

John 11—Lord of Life and Conqueror of Death

I believe the greatest and most amazing miracle Jesus did (except His own resurrection) was the raising of Lazarus in the Gospel of John chapter 11. What made this miracle distinctive was the reactions of everyone to Jesus before He raised Lazarus. Their disappointment and frustration with Jesus made the miracle all the more dramatic. Quite often people pray for a miracle, and they believe God will intervene to help them, but their prayers come back unanswered. In this story, we see how Jesus answers our prayers in puzzling ways, yet always in the most loving and wise way. We know God loves us, but we don't know what is best for us. God alone knows the big picture of how all things work together, and has an eternal view instead of our short range view. All the characters in the story of Lazarus are only focused on Lazarus' illness and death, but Jesus is aware of the big picture of the redemption of mankind and eternal life. They expected Jesus to relieve Lazarus' illness, but only Jesus knew that the events in John 11 would lead to the greater miracles of his Palm Sunday celebration, the crucifixion, and Jesus' resurrection.

One amazing thing about this well known story is that everyone is disappointed in Jesus. He had previously been revealed to be God in the flesh, the awaited Messiah, the great deliverer, and the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophets. God had confirmed this at His baptism and transfiguration. All of Jesus' works had confirmed it, yet everyone in this story is disappointed. In John 11:8, the disciples are disappointed about going back to Judea, in verse 21 Martha is disappointed He got there late, in v.32 Mary is upset, in v.37 the crowd of mourners complained, and in verse 48 the religious leaders were mad at Him.

Life Seems to Disappoint Everyone but God

We all have our expectations of what God should do. We set goals for God, but when He doesn't perform, we may be disappointed. Our way seems right to us. We expect a world where we experience mild consequences every time we sin, but pleasure and affirmations with every good deed. Faithful believers would be healed of any illnesses while scumbags get what they deserve. The good die of old age, and the bad die young. Instead, what typically happens is we may pray for healing, but the patient dies. The good get as many problems as the bad, and the good may die young. David expressed his disappointment with God in many of his psalms. In Ps. 44, David cried out to the Lord that he had heard all kinds of stories about how God did great and mighty works for his people (Ps44:1-8), but in v.9-26 David said that wasn't his experience. David said God had not helped his army, David's people were treated badly, and it was as if God had not heard their prayers or He didn't care. Where is God when we hurt? Where is God when I need Him? God seems hidden and silent. Of course we must not lose sight of the truth that David wrote this during a time of great emotion as he was going through a difficult trial in which God would eventually deliver him. Like us, when he was emotional, he had a short memory and

forgot all the help God gave him in the past. Therefore it just seemed to David that God wasn't listening, but in fact God just had different timing and a better plan.

What if God did perform according to our desires and expectations? If God fully revealed Himself to all, spoke to them clear instructions about what He wants us to do, and God intervened against all problems and evil, would it make a huge difference? Has God ever done this? Actually God has, so let's evaluate the effect it had on Israel. In the Book of Exodus, we read that God spoke directly to Moses, gave clear instructions, and then God intervened on their behalf by doing ten awesome miracles resulting in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness God fed them, clothed them, gave them water, and fought their battles. God punished evil immediately, and rewarded obedience. He spoke audibly and made Himself visible in the shekinah glory that they followed every day in the pillar of cloud, and later in the Tabernacle. God assembled the entire nation of Israel in the plains below Mt. Sinai, and spoke directly to them when He gave them His perfect moral righteous standard we call the Ten Commandments (Ex.19-20). There were no atheists on that day in Israel.

Did all that make Israel love and obey God? No, they feared God, but would not trust and obey. Therefore, would people really (as many say and demand) love God and believe in God if He would just intervene to stop all evil, reveal Himself clearly, and give us clear instructions? The answer is available in the Old Testament. Despite God's faithful good treatment, constant appearances and miracles, Israel repeatedly failed. About 50 years after God gave them the land of Canaan, Israel devolved into anarchy where every man "did what was right in his own eyes". We read in Judges 2:10-12, "there arose another generation...then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals (idols), and they forsook the Lord who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they followed other gods...thus they provoked the Lord to anger." If you think the human race today is different from or better than the people then, I think you are fooling yourself because Israel well represented the human race. God's response was to withdraw, to "give them over", in other words to let them do what they wanted apart from Him. People may feel like God has let them down, abandoned them, but biblically who really let who down? Who betrayed whom? God restrains Himself from intervening against evil for our benefit. When people say, "Where is God, why doesn't He do something?" it escapes their notice that if He did do something it would be to clean house. Do we really want Him to right all wrongs, and clean up evil? What if He started with us? It seems we want justice for others without judgment or consequences for ourselves, and mercy without justice for ourselves.

John 11:1-16, the Unique Ways of God

Think for a minute about the greatest challenge to your faith. In my informal poll it has been people's frustration that God does not often act as we expect Him to or we want Him to. Most people would not want their friends and family to know about their frustration, so they "put on a happy face". Many times in a crisis situation they

expected God to intervene and solve their problems, but He did not. GOOD NEWS—God has already addressed this frustration and disappointment by including it in many of the stories in the Bible. Disappointment with God is a key issue in the Lazarus story of John 11. The Gospel of John is unique amongst the four Gospel accounts in that the theme is the unique nature of Jesus as the God-Man. John used seven miracles or “signs” to reveal Jesus’ unique identity, and the raising of Lazarus was the last climaxing sign of Jesus being Lord of life and Conqueror of death. After each of John’s miracles we read that “many believed in Jesus”, but also the miracles intensify the opposition of the religious leaders against Jesus.

The miracle of Lazarus in John 11 begins with a crisis at the home of Jesus’ close friends and disciples in Bethany—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Every year during the festivals in Jerusalem, Jesus stayed at their house just east of Jerusalem, and they were devoted to Him. In December, John 8 records that Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Lights (Hanukkah), and got into a heated confrontation with the religious leaders that ended with them trying to kill Him. Several weeks later in John 9, Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath and they tried to arrest Him. Then in John 10, Jesus had another heated discussion with them at a later date, and again they tried to kill Him. Therefore, some time before Passover (March), Jesus left Judea and went northeast across the Jordan River, probably a two day walk from Jerusalem. Now in John 11, Mary and Martha send an urgent message of their crisis—Lazarus is deathly ill. Jesus made a comforting statement when He heard it that he wouldn’t die, and the illness was for God’s glory. In Jn.11:5-6, we read a very surprising statement that Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, yet when He heard of the crisis He stayed where He was two more days, and meanwhile Lazarus died. If it was a two day walk, then Lazarus died while the message was being delivered because when Jesus got there he had been dead for four days. As we analyze this, we must confess confusion that Jesus would linger while the one He loves is dying. Our reaction would be to call 911 emergency, and ask for the fastest ambulance to the nearest hospital. You certainly would not just wait around and do nothing, so clearly God’s ways are not our ways. Somehow, for some purpose that escaped everyone there, Jesus deliberately delayed because He loved them. Is that a contradiction? Clearly, God’s timing is different from ours and He has a bigger and better plan that we can’t fathom.

After two days, Jesus surprised His disciples by announcing that they were going back to Judea. In Jn.11:8-10, the disciples expressed their dismay that if they went back to the area of Jerusalem the religious leaders would kill them. Jesus answered with a cryptic proverb that meant that there is an appointed time for everything, and He must walk in the light of His Father’s will. In order to reveal how clueless the disciples were, the author wrote in v.11-14 that Jesus told them that Lazarus had “fallen asleep” and that Jesus was going to “awaken him”. Jesus meant that he was physically dead, but that Jesus was going to bring him back. As if they were not confused enough, then Jesus plainly told them that Lazarus was dead but Jesus was glad. At the height of confusion, who better to speak up than doubting Thomas who with a dejected fatalistic attitude said, “Oh well, let’s all go and die with Him”.

Bethany—the Wake

Just before Jesus and the disciples arrived in Bethany, Martha went out to meet Him to express her anguish that Jesus had arrived too late to save Lazarus. In Jn.11:17-29, you can't help but realize that Martha was putting the lion's share of blame on Jesus by saying, "Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died." What took you so long? Did you not care? In verses 24-27 they have an exchange that reveals a lot of truth, but clearly Jesus was speaking on a higher plain than Martha could understand. She was interested in the here and now while she surmised that Jesus was only interested in the distant future of eternity. We the students receive some awesome teaching about who Jesus is "I am the resurrection and the life", and how very important our belief in Him is "he who believes in Me shall live (forever) even if he dies (physically)." Who else could say that they are the resurrection and the life? We could all say we believe in the resurrection and eternal life, but only Jesus IS the resurrection and the life, and what He was about to do with Lazarus would prove it.

Act two of the drama in Bethany concerned Mary's reaction to Jesus' arrival in verses 30-37. Once again we see how disappointed in Jesus everyone was, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died", and then she began weeping right there at His feet. Was Jesus indifferent to their emotions? Did He not even care? Even though He knew that He was getting ready to raise Lazarus back to life, Jesus still cared about their feelings, and we read that He was greatly moved in spirit and "Jesus wept". This reveals to us the reaction to Jesus of the crowd of prominent Jews from Jerusalem who had come to pay their respects. They also were disappointed in Jesus and said, "Could not this man who healed the blind, have kept him from dying?"

Act three of the drama in Bethany took place at the tomb of Lazarus who had been dead for four days. There must have been hundreds of mourners there from Jerusalem based on all the reports that went back to Jerusalem in John 11:45-46; 12:9, 17, "the multitude who were with Jesus when He called Lazarus out of the tomb". In Jn.11:39, Jesus insisted that they remove the stone covering Lazarus' tomb, and then Jesus gave an audible prayer to the Father for the benefit of His audience, and in v.43 Jesus yelled out, "Lazarus come forth." I believe that if Jesus had not called him by name every dead person in that cemetery would have come back. Imagine the reaction of the crowd who then saw Lazarus bound with wrappings come hopping out of the tomb! OK now I get it, Jesus delayed and let Lazarus die because He was going to do His biggest and most impressive miracle yet that would blow their minds—but not so fast. There was even at least two greater purposes. First, this was the great event that provoked Palm Sunday. I always wondered why Jesus came to all the Passovers, but why on only His last one did a huge crowd form and welcome Him as the Messiah and King of Israel? We read the answer in John 12:9 and v.17-18, "the great multitude went out and met Him because they heard that He had performed this sign (raising Lazarus)." Secondly, we read in John 11:46-50, that this miracle had such an effect that the high priests decided they must have

Jesus killed. Therefore the raising of Lazarus was God's way of provoking the crucifixion of Jesus, which He had planned from eternity. A lesser reason for this miracle is no doubt the reaction of the crowd who witnessed it in Bethany. In John 11:45 we read that many who beheld it believed in Jesus on the spot, and in John 12 we read that they became great witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem. At the same time, we are shocked to see in Jn. 11:46 that some who witnessed it still did not believe, and conspired to have Him killed. What insanity is this that they would reject God in the flesh who had proven that He had the power of life and death in His hands?

Now we all struggle with life because we all feel like Jesus came for us and to please us. Jesus definitely came for us but not to please us, and He does not answer to us or our agenda. Jesus answers to God and God's agenda, and we must submit to that as well. When Jesus uttered His last words from the cross, He said "It is finished" signifying that His sacrifice had accomplished the will and plan of God to atone for our sins, and only then was God satisfied. We may still be disappointed from time to time, but remember all these Bible stories that make it clear that God has a bigger and better plan that we can't see yet. Therefore, we must live by faith until the glory of God is revealed just as Jesus first said of the bad news of Lazarus, "This sickness is...for the glory of God..."

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