

The Gospel of John
Session Twenty-Four: The Plot to Kill Jesus
Commentary

John 11:1-44

11:1–3. As we have studied the Gospel of John, we have seen how John chose to record at least seven miracles that prove that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Seven miracles that produce faith in readers. In the first six, we have seen his power over the physical aspects of life, including the human body, the natural elements, time and space, and even food and drink. But in each case Jesus also demonstrated that his purposes went beyond the physical to the spiritual. Now the Lord revealed his power by reaching beyond this life and touching death and the afterlife—territory that belongs only to God.

Death is not a natural extension of life, though many psychologists and thanatologists argue that point today. Death is an enemy, created as a result of sin, and ultimately to be destroyed by God. The perfume-anointing described in verse 2 is further developed in Matthew 26 and Mark 14, although John mentions it just to identify the relationship among these two sisters, their brother, and Jesus. Sometimes the Lord's ways are hard to understand. Imagine the disciples listening to Jesus as he observed casually that the sickness would not end in death and then lingering around for a few more days before heading to Bethany.

Though he had not yet recorded the story of the foot-washing (chap. 13), John assumed his readers had heard it. Perhaps the story floated among early Christians in the first century. But once again, we see John's lack of concern with chronological order. And the message from Bethany immediately tipped the Lord's close relationship to this family: Lord, the one you love is sick. Here John used the common *phileo*, then switched to *agapao* in verse 5. Notice there was no request; among friends, requests are not always needed.

11:4–6. Even as we read this passage, we wonder about God being glorified through sickness, the strong point of verse 4. Of course, God was glorified through Jesus' resurrection, but he was also glorified through his death. Any crisis that brings glory to God is good. If God is glorified in illness, it is good, as difficult as this is for our human minds to grasp.

The Lord's words, this sickness will not end in death, show us how much more deeply he was thinking than the disciples. They could never have imagined that Lazarus' physical death would end and he would actually walk out of the grave after several days.

How was God glorified in this life-and-death event? Certainly through the resurrection, but also in the death. The faith and hope that Lazarus's death evoked in the sisters occupies a significant portion of this chapter.

It appears that the four days that passed between the death and the raising of Lazarus find their starting point just before the Lord left for Bethany. That allows two days after the original message for the intended delay, and two days for the trip.

But we ask, the trip from where? We simply do not know. The end of chapter 10 places Jesus and the disciples in Perea (Transjordan), and that may have been their location at the beginning of this chapter. Carson explains:

This is why the “therefore” of v. 6 contributes to the flow of the argument. Lazarus’ illness will not finally issue in death: it is for the glory of God (v. 4). This does not mean Jesus is indifferent to human suffering. Far from it: Jesus loves Martha, Mary, and Lazarus (v. 5). Indeed, it is in consequence of that love that he delays his departure by two days, waiting for the divine signal, the news of Lazarus’ death, before he sets out on the four-day journey (v. 6), for this delay will make a substantial contribution to the strengthening of the faith of the Bethany family (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, p. 408).

11:7–10. The Lord and his disciples had probably been in Perea and had some distance to walk back to Bethany in the northeastern part of Judea. Death threats awaited there, and the disciples had serious reservations about the trip. Verses 9 and 10 represent the Lord’s answer, though it does not seem to fit the context. Perhaps it was a proverb of the time, meaning duty is more important than haste. For Jews, the twelve hours of daylight would have been from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., and perhaps Jesus emphasized that we have a full twelve hours, but no more. Each valuable hour should be used to glorify God.

Both Romans and Jews calculated time in twelve-hour blocks, and work was done during the daylight. The interesting expression this world’s light obviously refers to sunlight, but John may have intended a veiled reference to working in the “Sonshine”—that time which the Father had allowed Jesus to be on earth. Ed Blum suggests, “In one sense he was speaking of walking (living) in physical light or darkness. In the spiritual realm when one lives by the will of God he is safe. Living in the realm of evil is dangerous. As long as He followed God’s plan, no harm would come until the appointed time” (Blum, Edwin A. “John.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983, p. 313).

11:11–13. Jesus returned to the subject at hand and used a common New Testament euphemism for death—the word sleep (Matt. 9:24; 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:20; 1 Thess. 4:14). We see this again at the end of Acts 7 in the martyrdom of Stephen. According to Gangel, “Sleep is a common New Testament euphemism for death. It translates the Greek word (ekoimethe) from which we construct the English noun cemetery. A cemetery—supposedly fearsome and spooky—affords a Christian word of faith. Christians who die are not gone; they sleep temporarily until Jesus wakes them up. That sleep, of course, does not mean cessation of existence or awareness, because we learn later in Paul’s writings that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1–10)” (Gangel, Kenneth O. *Acts*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Vol. 5. Ed. by Max Anders. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998, pp. 111–12).

11:14–16. After having told them the sickness would not be unto death, Jesus then said clearly, Lazarus is dead. The disciples did not pick up on the word sleep and its connection with death. Not only that, but we learn the delay that allowed the death of his friend would work for the

benefit of Jesus' disciples. They were on their way south to Bethany. This trip would take them through Jerusalem.

Thomas called Didymus offered the pessimistic cry of the martyr complex, Let us also go, that we may die with him. "What futility," they must have thought. "Lazarus is already dead; why put our own lives in jeopardy since we can't help him now." In the view of Thomas, all of them (certainly including Jesus) would be dead before this trip ended.

Thomas entered the narrative of John three times and in each case in a somewhat negative reference. The word Didymus means "twin" (not "doubter" as some have surmised), although we know nothing about his sibling. Indeed, the name Thomas is the Hebrew word for twin. One can almost hear the sign of futility, the complete ignorance of substitutionary atonement and resurrection victory.

Some interpreters make much of Thomas' loyalty on this occasion, and I yield that point. Let me cite Tenney's positive stance. He observes that Thomas along with the other disciples certainly understood their fate was questionable and their lives were in jeopardy, but "notwithstanding this unhappy prospect, Thomas' loyalty is revealed by his readiness to share Jesus' peril. The skepticism that Thomas later evinced regarding the Resurrection was probably prompted by grief over Jesus' death rather than by disillusionment because of apparent failure" (, Merrill C. *The Gospel of John*. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Vol. 9. Ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981, EBC, p. 116).

11:17–20. Their arrival in Bethany occurred at least four days later. In the cultural ostentation of Jewish funerals, the mourners, the spices, and the procession still lingered. This was a popular family in the small town of Bethany, so Lazarus's funeral was a major event. But none of the Lord's followers—not the disciples and not the sisters—yet understood how Jesus is our life, as he was to Martha.

In John we have seen the term Jews in negative reference used to refer to the Pharisees and assorted religious opponents of Jesus. Here it takes on the general ethnic designation. The adjective many may suggest some influence of Lazarus in the small community of Bethany. The text of verse 20 literally tells us that Mary stayed seated in the house (kathezesthai). Borchert enlightens this interesting and more literal translation of our text:

The custom was for the bereaved to remain seated in the house and for the guests to come and sit in silence and periodically support the grieving parties with sympathetic tears and moans. For me the experience of having observed modern wakes in the Middle East has left an unforgettable memory of what "sitting in the house," crowded on benches in the heat of day and mourning for the dead, can mean. Moreover, one must not forget that it was the brother (the obvious wage-earner of that home) who had died. The loss was an intense one. Reading again Ruth 1:6–14 will provide some sense of the feelings that probably were present in that room (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, p. 355).

11:21–24. Here we have one of the great conversations of the Bible. We already know the personalities of these women, so we are not surprised that Martha charged out to meet Jesus while Mary stayed at home. Her words to the Lord almost take the form of a mild rebuke: if you had been here, my brother would not have died. Yet she hinted at resurrection by adding, God will give you whatever you ask. Knowing her faith, Jesus responded, Your brother will rise again (the word “again” is not in the Greek text).

Martha recited the standard Old Testament view of the resurrection, not practicing the promises Jesus had taught so often. Surely she knew about the resurrection of the widow’s son and Jairus’s daughter, but somehow she never made the connection that the Lord could do the same for her brother.

Martha, Mary, and all these Jewish mourners responded in human fashion to death and sorrow, defeat and abandonment. According to their words, Jesus should have been there to prevent Lazarus’s death. If he were really God, he would have prevented physical death because that is God’s job. They treated death as the end of life, as the final defeat, a sign that God had deserted them. The presence of death meant the absence of God.

Martha could never have accepted the view of the Sadducees that denied the resurrection; she sided with the more conservative Pharisaic view that prevailed among the common people. Martha had no more hope than she had before Jesus arrived on the scene. But that was about to change—dramatically.

11:25–27. What follows is the wonderful promise almost every Christian has memorized—a passage used at Christian funerals for nearly two thousand years. It forms the key to the chapter, but what does it mean? Jesus said, He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. Does that mean spiritual life beyond the grave as many interpreters have suggested? The context seems to demand an emphasis on physical death and physical life—in other words, bodily resurrection. Verse 26 seems to indicate that whoever is still alive and believing at the time of the Lord’s return will never die.

Martha did not grasp the entirety of this theology, but nevertheless placed her foothold of faith directly in Jesus’ affirmation of his messiahship. She was not completely without faith. She still believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and that he might still be able to do something, although she did not really know what. She understood only two categories of life: physical life on earth and some future life at a resurrection. In her mind, Lazarus had neither of those at the moment. She did not think there was anything Jesus could do about his death. The key to the chapter and a foundation stone of the doctrine of resurrection and the afterlife appears in these beloved verses. This is another one of the Lord’s seven “I Am” statements in this Gospel. Jesus said future resurrection was impossible without him. Martha (as well as Lazarus) had no hope without him in the picture. He also said that real life (life that extends beyond death) is possible only through him. A person attains it no other way. This life is both spiritual (will live, even though he dies) and eternal (will never die), and it comes only to those who believe in Jesus.

Martha's affirmation of Jesus in verse 27 fits directly into the Johannine pattern. She affirmed that Jesus is the Messiah and therefore the Son of God, and also that he was sent into the world by the Father—a fact he had been arguing in public for more than three years.

As Witmer explains:

The title "Son of God" was first applied to Jesus by the angel Gabriel in his announcement to the Virgin Mary. Explaining that her conception would be by the Holy Spirit, he said that, "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35; cv. 32). John the Baptist, after witnessing the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus at his baptism by John, said, "I testify that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). This was also the confession of Nathanael (1:49); of Martha, the sister of Lazarus and Mary (11:27); and of Peter, spokesman for the disciples (Matt. 16:15–16; c 14:33). When the earthquake occurred at Jesus' crucifixion, the centurion and soldiers who carried out the execution "were terrified, and exclaimed, Surely he was the Son of God" (27:54; c Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47) (Witmer, John A. *Immanuel*. Nashville: Word, 1998, p. 48).

It appears to the casual reader that Martha had climbed on board theologically and would no longer have any question about what Jesus could do. Yet a few minutes later she heard Jesus call for the removal of the stone and objected, "But, Lord ... by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days" (v. 39). So again Martha reminds us of ourselves—a willingness to verbally proclaim biblical truth without applying it in our lives.

Borchert reminds us that "the story thus serves as a significant warning even to evangelicals who may be able to mouth all the correct theological statements about Jesus but actually have failed to bring words and life together. It is not enough to make statements about Jesus. Indeed, if a person would make a statement akin to Martha's in some churches, the tendency would be to baptize such a person and to accept him or her into membership. But we must all be warned that verbal confessions and life commitments are not always partners with each other" (Borchert, p. 357).

11:28–32. Presumably, verse 28 contains an unrecorded invitation delivered personally at the request of Jesus, so Mary went outside the city with others following her, assuming she was headed for the tomb.

How interesting that her opening line was identical to Martha's, although she had not heard Martha speak and there seems to be no indication in the text that the women had discussed their reaction to the Lord. We have no idea where Mary met Jesus other than that he was at the same place and had not yet entered the village. We dare not miss John's notation that the Jews who had been with her in the house followed her. So Mary's conversation with Jesus was not, like Martha's, private. There are other differences. Martha engaged in theological debate; Mary fell at his feet. Martha expressed expectant faith ("God will give you whatever you ask"); Mary functioned at a more personal level.

11:33–37. Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. The Greek word for deeply moved in spirit is *embrimaomai*, used five times in the New Testament, always of Jesus (Matt. 9:30; Mark 1:43; 14:5; John 11:33, 38). It probably suggests anger over sin and death which could cause such agony in Mary, Martha, and their friends in Bethany. The second word (troubled) translates *etaraxen*. It seems to emphasize agitation, again perhaps over the grief of the sisters.

Of the phrase deeply moved in spirit Carson writes, “It does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but it is roughly equivalent to ‘in himself’: his inward reaction was anger or outrage or indignation.” And of the word troubled, “the same strong verb used in 12:27; 13:21. It is lexically inexcusable to reduce this emotional upset to the effects of empathy, grief, pain, or the like” (Carson, p. 415). When Jesus approached the tomb, he could no longer control himself and wept. John used a different word than the word he chose to describe the weeping of Mary and the Jews. Perhaps the intent was to show that Jesus’ tears emerged for a different reason—not grief over Lazarus; he had that situation well in hand. Surely the same unbelief and theological ignorance that prompted his anger also produced his grief.

This response to the death of Lazarus on the part of Jesus is very contrary to the Greek idea of gods, but very much like the promised Messiah of the Old Testament (Isa. 53:3). The question of the group in verse 37 seems fair enough, but it has an obvious answer. Jesus could have kept this man from dying, but he chose not to for reasons he had already explained to the disciples earlier in the chapter.

11:38–40. The emotional intensity deepened as Jesus approached the tomb, deeply moved. The same word appears in verse 33. I have visited the Herod family tomb behind the modern King David Hotel in Jerusalem. This tomb is probably similar to the tombs of both Lazarus and Jesus. The tombstone was probably four or five feet in diameter and several inches thick. Since Martha had raised the protest, the response of verse 40 may be directed primarily at her, though it certainly established a general principle—one that we have repeatedly observed throughout this gospel: Believing is seeing.

We might also conclude that Jesus was speaking to the disciples, since to them he had said, “This sickness ... is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it” (11:4). So to the sisters in their grief, the disciples in their bewilderment, and to all who seek faith for life at any age since this dramatic event, Jesus calls for faith first and sight later.

11:41–42. The power of Jesus is also seen in his prayer. These words must have been uttered audibly and publicly. The purpose of the prayer was to create faith in the hearts of those standing around the tomb of Lazarus wondering what would happen next. Here we get a glimpse into the relationship of the Trinity and particularly the Father-Son relationship within the Godhead that John dealt with so frequently in this Gospel.

All three of Jesus’ prayers recorded in John call upon the Father to support the mission on which he had sent the son (11:41–42; 12:27–28; 17:1–26). Borchert points out: “Unlike the other prayers, however, this prayer focuses on thanksgiving and is not unlike the formula

prayer in Ps. 118:21 (a psalm frequently cited by the NT writers). The prayer presupposes that Jesus knew the Father's will concerning Lazarus, and what he was about to do would not be merely for the sake of Lazarus but for those who would witness the incredible act that was to follow. The prayer thus was not primarily for his benefit, but it was aimed at bringing the observers into the group of believers (11:42)" (Borchert, p. 362).

What exactly did Jesus mean when he said to the Father, I said this for the benefit of the people standing here? This public gesture of looking up and speaking aloud was unnecessary, since the Father always hears the Son and responds. But Jesus' mission was to bring people to faith and John was mission-focused throughout this entire book. The unbelieving crowds of mourners heard Jesus' rhetorical question of verse 40, watched him, and heard him pray openly to the Father. We learn later that "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him" (11:45).

Boice emphasizes how Jesus involved people not only in watching and hearing but in the miracle itself:

Although it was Jesus alone who could bring the dead to life, he delighted to involve the bystanders in the miracle. First, they were told to move the stone. Then, after the miracle, they were told to unbind Lazarus. True, we cannot bring the dead to life. But we can bring the word of Christ to them. We can do preparatory work, and we can do work afterward. We can help to remove stones—stones of ignorance, error, prejudice and despair. After the miracle we can help the new Christian by unwinding the grave clothes of doubt, fear, introspection, and discouragement (Boice, James M. *The Gospel of John* (5 vols.). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977, p. 278).

11:43–44. Through this miracle we also see that Jesus is our power. How interesting that John should tell us Jesus called in a loud voice, for surely it was not necessary for that call to reach the ears of Lazarus. Perhaps he intended it for the crowd of mourners. No one present that day could possibly misunderstand what Jesus said or did.

This is one of the great dramatic scenes of the Bible, but we must be careful using the word "resurrection" to describe it. In one sense, Lazarus did experience resurrection because he came back from the dead. But New Testament "resurrection" refers to a return to life in a state of immortality so that one never dies again. That was the pattern of the resurrection of Jesus, of course, but not that of Lazarus who would die again. Yet the word "resuscitation" used by some commentators seems insufficient. Let us just recognize the limitations of resurrection performed in biblical times as over against that promised believers in a future day (1 Cor. 15; 1 Tim. 6:16).

The Greek verb rendered here called in a loud voice (*ekraugasen*) appears only nine times in the New Testament, eight of them in the Gospels. No Hollywood depiction of this event could possibly capture the drama of what actually happened that day as Lazarus stumbled and staggered into the sun while wearing his grave clothes. Borchert describes what he looked like:

“A long, narrow sheet was folded in half, and the body was inserted between the folded halves. Then the wrap was bound together, and the body was secured. The head was wrapped separately, which explains the note both in the Lazarus situation (11:44) and the separate head wrapping in the case of Jesus’ grave clothes (20:6–7)” (Borchert, p. 362).¹

¹ Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).