

JOHN CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Raising of Lazarus: Part One

Craig Barnes tells the following story: “A man told me he had been dating a woman for several years, and she was starting to wonder if they would ever marry. He told me he didn't know if he could marry her because, as he said to me, ‘I don't think she makes me happy.’ I asked him why not, which was a mistake. He went on and on explaining all the reasons why she didn't make him happy.

“Finally I interrupted and asked, ‘What kind of wife would make you happy?’ The more he described what he was looking for in a wife, the more convinced I became that what he really needed was not a wife. He needed a goldfish, the pretty kind with the long tail that floats around, or maybe a Golden Retriever—but even a dog will make demands on you emotionally. A goldfish, though, just sits there and looks pretty and doesn't ask you to communicate. It doesn't ask you how your day was or expect you to listen to how its day was. The last thing he needed was a wife, because his whole understanding of why the world existed was to meet his needs.”¹

How many people in our world today have this same priority. John continues to show us how the Pharisees could look at a miracle as incredible as a dead man being raised from the grave and deny it had come from God simply because it interfered with their own personal wants and desires. Let us see how foolish people can be in order to hold on to their own pre-determined ideas and ignore what is best for them.

John 11:1-16 NLT:

¹ *A man named **Lazarus** was sick. He lived in Bethany with his sisters, **Mary and Martha.***

² *This is the Mary who later poured the expensive perfume on the Lord's feet and wiped them with her hair. Her brother, Lazarus, was sick.*

³ *So the two sisters sent a message to Jesus telling him, “Lord, your dear friend is very sick.”*

⁴ *But when Jesus heard about it he said, “Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this.”*

⁵ *So although Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus,*

⁶ *he stayed where he was for the next two days.*

⁷ *Finally, he said to his disciples, “Let's go back to Judea.”*

⁸ *But his disciples objected. “Rabbi,” they said, “only a few days ago the people in Judea were trying to stone you. Are you going there again?”*

¹ “Citation: Craig Barnes, from the sermon "Learning to Speak Multiculturally," National Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C., (October 3, 1999),” in – *Perfect Illustrations: For Every Topic and Occasion*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "SELFISHNESS".

⁹ *Jesus replied, “There are twelve hours of daylight every day. During the day people can walk safely. They can see because they have the light of this world.*

¹⁰ *But at night there is danger of stumbling because they have no light.”*

¹¹ *Then he said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but now I will go and wake him up.”*

¹² *The disciples said, “Lord, if he is sleeping, he will soon get better!”*

¹³ *They thought Jesus meant Lazarus was simply sleeping, but Jesus meant Lazarus had died.*

¹⁴ *So he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead.”*

¹⁵ *And for your sakes, I’m glad I wasn’t there, for now you will really believe. Come, let’s go see him.”*

¹⁶ ***Thomas**, nicknamed the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let’s go, too—and die with Jesus.”*

This chapter covers the sickness, death, and resurrection of Jesus’ friend and the reaction of the Jewish leaders to yet another miracle, perhaps the most impressive of all of Jesus’ miracles, raising someone who had died back to life, **a sign of the promise He had made for all who believe.** This Jesus who had shown himself to be the Light of the world by giving sight to the blind man now showed himself as the One who could overcome death.

Jesus had apparently established a close relationship to a family in Bethany, which was not too far from Jerusalem. When Lazarus became sick, his sisters sent an urgent message to Jesus. However, Jesus did not respond for several days.

The discussion that Jesus had with His disciples after receiving the news raises a very big question. Why did Jesus wait two more days before going to Bethany? Jesus’ words, *This sickness will not end in death*, in verse 4 indicate that the purpose of Lazarus’ sickness was not for him to die but for Christ to receive glory and for people to come to faith and/or have their faith strengthened.

If I were one of Jesus’ disciples at this time, I would certainly have to wonder why He did not perform a saving miracle to prevent Lazarus from dying in the first place. However, if we study our Bibles carefully we see that God’s love is not the kind of love that makes everything perfectly wonderful for us in this life. The scriptures reveal to us that God loves us but that is not the kind of love that will shelter us from problems and pain. Remember, God loved His Son and yet He allowed Him to suffer the pain that accompanied death by crucifixion. Love and suffering are both part of our relationship with Jesus. Love and suffering make us one with Jesus.

Jesus could have prevented Lazarus from dying but He chose not to. There was an opportunity here to glorify God. Sometimes it is necessary to endure trials and pain in order to glorify God. Raising Lazarus from the grave, would be a much greater miracle, and do more to strengthen faith than any ordinary healing could. God’s delays are often meant either for His glory or our blessing, or both.

Jesus' message to the sisters in verse 4 did not say that their brother would not die. It promised only that death would not be the ultimate result, for the ultimate result would be the glory of God. Note that once again, Jesus called Himself "*the Son of God.*" He wanted them to accept and believe this promise.²

The disciples, however, express concern for Jesus' safety when He says He is going to return to Judea. Do you recall what happened back in John chapter 10:39 after Jesus told the Jewish leaders the parable of the **Good Shepherd** and that He was God? "*The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him.*" Jesus' disciples were probably pleased when Jesus decided to delay His departure. But Jesus was willing to lay down His life for His friends as He indicated later in John 15: "*This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15:12-13 NAS).

Jesus then calmed their fears by reminding them that He was on the Father's schedule, and because of that nothing could harm them. As you may recall from some of the previous passages studied, this is an important emphasis in the Gospel of John.³ Now the disciples were not always quick to catch onto things and this event was no exception. They thought that if Lazarus was sleeping he was getting better and perhaps there was no reason for them to return to the danger of Judea. Then Jesus told them specifically that Lazarus was dead. Death for the believer is commonly referred to as sleep.

Jesus was not glad that His friend died, but that He had not been there when it happened. Now He would be able to display the unbelievable power He possessed to raise the dead. What a strengthening of faith that would be to His disciples, and how could anyone resist recognizing Him as the Son of God when He performed such a great miracle?

We are also introduced here in verse 16 to the disciple, Thomas, who would later be the disciple that doubted Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

John 20:24-28 NAS:

24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

26 After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Because

² Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Jn 11:1.

³ John 2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1.

you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Although Thomas seemed to lack faith in this passage, we must admit that he was a man of courage and complete devotion to Jesus to be willing to accompany Him on a mission that he thought would end in certain death.

By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the grave for several days. Jesus spoke to Lazarus' sisters describing Himself as "*the Resurrection and the Life*," a truth they both accepted. Jesus was urging them to believe His word no matter how discouraging the circumstances might appear. Jesus, deeply moved at the pain of the two sisters, called for Lazarus' tomb to be opened. When this was done He called to Lazarus—and the dead man, restored to life, came out of his grave. This even more notable miracle stunned the religious leaders, and surprisingly hardened them even more in their determination to kill Jesus

We sometimes think of the disciples as "*supersaints*," but such was not the case. They often fell short of what was expected of a believer, and Jesus was constantly trying to help them strengthen their faith. He knew the day was coming when He would no longer be with them and they would be responsible for carrying the message to the world. It was necessary for them to have a strong faith in order to reflect the message they would have to carry.

When we find ourselves facing disease, disappointment, having to wait, and even death, our only encouragement is the Word of God. We must live by faith and not by what we experience going on all around us. Their situation seemed hopeless, yet the sisters knew that Jesus was the Master of every situation. The promise in Psalm 50:15 finds a parallel here: "*And call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.*"⁴

Jesus did not delay His departure for Bethany because He was waiting for Lazarus to die, for he was already dead. Jesus lived on a divine timetable according to John 11:9. He was waiting for the Father to tell Him when to go to Bethany. The fact that the Lazarus had been dead four days gave greater authenticity to the miracle and greater opportunity for people to believe, including His own disciples (John 11:15).⁵

In interpreting verses nine and ten, "*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. 10 But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him,'*" We have to remember that Jesus called Himself "*the Light of the world* (John 1:4-7; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5)." He was referring to living in physical **light** or darkness. When one lives according to the will of God they are safe. Living outside the will of God places one in the territory of darkness and places the person in real danger. Jesus knew that as long as He submitted Himself to God's will there would be no danger. As long as He stuck to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

God's plan, no harm would come to Him until the appointed time God had set for His sacrificial death on the cross. He is teaching His disciples that the Jews should accept Him for who He was while He was still in the world to provide light for them. When He was gone they would have missed the opportunity that He was giving them for salvation. They would then stumble and fall like a person walking in the dark..

John 11:17-22 NAS:

¹⁷ *When Jesus arrived at Bethany, he was told that Lazarus had already been in his grave for **four days**.*

¹⁸ *Bethany was only a few miles down the road from Jerusalem,*

¹⁹ *and many of the people had come to console Martha and Mary in their loss.*

²⁰ *When Martha got word that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him. But Mary stayed in the house.*

²¹ *Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

²² *But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask."*

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been buried about four days. He had been put in the grave the day or day after he died. Though it was the Jewish custom to embalm their dead, yet we find, from John 11:39, that he had not been embalmed; and God wisely ordered this, that the miracle might appear the more striking.⁶

Verses 17–27 focus on a conversation between Jesus and Martha. Evidently Jesus was met on the outskirts of Bethany and was informed that Lazarus had died four days previously. The nearness of Bethany to Jerusalem is mentioned here to account for the presence of so many Jews who had come to comfort Lazarus' sisters, each of which had a strong faith in Jesus' power (verses 22 and 32.).⁷

John 11:23-27 NAS:

²³ *Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again."*

²⁴ *"Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day."*

²⁵ *Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying.*

²⁶ *Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"*

²⁷ *"Yes, Lord," she told him. "I have always believed you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who has come into the world from God."*

Your brother will rise again was an easy statement for Martha to misunderstand.

⁶ Adam Clarke, *A Commentary and Critical Notes*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1826), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "John 11".

⁷ Carson, D. A.: *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition. 4th ed.* Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA : Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, S. Jn 11:1.

Understandably she assumed Jesus was referring to the resurrection of the dead at the last day, but Jesus had something else in mind. There cannot be a more meaningful and important passage in the Bible than the one that Jesus gave Martha in John 11:25-26 NAS:

*25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies,
26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

This is absolutely essential for salvation and Jesus wanted to make certain that these two sisters that He loved so much got it straight. He wanted them both to be in Heaven with Him one day, and He also wants you and me to be in Heaven with Him one day. So let me ask you, do you have it straight? Do you understand exactly what it is that guarantees your salvation and eternal life in Heaven? Let me review basicall what Jesus told Martha:

Jesus Christ alone is the only way to salvation and eternal life. If you believe in your heart that Jesus died to pay the penalty for yours sins so that you may have eternal life with Him in Heaven, than you have it straight and you are guaranteed a place in glory. Everyone who believes in His substitutionary death for their sins will never experience death but pass immediately from this life into Heaven. Do you believe this?

Martha's response is the foundation on which the book of John is built.

John 20:30-31 NAS:

*30 Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;
31 but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

John 11:28-29 NAS:

*²⁸ Then she returned to **Mary**. She called Mary aside from the mourners and told her, "The Teacher is here and wants to see you."
²⁹ So Mary immediately went to him.*

Martha then went to tell Mary that Jesus was asking to see her. It would appear that not only did Jesus want to comfort her but He also wanted to make certain that Mary understood the way to salvation as well.

John 11:30-37 NAS:

*30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. 31 Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.
32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at*

His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?"

Jewish burying places were on the outer perimeter of their cities and villages. This is where Jesus seems to have met Martha and it was not far from where Lazarus was buried. It was apparently customary for the closest relatives to go to the grave site frequently during these three days of mourning and weep for the deceased. Their friends and neighbors would go with them for support and they would all mourn at the grave site.

When Jesus saw Mary weeping over her brother He was deeply moved and could not help but join the others in their weeping. A very close friend of Jesus was dead and His tender heart felt the kind of grief which prompted His tears. This was an emotional reaction from the only perfect human being to ever live. We should therefore never be ashamed to shed tears over genuine sadness. We see Jesus weeping again in Luke 19:41, and this time over the condition of the city of Jerusalem.

Then we see the Jewish leaders return to their standard behavior. They likely considered Jesus weeping a sign of weakness and could well have begun to taunt Him as they often did. Can't you just hear them. "If you are really the Son of God why didn't you prevent your friend from dying in the first place. Let us hear no more about the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem as a miracle. If He can't prevent someone from dying, maybe He tricked us regarding the healing of the blind man. If he had really been able to do that, He would not have permitted his friend to die. He is nothing more than an impostor.

These doubters were about to get the shock of their lives. Those who doubt the truth about Jesus in the Gospel will all also get the shock of their lives the day they die. Next week we will see one of the greatest miracles of Jesus ministry.