Jesus—one of the saddest and indeed shocking events in redemptive history—a plot which culminates in the events surrounding our Lord's death and resurrection. So, there is much here for us in John 11, especially in light of the fact that so many in our congregation recently have buried those whom they love. In John's account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, we come to the very center of Jesus' claims and the truth of the gospel. If Jesus is who he says he is, then at some point his disciples must witness the power of God and the grace of Jesus Christ toward those of us who have sinned against God, and come under the curse of death. There is also much to learn about grief and grieving from how Jesus approached the death of his own dear friend.

Recall that when we left off last time (the end of Chapter 10), John recounts that the Jews were attempting to arrest Jesus. To avoid this, Jesus went back across the Jordan River, not because he was afraid of them, but because his hour had not yet come. When chapter 11 opens, Jesus is still in this area, before he eventually sets out for Bethany, a small village a mere two miles to the east of Jerusalem. This change in location—from the wilderness east of the Jordan to Bethany—indicates that Jesus' messianic mission (as described in the preceding chapters) is about to come to its conclusion. In verse 1 of chapter 11, John sets the stage by telling us, *"now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.* There are three siblings from Bethany whom Jesus regards as close friends, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, all of whom figure prominently in what follows—the preparation for Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem and the celebration of the Passover, just days away.

Some scholars have argued that whenever someone is actually named in the gospels (unlike the nameless people whom Jesus healed) it is because these people were well-known in the apostolic church. Many in the churches knew these people, and probably heard them tell firsthand their stories of what Jesus had done for them.¹ In this case, John does not assume that his reader knows who Mary is, because he tells

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 176.

us in verse 2, “*it was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.*” Mary will not anoint Jesus’ feet until the next chapter, so John introduces her here in such a way that the reader knows which Mary John is talking about—not the virgin Mary, not Mary Magdelene, but Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus.

When a messenger arrives at the place where Jesus was preaching, bringing news from Mary and Martha of Bethany, the news is not good. “*So the sisters sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’*” Lazarus was sick with some unknown but apparently life-threatening illness. It is important to note that even though this family knew Jesus quite well (and it is obvious that he is fond of them too), they address Jesus by the honorific title “Lord.” They do so because Jesus is their master and they are his followers. But this raises a question—at least in my mind. What does it mean to be Jesus’ friend in this context? Did Lazarus and Jesus work together on Lazarus’ work cart? Did Jesus help Lazarus fix-up his house? Did Jesus accompany Lazarus to the local chariot races? We really do not know how such a deep friendship worked, but this was probably not an informal friendship for which Americans are famous.

Jesus was fully human, so he truly enjoyed human relationships—including his friendship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The best way to understand such a friendship is that Jesus was likely a guest in this family’s home—perhaps frequently. This contact occurred often enough that Jesus knew their family well, and in turn, they came to know Jesus quite well—and yet Jesus was still their Lord, someone whom they followed and despite the friendship (as deep and genuine as it was) they considered themselves to be his disciples, not his “buddies.” There was some risk in this friendship, since Jesus was the target of plotting by the Sanhedrin and anyone who lent him material support (food and shelter) was also likely subject to arrest. Jesus loved this family, but his response to this news will take the disciples, and the two sisters by surprise—Lazarus too.

As we learn in verse 4, “*but when Jesus heard it he said, ‘This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.’*” No doubt, Mary and Martha (and the disciples) understand Jesus to be saying that Lazarus is not going to die, when all Jesus says is that his illness will not *end* in death. More importantly, Jesus says, whatever is about to happen will come to pass so that God’s glory may be revealed—meaning that what happens to Lazarus will bring God glory. In what follows, we witness Jesus confirm that he is who he says he is (the Son of God who gives life to the dead), that he can turn whatever evils may befall us into good, and that ultimately God is glorified in and through our dire and difficult circumstances. In one sense, the story of Jesus raising Lazarus is the historical outworking of Paul’s well-known words found in Romans 8:28. “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*”

Having heard only that Lazarus’ illness will not end in death, what Jesus does next comes as a surprise to the disciples, because Jesus seems coldly indifferent to the plight of Lazarus and his sisters. As we read in verses 5-6 “*now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*” John makes sure that his readers know that Jesus loved these people and they loved him—despite all appearances to the contrary.

Even though Jesus seems indifferent to Lazarus’ situation it is not because Jesus does not care about these people enough to interrupt his busy schedule. Rather, Jesus will do what reveals the glory of God, and that which brings glory to the Son. Jesus will finish his mission in God’s own time, and in a way which is obedient to his Father. This is a difficult thing for us to learn and accept—granted. But accept it we must. God’s purposes, his means, and his ends, are not ours. God’s timing is often not our timing, and the outcome of his will is often not what we desire. And it is this will we pray be done on earth.

But in no sense does this mean that God does not love us, or care for us. On the contrary, God is working all things for good, even when we don't see it, or when, because of our sinful pride, we will not accept it. We know this to be true because of three things we see in this passage. First, Jesus loves these people. He will do what is best for them—even if they do not see it at first. Second, Jesus will tell Mary, Martha, and the disciples that in the death of their brother and friend, God will be glorified. Third, Jesus will indeed ensure that the outcome is the very thing he promised—this will not end in death.

Jesus has said he will stay two more days east of the Jordan—even though Lazarus is ill in Bethany, more than a full day's walk away. Suddenly there is what appears to be a change in plans, and it catches the disciples completely off-guard. *“Then after this he said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’ The disciples said to him, ‘Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?’”* The Jews had tried to kill him when he was last in Jerusalem (not long before), so Jesus left the city for the safety of the wilderness. Now, when he gets word that Lazarus is very ill and his family needs Jesus to come before it is too late, Jesus states that he will remain in the wilderness for two more days. Then, unexpectedly, Jesus announces that it is time to go to Judea (presumably to Bethany), and the disciples are afraid, believing that this is a risk Jesus should not take. If he goes back to Judea, it is likely that Jesus will be arrested, and quite possibly stoned. Of course, from this vantage point, the disciples cannot possibly understand what Jesus intends to do with Lazarus, nor can they understand how Jesus' own death will bring God the greatest possible glory.

Jesus knows there is much to teach his disciples because his hour is coming soon. In verses 9-10, John recounts that *“Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.’”* In the world of Jesus' day (before clocks and watches) a day was reckoned from sun-up to sun-down (which meant the length of a day varied with the seasons). People did their work during the day because they could see. When night came, people stopped working. Wax for candles and oil for lamps were a luxury. As someone once noted, if we were to go back in time into the world of that day, the biggest shock to us would be the complete silence and pitch darkness after sundown. No lights, no cars or machinery making noise, no TV, music, or conversation. Someone trying to walk at night (in such darkness) was sure to stumble. You didn't do it.

But Jesus is not merely pointing out the obvious—that you cannot see to walk in the dark. Jesus is answering the disciples' question about why it is *now* time to go to Jerusalem. As long as Jesus is endeavoring to fulfill his father's mission, then the messianic light is still shining—the revelation of God's truth in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus must finish his redemptive work while such light remains. But Jesus' hour is approaching fast, and it is not an accident that a terrible supernatural darkness falls upon Jerusalem at the moment of his death on the cross. As for the disciples, Jesus declared in John 8:12, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* The disciples must follow Jesus (the true light) in order to see through the spiritual darkness which characterizes the entire nation of Israel. Where Jesus leads them, they must go. The twelve hours of the daylight are not yet finished, but not much daylight remains.² Jesus needs to fulfill his mission quickly. He heads to Bethany because his hour is drawing near.

In verses 11-15, Jesus explains to the disciples the circumstances of Lazarus' death, and why he did not rush from the wilderness to Bethany to heal his friend. We read in verse 11 that *“after saying these*

² Carson, The Gospel According to John, 408-409.

things, [Jesus] said to them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.'" Lazarus was well-known among the twelve and the disciples should have caught the obvious and rather transparent meaning of Jesus' use of the metaphor "to sleep," a common metaphor of that era for death.

Although not widely used in the Old Testament, in the opening verses of chapter 12 of his prophecy, Daniel does speak of the dead as "sleeping" until the resurrection. *"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."* But the disciples (perhaps with one foot still in darkness) should have caught the echo from Daniel 12. They don't, and so they miss Jesus' point. *"The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.' Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep."* Still confused by Jesus' reference to the fact that Lazarus' illness will not end in his death, the disciples mistakenly assume that should Lazarus get enough rest (sleep), then his illness will pass, and he will eventually recover. They must have been shocked when Jesus *"told them plainly, 'Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.'"*

We can surely imagine the disciples looking at one another in shock and confusion, all of them beginning to feel that wave of nausea you get deep in the pit of your stomach when you first hear awful news. They had understood Jesus to say that Lazarus was going to get better, and that he would not die. Now they learn their friend is already dead. How did Jesus know that Lazarus had died? No one saw anyone coming from Bethany bringing such news. And why had they waited for two whole days east of the Jordan? If Jesus really wanted to go back to Bethany all along, why did they not leave when the messenger first brought news of Lazarus' illness? Had Jesus left then, perhaps he could have healed his friend before he died. Now Jesus was telling them that the delay was of benefit to them? How can Jesus be glad about this? Glad his friend was dead? This just doesn't make any sense.

We have the benefit of knowing how all of this turned out in the end. The disciples did not. They are understandably confused. They are shocked and saddened by the terrible news of Lazarus' death, and they struggled mightily within themselves to accept what Jesus was telling them. But, as will see in the balance of the chapter, Jesus is going to bring God glory, and continue to reveal that he is indeed the very Son of God and Lord over all things—even death. The story of Lazarus will end exactly as Jesus said it would—his sickness will not end in death. But if Lazarus was already dead, then this can only mean that their friend would have to be raised from the dead if things are to turn out as Jesus says they will. The disciples should have understood this. The first thing they thought when they learned of Lazarus' death was not, "oh, Jesus is about to raise him from the dead." Rather, they thought they would never see their friend again in this life, and then came the wave of sadness which goes with that terrible realization.

Because a resurrection from the dead is so unlikely—even though Jesus said he was Lord of death—the disciples forget that four times in the Old Testament the dead were raised in anticipation of the general resurrection at the end of the age. In 1 Kings 17:17-24 Elijah raised the widow's son (as we saw in our Old Testament lesson). In 2 Kings 4:32-37, the prophet Elisha raised the Shunammite woman, and a dead man was raised in 2 Kings 13:21 when Elisha's remains landed on his corpse when Elisha was being buried. Then, there is the story of the witch of Endor raising Samuel from the dead in 1 Samuel 28 at the request of King Saul. We also have the prophetic vision of Ezekiel 37 of the messianic age as a time when dead bones will come back to life. The Jews of Jesus' day believed the bodily resurrection of the dead to be tied directly to the end of the age, the day of the Lord, and the final judgment when the

dead are raised and the end of the world has come.³ The Pharisees believed this. The Sadducees did not.

And lest we forget, Jesus had already raised two people from the dead: Jarius' daughter (an event recorded in all three synoptic gospels), and the widow's son at Nain (found only in Luke 7). Now, Jesus will raise Lazarus. Having been with Jesus for the other two dramatic miracles in which Jesus raised the dead, the disciples should have immediately understood that Jesus is about to do the same thing here. But given their misunderstanding of what Jesus has said, the timing of their leaving the relative safety east of the Jordan only to return to the danger of Jerusalem, to their grief upon learning the news of the death of their friend Lazarus, they fail to connect the dots. So much so that in verse 16, "*Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'*"

If Jesus was willing to face death in Jerusalem, then Thomas was ready to do the same. His words reflect great courage and a fierce loyalty to Jesus, no doubt. But not one of the disciples can die the death which Jesus must die. Jesus alone is the sinless lamb of God whose death will take away the sins of the world, and turn aside the wrath and anger of God toward sinners who renounce their own righteousness and trust in his. But even though he still does not understand, Thomas is ready to take up his cross and follow his Lord wherever Jesus takes him. And in this, Thomas is certainly a model to us all. Next time, Lord willing, we'll take up verses 17-27 of John 11, when Jesus declares that he is the resurrection and the life, even as Lazarus still lay dead in his tomb.

So, what then, do we take with us from this passage? First, it is perfectly acceptable to see Jesus as our friend. By this we don't mean a sort of greasy familiarity. We may think of Jesus as our friend, so long as we do not forget that he remains our Lord, and we his disciples. Since we do not see Jesus face to face and cannot entertain him in our homes (as Lazarus, Mary, and Martha did), our relationship to Jesus is a mediated relationship. We know him through his word and through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit—which is why Jesus will spend so much time teaching them about the work of the Holy Spirit when he gives final instructions to his disciples in the Upper Room. But we do truly know Jesus as a friend, just as he knows us along the lines of Psalm 139 (which I encourage you to read).

Second, Jesus may appear indifferent to Lazarus' death and the grief that all felt at hearing this horrible news. But Jesus knew that Lazarus had already died, and that immediately rushing to Bethany was not going to bring God glory. Instead, Jesus waits two days, using the time to instruct his disciples about his role as messianic light, even as darkness was drawing near. Since God's timing and purposes are not always the same as ours, we must never take God's *seeming* indifference to our plight as though he were *truly* indifferent to our plight. God will turn all things for our good, so as to benefit us, and to bring him glory. But since God sees simultaneously both the beginning and the end (and we see things only from a small and truly unformed moment of time), we cannot say God has rejected us, or that he does not care for us—even when truly terrible things happen and we do not yet see his greater purpose.

This may have seemed to be the case when the horrible news came to Mary, Martha, and the disciples that "*Lazarus has died*" and Jesus did nothing about it. Whatever they may have thought to themselves about Jesus' supposed indifference to them, or whether his love for them was genuine, was only a brief prelude to that glorious moment when Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb and commands, "Lazarus come out." Not only are we given a glimpse of the resurrection at the end of the age, when the curse is forever

³ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 467-468.

removed, Mary, Martha, and the disciples will all see how much Jesus truly loved his dear friend Lazarus, even as he loves us. All those for whom Jesus dies (when he glorifies himself and his Father on the cross, and when he defeats death and the grave), will he call forth unto the glorious resurrection and everlasting life. Lazarus as died. But soon, he will live again. We will die. And we will live again.