

Do You Believe This?

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[0 : 00] I want us to use our imaginations for a moment. Let's picture the scenario in John's story. ! Lazarus, Martha and Mary live in Bethany, some two miles from Jerusalem.! The three of them are clearly close to one another.!

Indeed, the sisters can simply describe Lazarus to Jesus as the one you love, without fear of misunderstanding. One day, Lazarus becomes ill.

We don't know the nature of the illness, but it was something sudden and aggressive, perhaps some kind of fever.

Mary and Martha had likely seen Jesus heal people, maybe including Simon the leper from their own village. Jesus was near the river Jordan, perhaps just 20 miles away.

[1 : 08] So they sent word to him, Lord, he whom you love is ill. You can imagine the sisters' anxiety as their brother grew weaker.

But don't worry, they would have reassured each other. The teacher will be here soon. Soon, everything will be alright when he comes.

But the teacher doesn't come. Lazarus' breathing grows shallower and stops. They're devastated, confused.

Something of that pain even reproaches there in the sisters' words to Jesus when he does arrive. But four days too late. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

I wonder if you've ever been in a situation where you were waiting for God. Perhaps at some great crisis of your life.

[2 : 14] Though we pray, we plead. But the answer that we long for seems to delay. Romans 8 tells us that all things work together for good for those who love God.

But it's difficult to believe that when we're in the midst of the situation, isn't it? Have you ever begun to doubt when you've found yourself there?

As humans, we have a doubt and unbelief problem. It goes back all the way to Genesis 3 where Satan persuaded Adam and Eve to doubt God's word and his goodness.

That unbelief problem is something the Apostle John's very concerned about. In fact, it's why he wrote his gospel. In chapter 20, he says it was written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John carefully chooses seven miracles or signs to support what he says. And this story, the raising of Lazarus, is the last and greatest of these.

[3 : 28] And in case we still miss the point of his story, Jesus explicitly tells the disciples in verse 15 that Lazarus' death occurred so they might believe. Again, Jesus' prayer in verse 42 is that those listening might believe.

John 11 is perhaps one of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible. But John won't allow us to avoid the challenge that it presents.

Do you believe this? Jesus very directly asks Martha right at the centre of the story. Unbelief, of course, comes in many different forms.

We'll see that in the different characters as we go through our passage. The disciples, Mary, Martha, all struggle with unbelief, but in different ways.

Structurally, the passage starts with Jesus not in Bethany, but on the other side of the Jordan. That opening section functions as a prologue. It sets the scene and introduces the problem of unbelief.

[4 : 44] Then when Jesus reaches Bethany, the narrative centres around three conversations. I'm going to suggest that each of those three conversations helps us with a different aspect of unbelief.

So in verses 17 to 27, we have a conversation with Martha. That conversation addresses doubt about who Jesus is.

Doubt about Jesus' identity. The second conversation is with Mary, verses 28 to 37. It concerns doubt about Jesus' compassion.

His love or care for his people. And the third conversation occurs at Lazarus' grave. That third conversation from verses 38 to 44 settles any doubt about Jesus' power.

Specifically his power to raise the dead. So three conversations in Bethany that help us with doubts about Jesus' identity, compassion and power.

[5 : 51] We'll go through the opening prologue and then each of the three conversations before drawing some lessons at the end. Verse 5 tells us that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

But the following verse continues with something strange. So, it says, So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

You don't usually delay when someone you love is ill. Especially if you have the means to heal them. But Jesus explains the mystery in verse 15.

I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. God's purpose and his timing are not always what we would choose.

Jesus' delay would mean agonising distress for Mary and Martha and the other disciples who loved Lazarus. But it would lead to them learning an essential lesson about Jesus.

[6 : 59] About his identity, compassion and power. For those who love God, all things work together for good. But God's purpose for us is often not our comfort, but that our faith and knowledge of him should increase.

John describes the disciples as pretty clueless about Jesus in this preliminary section of our story. They're incredulous that Jesus should return to the very place people had tried to kill him, as recounted in John 10.

Clearly, for all Jesus' teaching, they haven't understood either who he is or the need for him to die on a cross.

In other words, they have doubts about Jesus' identity. So Jesus tells them a short parable about day and night in verse 9. His point is that it's impossible for him to stumble or die during the day when he, the light of the world, is appointed by God to be on earth.

But his death will come at God's appointed hour of darkness. It'll happen, but only according to God's sovereign will. You'll note in passing how prominent the theme of God's sovereignty is in this passage about suffering, and indeed in the whole of John's Gospel.

[8 : 30] Thomas sums up the general spirit of the disciples' unbelief in verse 8. It's our first introduction to Thomas in John's Gospel. Let us go also that we may die with him.

It seems a worthy sentiment, although in reality Thomas would flee with the other disciples when Jesus was eventually arrested. But I think John, the author, has a purpose in introducing Thomas by name here.

Thomas is going to play a central role in John's story of Jesus' resurrection. Chapter 20 tells us that Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them after rising.

Thomas would entertain nothing of their claims of meeting with Jesus. Unless I see the nail marks and put my hand into the wound on his side, I will never believe, he declares.

Yet, when Jesus did appear to Thomas, Thomas gave perhaps the most complete confession in the whole Gospel. My Lord and my God.

[9 : 45] In chapter 11, John's telling us specifically that Thomas was present at the raising of Lazarus. That little mention of Thomas shows two things about unbelief.

Firstly, the incredible capacity the human heart has for unbelief. Thomas saw Lazarus being raised. He of all people should have believed when Jesus was raised as he promised.

But we also see God's incredible patience in bringing even the most resistant of unbelievers to faith in him. That theme of God overcoming unbelief is what we're going to explore in the three conversations that follow in Bethany.

The first of these is Jesus' conversation with Martha from verse 17. It's a conversation about who Jesus is.

About Jesus' identity. Our society is obsessed with questions of identity. Who am I? Can I create my own identity?

[10 : 54] Well, knowing who we are is important. But the question of Jesus' identity, who he is, is infinitely more important. And John's recounted this first conversation with Martha to address any

doubt or confusion we might have about Jesus' identity.

Martha opens by saying, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. On the one hand, it shows faith, a recognition of Jesus' ability to heal the sick.

On the other hand, it speaks of regret and surely even of reproach. You should have been here, she seems to be saying.

But her second statement does contain at least a glimmer of hope. Even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Perhaps you can identify with those mixed feelings when we're going through hard times.

Faith and hope, yes. But with a twinge of reproach, resentment too. God, you should have been there.

[12:11] You should have intervened. Martha's mixture of faith and doubt leads to a theological conversation with Jesus.

John recounts that conversation because it helps explain the purpose of the miracle that Jesus was about to do. You see, this is the ultimate of John's seven signs.

And a sign points to something. This sign points to Jesus' upcoming death and resurrection and then to that of the Christian. John 11 isn't there to tell us we can always expect healing or resurrection in this life.

There's no ground for prosperity gospel teaching here. Lazarus being raised was exceptional. And that's actually the whole point. I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day, Martha says.

Her statement was perfectly orthodox. The Pharisees could quite happily have made the same confession. But Jesus turns the conversation to himself, his identity.

[13:28] In the fifth of seven great I am sayings in John's gospel, Jesus says, I am the resurrection and the life. It's not just that there is a resurrection.

Rather, it's that resurrection life is in Jesus. What Jesus says takes us right back to John's prologue in chapter one. In him was life.

You see, Jesus' identity is central to the gospel. The gospel, in a sense, is Jesus. Someone might share a view of morality.

They might believe there's a God. They might believe in life after death, as the Pharisees did. But if they don't believe that Jesus is God incarnate, the one who created and upholds all things for his glory, and who died on a cross for our sins, then it's not the Christian gospel.

You can't have the gospel without Jesus and without accepting him as Lord. Jesus' question in verse 26 is a challenge to us, as to Martha.

[14:45] Do you believe this? Do I? You might be interested in Christianity, maybe come to church, but eventually Jesus asks a question that demands a yes or a no answer.

The gospel's not abstract or theoretical. Each one of us has to answer Jesus' question. Do we believe this or not?

The answer to that question will change everything about our lives, but we can't get away from it. Martha's answer is, I think, remarkable.

Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. John obviously approves of her Christological summary.

He adopts it to describe the purpose statement of his book that we read earlier from chapter 20, 31, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

[16:01] We tend to think of Martha in the light of Luke 10. There, Mary is commended for sitting at Jesus' feet, while Martha herself is gently rebuked for being distracted by other things.

But here, Martha shows incredible insight and faith. Martha and Mary were, it seems, very different characters.

But let's not be quick to write off someone else's love and knowledge of God because their personality or gifting is different to ours. It's interesting, too, to compare Martha's statement with Peter's great confession in Mark 8, where he says, you are the Christ.

Martha's confession must have been around the same time as Peter's, or almost certainly a little earlier. And if anything, she goes further than Peter. Note that Martha says three things.

Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He's the Son of God. And thirdly, he's the one who is coming into the world. That is, he's the one whom the Scriptures foretell.

[17:18] We come to Jesus' second conversation, that with Mary in verse 28. It is, I think, a conversation that answers any doubt we might have about Jesus' compassion.

Jesus' compassion. It's striking that when word came of Jesus' arrival, Mary stayed where she was. Was her grief just too great? Or was it a sense of betrayal that Jesus should have been there? It's all too easy, isn't it, to shut God out of our lives when we're going through suffering. But in his infinite grace, God still calls to us.

And sometimes he does that through other people, through Martha, in this case. The teacher is here and is calling for you. When Mary did meet Jesus, she fell at his feet.

[18:23] One gets the impression this was more of brokenness and despair than worship. And she says exactly the same thing to Jesus as her sister, word for word. If you had been here, my brother would not have died.

Clearly, the two sisters had been talking, trying to make sense together of what was happening. But with Mary, unlike Martha, there was no qualifying afterstatement of hope.

No, even now, God will give you what you ask. Mary's grief, her hopelessness, seems complete. And not only due to her brother's death, but to Jesus' apparent failure to intervene.

The two sisters' words to Jesus are exactly the same. But do you notice how Jesus' responses are completely different?

It's been observed that with Martha, Jesus engaged in a theological discussion about the future hope of the resurrection. With Mary, he did no such thing. With Mary, Jesus just wept.

[19:42] We've called Jesus' meeting with Mary a conversation. Actually, there weren't many words spoken. Sometimes tears are the most eloquent and meaningful communication.

The phrase, Jesus was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled, is difficult to translate. No doubt, it implies deep sorrow, not so much for Lazarus, who Jesus knew would rise, but for Mary and her uncontrollable grief.

But scholars say it also contains the idea of anger. That anger is surely against death itself. God, the author and source of life, had breathed life into Adam that he might enjoy eternal fellowship with the God who created him.

This, in a sense, was not how it was meant to be. John 11 is a dramatic illustration of how all things work together for good for those who love God.

We don't always in this life see what that good might be. But here, at least, we can see good coming from tragedy with many coming to believe in Jesus in verse 45.

[21:00] But these few verses also remind us that Jesus isn't a cold, aloof strategist. Even when Mary's suffering is part of God's plan for good, Jesus can't help sharing in her suffering.

And Jesus has lost none of that compassion. When, like Mary, the only prayer we can make to him is our tears, surely his care for us is the same as for Mary.

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that we don't grieve for those who fall asleep as those who have no hope. But grieve nonetheless we do. Jesus did, even although he knew Lazarus would rise.

We're not, as Christians, to be uncaring Stoics. Sometimes, in the depths of their despair, the most helpful thing we can do is to weep with people.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, says Paul in Romans 12, 15, and weep with those who weep. Job's three friends were perhaps at their wisest when they just wept and spent seven days with them on the ground in silence in Job 2.

[22:19] Perhaps they'd have done well to leave it at that. Well, if Jesus' conversation with Martha addresses doubts about Jesus' identity and his conversation with Mary addresses doubts about his compassion, the final conversation at the graveside from verse 38 onwards removes any doubt about his power.

Psalms 62, 11 says that power belongs to God and to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. Power without compassion, it's said, is tyranny.

Compassion without power is helpless. But God, the psalmist reminds us, is both compassionate and powerful. People. Earlier, we admired Martha's understanding and faith in Jesus.

Whatever you ask from God, God will give you, she had said. But when it came to the critical moment, even Martha's faith seems to have wavered. So when Jesus commands that the stone is taken away in verse 39, Martha objects, Lord, by this time there will be an odour for he's been dead four days.

It's easy, isn't it, to start well on some journey of faith. But then at the critical moment for our faith to waver. Do you remember the story of Peter walking in the water in Matthew 14?

[23 : 55] It started so well, but then we're told he saw the wind. As the doubts came, he began to sink. There is something of Peter and Martha in all of us.

If we are engaged in some endeavour for the gospel, let's pray that we would keep remembering to the end God's power, as this third conversation reminds us.

Jesus' answer to Martha, did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God, seems more an encouragement to believe than a rebuke. And despite all Martha's and Mary's doubts, Jesus did nevertheless gloriously raise Lazarus.

There's an encouragement for us here. So often we think that we need greater faith, and probably we do, but Jesus tells us elsewhere that even faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

We're reminded of Hudson Taylor's famous quote, you don't need great faith, but faith in a great God. The raising of Lazarus, dead for four days, is an ultimate demonstration of Jesus' power.

[25 : 14] He did it merely by speaking three short words. Lazarus, come out. It brings to mind Genesis 1 and the mighty creative power of God's word.

The raising of Lazarus is indeed a mighty miracle, but as we saw, the purpose of a sign is to point to something, and the culminating miracle of John's seven signs is designed to prepare us for the infinitely greater event of Jesus' own death and resurrection.

It's not difficult to see how John picks out details we'll see mirrored at Calvary. The tomb's a cave with a stone across the entrance. Both accounts have a woman called Mary, albeit a different Mary, weeping and meeting with Jesus.

The words used for the grave clothes of Lazarus and Jesus are strikingly similar. But there are differences too. No one needed to tell Jesus to rise.

No human hands were required to roll away the stone, and Jesus needed no one to remove the grave clothes. Rather, Peter and John just found the linen cloths and the face cloth lying there.

[26 : 36] And, most obviously, Lazarus would one day die again. Jesus wouldn't. Lazarus' body, you see, was the same as before.

Jesus' body was the same, but it was also gloriously different. Jesus' resurrection, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians, is a glorious foretaste and guarantee of what awaits all Christians.

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. Just as Jesus' authoritative effectual command to Lazarus points back to God's work in creation, so it points forward to his work of re-creation.

An hour is coming, Jesus had said in John 5 28, when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

[28 : 00] That last verse about judgment takes us back to the need for a response to Jesus. Do you believe this?

We too are called to accept that Jesus' death on the cross was for our sins and to respond in faith. This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent, we read in John 6 29.

Faith, life-changing trust in Jesus, is what's required so that we might enjoy a renewed life, that we might spend eternity with the gloriously resurrected Christ.

I wonder what aspect of belief each of us struggles with. Is it with Jesus' compassion, or his power, or even his identity?

God's love, the ultimate assurance of his compassion is his willingness to die on a cross for us. The ultimate assurance of his power is his own resurrection and defeat of the grave.

[29 : 13] The ultimate assurance of his identity as the Christ, God's son, is his ascension to the right hand of God the Father. Let's be encouraged by the story of Thomas, who went from an unreasonable sceptic to acknowledging Jesus as Lord and God.

John 11 is a wonderful encouragement. It reminds us that both suffering and waiting have a purpose. God isn't late.

Bruce Milne commented in this passage, God is the best of timekeepers. he created time. He's never late for his appointments. But let's make sure that we're not so focused on ourselves and our

own need of encouragement that we lose sight of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who brought about this miracle.

Colin, these last few Sunday evenings, has been preaching on the glory of Christ. The language of glory is prominent in John's description of his seven signs.

After describing the first sign, the turning of water into wine, John says this, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee and manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him.

[30 : 43] That link between belief and glory is emphasised in this last sign too. Jesus explains in verse 4 that Lazarus' death is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

And he connects belief and glory in verse 40. Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? All things ultimately are for the glory of Christ who created all things, who raises the dead and who will bring history to an end by the power of his word.

Jesus' raising of Lazarus was divisive. The end of the chapter tells us that many of the Jews believed in Jesus because of it, but the Pharisees' and Sadducees' response was to make plans to kill Jesus.

What will our response be today? it will come down to how we answer that question we've kept coming back to. Do you believe?

The response which John commends to those who do believe is that of Mary. John deliberately started chapter 11 by telling us that this was the story of the same Mary who anointed Jesus.

[32 : 10] At the start of chapter 12 he recounts that story. Mary, he says, took a jar of very expensive ointment worth a year's wages and poured it in Jesus, wiping his feet with her hair.

It was a lavish, even wasteful action, not to say socially inappropriate, but it was a wonderful expression of her love and gratitude to the one who had given her back, her brother, who had shown her such tender pity in her brokenness and who would shortly die on a cross for her sins. Mary's response is surely the only reasonable one if we have known that same love and have believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who was to come into the world.