

Chapter 11

The Gospel of John: the Death of Lazarus

Chapter 11 consists of Jesus' final "sign" as recorded by John, namely, the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

John sets the scene by reminding his readers that Jesus was a close friend of the family of Lazarus. He knew his two sisters, Mary and Martha, and pointed out that Mary had previously anointed Jesus' feet with perfume—an act of devotion. Clearly, this family believed Jesus to be the Messiah, and they further believed in his ability to perform miraculous deeds. Accordingly, they send Jesus a message that Lazarus is ill, perhaps thinking Jesus will come and heal him.

Jesus responds by saying, "This is not a sickness unto death but one through which the Son of God will be glorified." No one knows what he's talking about because, as usual, he is on a whole other level of discourse. Moreover, rather than going to him, Jesus stays put for two more days, insuring that Lazarus will die before he gets there.

After the two days, Jesus announces that he wants to go to Judea where "the Jews" had wanted to stone him. The disciples object on this basis but to no avail. Jesus feels that he needs to bring light into the darkness. He also informs them that Lazarus is dead. Moreover, this is for their sake that he let him die. It was "so that you may believe." Thomas at this point expresses their devotion to Jesus by saying they should all go so as to die with him. When Jesus actually is dying, it will be another story.

Jesus arrives four days after Lazarus' death. The Jews believed that after three days, a deceased person's spirit had vacated the premises and that there was therefore no hope of a revival. Martha comes to meet him and expresses confidence that, had he [Jesus] been there to heal Lazarus, he would not have died. Jesus responds by saying, "Your brother will rise again." Of course, Martha thinks he is referring to the eschatological resurrection at the end of time. Not really. Jesus is referring to what he plans to do. And he shares this with another "I am" statement. "I am the resurrection and the life...and everyone who believes in me will never die." That is to say, through faith in Christ, a person receives the Holy Spirit. The life of the Spirit, and the life of the believer come into a mystical union. Since the Holy Spirit is eternally living, the person is caught up in everlasting life. While the body dies, the born-again life does not. When asked if she believes this, Martha responds by confessing that Jesus is indeed "the Messiah."

There upon, Martha goes back to the house to get Mary. Mary immediately comes to him and says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Her weeping and the mourning of all the people around them, causes Jesus to be deeply

moved and disturbed. It was the reality and consequences of death that disturbed Jesus. Jesus came to save, to bring life, to overcome the nihilizing effect of death. He asks where they laid the dead man. He then also begins to weep, and the observation made is the shortest verse in the Bible.

The crowd thinks he is weeping out of love for his friend. I don't think so. Jesus is weeping in the face of and because of the devastating results of death. So disturbed is he about this last and final enemy of life that he feels compelled to show that God would have it otherwise. According to Genesis 2-3, death was not God's idea for human beings. So long as a human being lives in God, and God in him in a bond of love, there would be no death. Unfortunately, human beings, because they decided they would rather be "like God", because they felt they could become "little gods" (something we have been doing ever since Eden), they separated themselves from God. This meant death came into the world. For the only way for a created being to have everlasting life, that person would have to live in the God who has eternal life.

Today, according to the magazine, The Economist, scientists are dreaming once again about keeping people alive indefinitely. Maybe even permanently? Alas, even if we could do that, cosmic forces are such that eventually, the earth will be destroyed.

In any case, Jesus desires to demonstrate God's will with respect to death, and because he does that, the sign points to Jesus' own resurrection after his passion.

First, Jesus tells them to roll the stone aside. "No," they say. "It's been four days. The spirit of Lazarus is no longer there. It will be a stench." Jesus responds by telling them that, if they believed, they would see the glory of God. So they comply.

Jesus then prays to God, thanking God because he hears him, and thanking him because those who see this sign might come to believe. This is the point of this, and of all the signs. Jesus wants to bring people to faith in the God who is capable of saving them. As Lazarus comes back to life, it's as if God's Kingdom—His power to save—come to earth. He wants them to know that the God who raised Lazarus is the God who sent Jesus.

With that, Jesus commands Lazarus to come out. As he struggles to move while still being bound in burial wraps, Jesus says, "Unbind him and let him go."

For the Jewish authorities who saw this, it became the last straw. They call a meeting of the council. The problem as they see it is that if they allow him to continue doing these signs, then the people will believe in him, and the Romans will destroy their nation. This was, in fact, probably a critical turning point where action had to be taken. At any sign of rebellion, the Romans would have come down very hard.

However, the high priest, Caiaphas, a Sadducean who cooperated with the Romans, had another idea. From his point of view, it seemed better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. From that time, they conspired to put him to death.

From that time on, Jesus no longer walked openly among the crowds. His days of public teaching were over.

Chapter 12 opens with Jesus back at Bethany in the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Martha served, but Mary took a pound of costly perfume and anointed his feet as if for burial. Perhaps she knew of the Jewish authorities' desire to kill Jesus. In fact, at the end of the passage, Jesus even says she bought it for his burial. This was an act of worship. Mary was demonstrating her faith in Jesus as the One whom God had sent. He was her Lord. Nevertheless, this act caused controversy. Judas, identified as a thief in this gospel, but one who also showed tendencies of being perhaps a Zealot, and thinking that Jesus would bring a violent revolution, objected on the grounds that the perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus affirms Mary's devotion as an act of value in itself.