

Sign 7 – the raising of Lazarus

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[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to the first 16 verses of John 11 so that we can pick out the motivation of Jesus. There are three themes that we find in these 16 verses that will recur through the rest of the chapter, and they are in a very real sense interconnected.

So, first of all, we see the love of Jesus. So, we meet in the first three verses a family, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, who is ill, and we discover in verse 3 that Jesus loves his family. Lord, the one you love is ill. John tells us in verse 5, now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, which leads to a very surprising, indeed some might say a shocking turn of events. Jesus loves, so when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was two more days. Jesus loves, and Jesus delays going. And we need to ask ourselves, why is that?

It takes us to our next theme that we see here that motivates Jesus. Verse 4, Jesus said, this illness will not end in death, no, it is for God's glory, so that God's Son may be glorified through it. What motivates Jesus' whole life, his ministry, and this moment is the glory of God.

So, this is going to become another one of those signposts. Jesus is going to act in such a way that it will bring glory to God the Father and glory to himself as the Son of God. That this delay, this loving delay, is going to make absolutely clear to everybody that Jesus must be the Son of God, God. And that Jesus is so powerful that he is even Lord over death, so that we have good reason to put our trust in him. So, there is love and there is glory. That takes us to our third theme, which we see run through the whole chapter, and that's the idea of believing, belief. So, in verse 11, Jesus said to his followers, the disciples, Lazarus has fallen asleep, and I'm going to wake him up. And they think, oh, great, sleep means rest, means recovery. We know this if we have an illness or a virus, rest is good for our bodies. They misunderstand. So, Jesus speaks plainly in verse 14, Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. So, Jesus loves and he delays, so that he can show his glory, so that the disciples might see more of that glory, so their faith might be strengthened, that they might have more confidence in the one that they are invited to believe in. So, we put this all together, we can say that the most loving thing Jesus can do for anyone, for Lazarus, for the disciples, for you and me, is to show the glory of God to us, so that we might believe and we might have eternal life. Specifically here, it is the love and kindness of Jesus to show his glory over death, that he is Lord over death, that he will defeat that great enemy, so that we can gladly believe in him and have confidence in eternal life. Now, where we might struggle, I think, is precisely because we are distanced from death as people. We don't typically think of death and we don't typically think of eternity.

So, when our focus is on now and what is immediate, we might think, well, do you know what? The most loving thing Jesus could do would be to fix this sort of immediate pressing need, whether that's my health or my finance or a relationship. We forget too easily eternity, and so we place all our importance on what's happening now. And John 11 and the ministry of Jesus wants to remind us of life and death and eternity. So, ask yourself the question, honestly, what's the best thing you think God could give you? What's the most loving thing God could do for you?

[4 : 46] If we put it in a family setting, children, children love toys, gadgets, presents, birthdays are exciting, but it's recognized by children and it's recognized by scientists and people who make observations that the most important thing, Martin Luther King said it, is the presence of a parent being there, not the presence, not the gift. The most important thing that a child can receive from a mom and a dad is their active involvement, being around, having that strong bond that's built, that physical touch that's needed in a time of sadness. And so, when we think about it in a family setting, then we pull back to think about God the Father, the greatest thing God can give is Himself. And that's what He's done in the sending of Jesus. Jesus comes to be Emmanuel, which means God is with us. Jesus is God with us. And as God with us, in love He has come to conquer sin and death.

Our great enemies, those realities that would separate us forever from our good and loving God, Jesus comes to deal with them so that by faith we might know and enjoy life with God forever. So, what we need, just as it was with the disciples, is to believe in Jesus.

So, there's the motivation of Jesus, and we'll see those themes reappear through our text, but we need to move now to the ministry of Jesus. And if you look with me at verse 17 to 19, you see that the action moves forward.

Jesus is now moving towards Bethany, and He's discovered that Lazarus, we find that Lazarus has already been in the tomb for four days. And we also discover that Jesus now is moving towards a funeral scene, a scene of mourning and of grief. And Jesus comes to minister to, to bring care to, these two sisters who've lost their brother, to Martha and to Mary. And what we'll see is that Jesus ministers in very different ways to each of them, but gives to them and to us what we really need. To Martha, there is what's often known as the ministry of truth, and to Mary, the ministry of tears. And again, it's something that we need to recognize, because facing death is horrible, and frightening, and lonely, and awful. And we need Jesus, the one who enters in, the one who entered into our experience, and the one who comes to draw near to His people, so that when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we're not on our own. We need Jesus, the one who gives hope of meaning beyond death, of life and love that lasts beyond death. That's what Jesus comes to bring.

So let's look together at this ministry of truth that He brings to Martha. Verse 21, we see Martha has faith, and indeed she has great faith. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. [8 : 23] But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. So she knows Jesus could have healed Lazarus' illness. She knows that Jesus does have unique access to His Father. Martha has great faith, but it's not as yet complete faith. There is still more that she needs to see and understand about the authority of Jesus, namely to see that His authority extends beyond illness, even over death.

She needs to see the full extent of His glory as He comes to raise Lazarus. Jesus said to her in verse 23, your brother will rise again. And Martha shares the same understanding of resurrection as many of the Jews of her day. I know He will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. So for Jewish people, their great hope was at the end of time, the people of God would be risen to new life, and God would make everything new for them. But what does Jesus do that's different? Key verse here, verse 25, Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die, and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. What is Jesus doing here? He is rooting resurrection hope in Himself. Hope is now focused on a person, the person of the Lord Jesus. And it's not just for some moment in the future, hope is now focused on the present, on the Savior who is present with her.

Jesus is saying that to believe in Him, to believe that He is the resurrection and the life, is to understand that He is our life, that nothing matters more than Jesus to us.

He is Lord, He is Savior, He is King, He is friend, He is brother, that He gives eternal life.

He has that authority, and it is His delight to love His children and to give eternal life, and He promises true life beyond death. Not wishful thinking and pie in the sky, this is a promise from our Creator King who is Lord over all. Jesus comes towards this funeral scene, and it's as if there's that understanding, everything in life is temporary except for God's love.

[11 : 08] Everything will be lost except for God's love. Boys and girls, if you can think back to the summer, maybe you have some in your house, those big shells that you pick up at the beach and where they're big enough that you can cup them to your ear. And when you do that, what do you hear? You hear the echo of the sea, don't you? You hear the waves. Our great need as people is to listen to our heart for that echo of eternity.

We were made to live forever. We were made to live with God. That's the deep longing in our hearts. That's why we hate all losses. We need to recognize that and to respond with faith in Jesus. Follow the example of Martha, verse 27. Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. She follows the signpost and hope begins to rise in her heart. So, there's the ministry of truth that Jesus brings, but then there's the ministry of tears from verse 28 to 37. We can imagine if this was sort of on cinema, the camera panning back from Jesus and Martha panning back to the house in Bethany to where Mary is weeping and her friends have gathered to bring comfort. And Martha comes running and says, Jesus is here and he wants to talk to you. And so, we see Mary get up and begin to move to

Jesus. And then we see the friends, presuming she's going to the graveside, they want to follow to offer comfort. And just before we move from that, it's important to recognize the value of the ministry of presence. I think one of the most profoundly sad parts of sort of the last 18 months is to see and to hear people having to suffer and to die alone. And we need, now that we have the opportunity to recover that ministry of presence is a beautiful and a necessary thing to be with people. We don't necessarily have to have wise words or the right words. We need to be where suffering, hurting people are. We see that wonderful example from the friends of Mary. But here's Mary and now she reaches Jesus in verse 32 as she's weeping and the crowds are weeping and she says, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died. And Jesus sees her weeping. The Jews who'd come along with her also weeping. What happens next? So, remember, we've already been told by Jesus himself, this will not end in death. This event will display the glory of God. So, Jesus knows the end of the story.

But how do we find Jesus? Verse 33, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And then verse 35, that short and yet so profound little verse, Jesus wept.

Jesus is heartbroken. He is Jesus in his full humanity with a full range of human emotions.

[14:51] We see on the one hand a hatred of death, but also a mourning with his friends and mourning and weeping for his friend. It's a reminder to it that grief is right. It's a reminder for us grief is right.

Life is good. Life is a good gift. Death is a horrible offense and it is right to grieve and Jesus teaches us that.

So, here we are again at a funeral scene and we're being confronted with permanent loss, confronted with the reality of mortality, confronted by the wages of sin, which is death.

Recently been reading through the book of Ecclesiastes and that little verse in chapter 7 is always so striking and I wonder the extent to which we in Western society struggle with it. Here's the verse, it is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting.

Now, we live where we're encouraged to think that happiness and joy and pleasure is everything and that's our aim, that's our goal, that's it. Why is it better, according to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, to go to a house of mourning? For death is the destiny of everyone. The living should take this to heart.

[16:26] We need to get real with the reality that we all will die so that we are prepared, so that we are found in Jesus. And when we allow ourselves to consider that great and solemn reality, then we begin to understand the value of Christianity and of the Lord Jesus and that it gives us what we most need. Think about the truth that Jesus has just been talking about. To believe in Him is to have that hope that love never ends, that life with God continues, that perfect life can be ours if we are trusting in Jesus. We also have that wonderful reality of the tears of Jesus, that God didn't stay distant to the great human problem, that rather God in Christ entered in. We have a saviour with tear-stained cheeks, a saviour who promises He will come in the end to wipe away all tears and to give His people a life of perfect, unending joy, to give the life and the world that you and I want. If only we would see that that life is found in knowing the Lord Jesus.

Then we get to the miracle of Jesus in verse 38 to 44. I want to take us back just for a moment to the Lord of the Rings and to that battle of Helm's Deep. And so what we have, there's the terrible fighting and the distress at the bottom of the hill, and then we see Gandalf, and Gandalf was riding his great horse, shadowfax. So imagine that great war horse, nostrils flaring, just about to charge down the hillside into battle. Imagine the enemies falling before Gandalf the Great, and use that to help us to understand this miracle that's taking place at a funeral. Because there's two things we can see here, one that's hidden, one that's clear. The first thing that's hidden, and it's hidden by our English translation actually, is the anger of Jesus. We need to go back to verse 33, and then to verse 38.

In verse 33, we're told Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. And then in verse 38, we're told Jesus once more deeply moved came to the tomb. Now, the image that our English doesn't get across to us is of how indignant and righteously angry Jesus is. This is the image of nostrils flaring. Imagine Shadowfax, that great horse, nostrils flaring before charging at the enemy. This is the anger that Jesus feels as he confronts his enemy. And who is the enemy, or rather, what is the enemy? It's death.

And behind death, the one who has the power of death, the devil. Jesus is ready to charge into battle as he is confronted with this great enemy. Maybe that provokes a question in our mind. How

can we be told on the one hand that Jesus is perfect and Jesus is angry? Isn't anger always a bad thing?

[19 : 57] But again, if we think about it in our own lives, when we truly love someone, don't we instinctively hate that thing that kills and destroys?

We hate cancer. We hate alcohol that destroys an addict. Jesus hates death. He hates the wages of sin. He hates the reality of life under the curse.

And so, B.B. Warfield, the theologian, says, Jesus wins for us our salvation in flaming wrath against the devil. Against death and the devil. So, the anger of Jesus is there. But we also see in this miracle, of course, the authority of Jesus. The authority of Jesus in verse 40, Jesus said, did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God? Jesus is God's approved agent.

When God acts, he's revealing the glory of God. And here is the authority of Jesus. Verse 43, Jesus called in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth round his face. Jesus has the authority to bring the dead to life. Jesus, who is the word of God with just a word, brings new life to the corpse of Lazarus, saying to us really powerfully that Jesus is Lord even over death.

[21 : 52] We have time to look at the rest of chapter 11, but what we find is that the religious leaders come together once again, their hatred and their fear of Jesus is growing, and they say, we need to get rid of this guy. We need to kill Jesus. And then in verse 50, we find Caiaphas, the high priest, saying far more than he means when he says, you do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. Jesus has come to be our Savior King. But in order to be our Savior King, he must die. The only way to give new life to Lazarus, the only way to give new life to you and to me, the only hope for us in having eternal resurrection life, is if Jesus goes into the tomb himself, having paid the price for our forgiveness, and then rising in victory to show he is Lord of all even over death.

This final sign leads us towards seeing Jesus' own resurrection. It announces that Jesus has come to take the death penalty for us, to end the slavery to sin leading to death that we experience, to break the curse we are under. If, if we believe in him, we turn from our sin, and trust in him. Let's close by thinking about why this all matters. Just over 20 years ago, the first Sunday after 9-11 in Manhattan and outside the Redeemer Church there, queues formed around the building to have the chance to be in the worship service. So, they had to put an extra service on. As the twin towers fell and as the debris was still smoking, people wanted to find a church, to find hope. And what was the text? That day, it was this text. It was John 11. Now, why choose that text? It's because it's what a broken city and a sorrowing people needed.

This truth is what you and I need more than anything else. To recognize Jesus is Lord over death, and that to believe in him. And that to believe in him is to receive a love that you will never lose. To realize that as we face death, we need Jesus, the one who is stronger than death. We need to face death in him. Faith in him to know eternal life.

That the repeating notes of the song of John 11, of the song that we need to hear in our hearts, we need to hear and hear and hear again of a loving Savior who came to defeat death, by tasting death, who defeated death and who will return one day to end death forever for his people.

[25 : 39] We need to hear and hear and hear again of the glory of Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man, bringing truth and tears and final victory to his own people. And we need to hear and hear and hear again so we will believe and keep believing. We turn from sin, we trust in him, we live with our eyes fixed on his glory and our hope would rest on our eternal glory. These signs of John, why were they written?

They were written so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we would have life and life in his name. Have we seen who Jesus is? If we have seen, we believe. Let's pray together.

Lord, our God, we thank you that the Bible is honest and it reminds us of realities that we know are true, even if we find them difficult to face.

Suffering and death come to us all and we need to be ready to face that. As Lord, we're so thankful for the ministry of Jesus, for his truth and for his tears, for his love and for his glory that we have seen here in the way that he dealt with Lazarus.

We thank you that it prepares the way for us, for Jesus himself dying and rising. Our Lord, we thank you for the hope that if we trust in Jesus, we too, even though we die, will live.

[27 : 36] Our great hope as Christians is a renewed world where everything is made perfect once again, where we have resurrection bodies unable to sin, knowing no pain or suffering or death, enjoying life with Jesus forever.

Lord, may you confirm those truths and that hope in our hearts we pray. Amen.