

Thru the Bible: The Raising of Lazarus [John 11]

Introduction (John 11:1-57): The story of the raising of Lazarus is the final and climactic “sign” in the first half of the Gospel (“Book of Signs”) and contains the fifth “I am” statement, *“I am the resurrection and the life”* (11:25). After this story, Jesus’ public ministry is completed, with no further public discourses. From now on, John the gospel writer will focus on the culminating events and private teaching of Jesus’ final week, leading up to his third and final Passover Festival in Jerusalem. While the Synoptic Gospels include the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mt. and Mk.) and the widow of Nain’s son (Lk.), only John records this astonishing story of Jesus raising someone already entombed for four days.

Jesus and the Bethany Family (11:1-6): The sisters Mary and Martha appear to be known to the readers, perhaps from the story in **Luke 10:38-42** of Jesus teaching in their home, but their brother Lazarus is only mentioned in John’s Gospel. This family appears to be very special to Jesus, and their home in Bethany (near Jerusalem) may have been a regular place of hospitality for Jesus and his disciples when in the region. Leading up to our chapter, in **10:40-42**, John tells us that when Jesus heard the news of Lazarus’ illness, he was teaching across the Jordan River, in the place where John the Baptist had been preaching, which is identified as a different Bethany in **John 1:28**. After receiving the news, Jesus stays two more days in that place.

Jesus and the Disciples (11:7-16): When Jesus informs the disciples that he plans to return to Judea, they are surprised, since during their recent visit there, the Jewish authorities had tried to stone Jesus (10:31). Jesus’ seemingly cryptic response about the hours of daylight and darkness reflects his own understanding throughout the gospel about the timing of his ministry and the anticipated “hour” of fulfillment, as illustrated earlier in **7:30**, *“Then they tried to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him, because his hour had not yet come”* (also **8:20**). The ensuing discussion contains typical Johannine examples of double meanings (sleep//death), and irony in Thomas’ statement, *“Let us go, that we may die with him”* (11:16).

“The words ‘my time has not yet come’ include the first of nine references to Jesus’ ‘hour/time’ ..., a significant theme in this Gospel. The first three references indicate that Jesus’ hour had not yet come; the last six indicate that it had come. The hour towards which everything moves is the hour of Jesus’ glorification, which takes place through his death, resurrection and exaltation...No machinations of Jesus’ opponents could bring his ministry to a premature end; he would not surrender himself to their hands until his ‘hour’ had come.” Colin Kruse, *John*, 92, 189

Jesus and Martha (11:17-27): After a two day journey, Jesus arrives near Bethany at the point that Lazarus had been interred already for four days and the communal practice of mourning (typically seven days) was in full swing, with people coming even from nearby Jerusalem. In the conversation between Jesus and Martha, there is the typical misunderstanding of his words and intentions, with Martha affirming the common expectation of the Pharisees in a future general resurrection, which Jesus himself had already announced, *“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves 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 condemnation”* (John 5:28-29). It is at this point that Jesus announces, *“I am the resurrection and life. Whoever believes in me, even though they die, will live”* (11:25). In response to Jesus’ direct question, “Do you believe this?” Martha confesses her belief with three Christological titles.

Jesus and Mary (11:28-37): John builds the suspense even further by including a meeting between Jesus and Mary, where she states her belief that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death, if only he had been there, presumably by a healing miracle. When Jesus saw her and the other mourners weeping, it affected him deeply and John uses very strong language to describe Jesus’ emotions, “he was greatly *disturbed in spirit* and *deeply moved within*” (11:33; emphasized again in v.38). Since the first Greek term is most often used of *anger* or *indignation*, commentators have debated over how to interpret and translate Jesus’ inward response and its cause.

1. Some think he is angry at the grief displayed and a lack of trust that he could change the situation.
2. Others, that he is angry at death itself, as a corrupting power in God’s good creation.

“My child, let your tears fall for the dead; and as one in great pain begin the lament...Let your weeping be bitter and your wailing fervent; make your mourning worthy of the departed” **Sir. 38:16-17**
“Rabbi Judah says, ‘Even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman”
m. Ket. 4.4

3. Still others suggest he is angry because this situation will precipitate his own suffering and death.

4. But most translations soften the language because the immediate outward response of Jesus is to *weep*, and the other mourners then interpret this as an indication of how much Jesus “loved him” – something already affirmed by the sisters and John in 11:3, 5.



Jesus and Lazarus (11:38-44): Finally, Jesus makes his way to the cave tomb of Lazarus and gives instructions to remove the stone blocking the entrance, over the objections of Martha, who warns Jesus about the effects of decomposition after four days in a warm climate. Interestingly, Jesus’ prayer to the Father is one of thanks for having heard him, as if the following restoration of Lazarus was a foregone conclusion. While the raising of Lazarus is usually called a *resuscitation*, not a *resurrection*, this story is a sort of bookend (*inclusio*) which prepares the way for the later story of Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. There are a number of days elapsed, mourning women, a rock-hewn tomb sealed with a stone, grave clothes with a specific detail of the face cloth, along with doubts among those involved.

The response of the Sanhedrin (11:45-53): As with previous miracles and encounters with Jesus, there is a mixed reaction to this final startling sign of the raising of Lazarus, dividing between the twin poles of belief and unbelief. The fact that many “believed in him” as a result of the event, and the nearness of the Passover festival, forces the religious leaders to a crisis point. If something isn’t done soon, they fear that the growing messianic movement will bring political and social instability and invite the intervention of the Roman overlords and the potential destruction of the city, temple and nation. It is at this point that the High Priest Caiaphas proposes an ironic solution, “*it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish*” (11:50). This sets into motion the plot to kill Jesus and transitions John’s narrative from stories of mission to the final week of passion and preparation of the disciples.

The response of Jesus (11:54-57):, Knowing that his “hour” is at hand, Jesus withdraws with his disciples to a remote location amidst speculation among the people about his presence at the Passover, and the authorities ordering a “warrant” for his arrest.

Application: This passage, in relation to Jesus’ response to human frailty and grief, invites us to consider (and reconsider) our views of God and the revelation of God’s nature through Jesus, the *Word* made flesh.

1. Christian grief and empathy: How should a believer respond to personal loss and death in light of the hope of the resurrection? Some would (mis-) quote Paul’s words in 1 Thess. 4:13 to not grieve for loved ones who have died “*as those who have no hope.*” But Paul is not saying that grief itself is wrong, only a hopeless type of grief. Jesus himself assumes the disciples will grieve, weep, and mourn when he is taken from them (John 16:6, 20, 22). We are called to “*weep with those who weep*” (Rom. 12:15) and one of the Beatitudes even states, “*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*” (Mt. 5:4).

“To begin with, we should not rest content, as some older writers did, with treating Jesus’ tears as evidence that he was a real human being, not just a divine being ‘playing’ at being human. That is no doubt true; but nobody in Jesus’ world imagined he was anything other than a real flesh-and-blood human being, with emotions like everyone else. Rather, throughout the gospel John is telling us something much more striking; that when we look at Jesus, *not least when we look at Jesus in tears*, we are seeing not just a flesh-and-blood human being but the **Word** made flesh (1:1-14). The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of a friend. Only when we stop and ponder this will we understand the full mystery of John’s gospel. Only when we put away our high-and-dry pictures of who God is and replace them with pictures in which the Word who is God can cry with the world’s crying will we discover what the word ‘God’ really means.” **N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone*, Vol. 2, 10-11**

2. The God who weeps: Historically, the doctrine of the “impassibility” of God has often been influenced more by Greek philosophy than biblical theology. And the proper understanding of what this doctrine means and *doesn’t mean* doesn’t simply come from the NT story of a suffering and crucified God, a theology of the cross. The OT also reveals to us a passionate and vulnerable God, unafraid to show emotion and weep over his wounded creation (Isa. 42:14; 63:9-10; Jer. 14:17; Exod. 3:7). Jurgen Moltmann has written, “*A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is a loveless being*” (**The Crucified God**, 222). However one understands the doctrine of impassibility, it cannot mean that God is unaffected or emotionless in relation to human experience.

“The God who calls others to a vocation that may entail suffering is no stranger to that kind of vocation and to that suffering. The God who ‘knows’ the sufferings of Israel (**Exod. 3:7**) has in Jesus Christ entered deeply into our suffering world and made it his own so that neither suffering nor evil constitutes a final word for the creation. God is not like a mechanic who chooses to fix the suffering of the world from outside the world; God is more like a good medicine, choosing to heal the world from within, by entering deeply into its life. God saves the world by taking its suffering into the very heart of the divine life, bearing it there, and then wearing it in the form of cross”

Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God and Natural Disasters*, 119