

Autumn Ridge Church Women's Bible Study
Gospel of John: So That You May Believe
Chapter 11 ~ Jann Wright
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Good Morning/Evening and welcome to Women's Bible Study. I hope you are enjoying the few warm days that give us a glimpse of spring. Palm Sunday is only a few days away and Easter is the following Sunday. How appropriate that we continue our study of the gospel of John. Our study much like our calendars today takes place before the events of Holy Week and will take us right up to Chapter 12 which begins six days before Passover and includes the account of the Triumphal Entry. Jesus will move toward Jerusalem by way of the village of Bethany. Please open your Bibles to John, chapter 11.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²(This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."¹

Context

Geographically, Bethany is a village east of Jerusalem over the Mount of Olives about one and half miles away from Jerusalem. Bethany was the final stop on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. When Jesus was in Jerusalem, he often used Bethany as his base. That is why we see multiple stories about Bethany in the gospels (Matthew 21:17, 26:6). Jesus likely lived here the last week of his life.²

Chronologically, the events of this passage occur between the winter Hanukkah Feast and the upcoming spring when Jesus is crucified.³ Scholars generally place the date around A.D. 30.

Relationally, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were dear friends of Jesus, somewhat of an extended family. The sisters are known for their hospitality. They opened their home to Jesus in Luke 10:38. Here Martha, who was likely the older of the two took the lead as the hostess and in matters representing the family. She was concerned about the preparations necessary for Jesus' visit. Mary; however, took the opportunity to listen to Jesus teach. We are also told that it was this Mary who anointed Jesus with oil. This won't happen until Chapter 12, but apparently it was such a well-known event that John uses it to identify Mary.

A Man

Interestingly chapter 11 begins with the phrase, *Now a man*. Perhaps I am making too much of this based on the passages I have been assigned to teach, but I find this repetition

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²Burge, Gary M. The NIV Application Commentary: John. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2000. Print. Page 312.

³ Burge 314.

fascinating. Back in Chapter 2 when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover, many believed in him because of the signs he did:

²⁴But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, ²⁵and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man. (John 2:23-24 NKJV)⁴

And in Chapter 3: *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. (John 3:1)*

Just last week in Chapter 9: *As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. (John 9:1)*

Here in John 11, *Now a man named Lazarus was sick. (John 11:1)*

This repetition, I think, reminds us that we are reading about the lives of real people, who lived at a real time in history, and who walked in real geographic locations. They had individual stories, needs, and hurts, just like us. All of those people and their stories are woven into the grand story of the Kingdom of God.

Great Expectations

In the midst of Jesus' ministry and his work with the disciples he receives an urgent message from Mary and Martha saying that their brother Lazarus is sick. Isn't it interesting that they knew how to reach Jesus who was across the Jordan (John 10:40). There were no cell phones to call or text, and no opportunities to e-mail. Yet, there was still a system in place through which they could reach him.

Given their close relationship it is natural that they would contact Jesus in a time of crisis. The unspoken expectation is that Jesus will return to Jerusalem to assist the family and to heal Lazarus. The sisters know Jesus is capable of healing, he has done it before.

Reality

These are the expectations, now we will look at some of the realities of the situation. Let's begin with verse 4:

⁴When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. ¹⁰It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

¹¹After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."

¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there,

⁴ Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶ Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Political Realities

Let's look first at the political realities of going back to Jerusalem. The tensions have been growing. In John 7:1 we are told that, *After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill him.*

The NIV commentary describes the mounting tensions in this way,

“During the previous autumn celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles the authorities tried to arrest him (John 8:44), and rumor was out that they wanted to kill him (John 7:25). At one point a crowd tried to stone Jesus (John 8:59). A few months later at Hanukkah they tried to arrest him (John 10:39), and again there was the threat of stoning (John 10:31).”⁵

The threats were not just against Jesus. The disciples clearly feel their lives are at risk as well. In this passage we encounter Thomas who has been labeled throughout the centuries as doubting Thomas because of his need to see for himself the risen Lord and the scars of his crucifixion. However, he, with resignation, is willing to go with Jesus toward Jerusalem and face the risks.

Personal Realities

Set against those political realities are the personal realities. Lazarus dies. Jesus oddly stays for two more days before beginning the journey to Bethany.

Difference in Perspective

Throughout this passage we see a vast difference in perspectives. First, we observe Jesus has information that others do not have. Jesus knows that Lazarus has died. He is not with the family. He does not have human access to that information, but as the Son of God he knows exactly what has happened to his friend.

Given the timing and geographic locations in the passage it is likely that Lazarus died shortly after the messengers left Bethany. The disciples clearly do not know of Lazarus' death and it is frustrating to listen to their conversation.

However, we are guilty of the same thing. We do not understand that God's all-knowing nature allows him access to information that we do not have. Jesus responds in ways that are consistent with his vantage point, but not with ours.

Specifically, from the disciples' perspective it appears that Jesus is taking unnecessary risks. From our perspective, of just those verses, it appears that Jesus lacks compassion, but that is far from the case. The disciples and we are not able to see the full perspective that Jesus sees.

⁵ Burge 314.

Second, Jesus seems to have a different perspective on death. While we wisely avoid describing death as sleep when talking with children for obvious reasons. We do not want them to be afraid of going to sleep. We don't want them to expect dead people to wake up as though death were a temporary condition.

However, the NIV Commentary notes, "Ironically death for Jesus is much like sleep because Lazarus must be awakened. Death does not bear the same finality for Jesus as it does for every other person."⁶ For the Christian death is not the end.

Third, Jesus explains to the disciples that he will not die until the time of God's choosing. John MacArthur notes in his commentary that, "12 hours symbolize the duration of the Lord's earthly ministry as allotted by the Father. Just as no one can lengthen or shorten a day, so the disciples' concern could not extend the time allotted to Jesus, nor could the Jews' hostility shorten it."⁷

Mind the Gap

When I was in high school the requirement of foreign languages to attend college did not exist, at least not in rural Kentucky. While my children speak a variety of foreign languages, I do not, which makes for some interesting travel experiences. On trips out of the country, one of them is usually assigned to be an interpreter for me.

However, in England I admit although we speak the same language there are still some difficulties in the translation. I find it amusing to identify words that illustrate this. For example, this (flashlight) is called a torch in England. If you go into a store and ask for this (a band aid) you will get a bewildered look, they are known as plasters.

On a recent visit to England I saw these signs all over the tube stations, Mind the Gap. They are to remind travelers that there is a gap between the train and the platform. You need to be aware of the gap and take intentional action to avoid injury.

Erroneous Information

In the same way we need to Mind the Gap between our expectations of God and the reality we see. Often when our expectations don't match our reality, we ask questions. Does God love me? Does he care what is happening to me?

While God's love is unconditional to his children, sadly we are the ones who begin to attach conditions to his love. If God loved me, then he would . . . If he doesn't meet our expectations we make assumptions, like He doesn't care or He isn't aware.

Truth

We must mind the gap between our expectations and reality, lest we injury ourselves emotionally, psychologically, and most important spiritually. If you notice in the passage, verse five is sandwiched between the expectations of the sisters and reality. It reads, ⁵*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* We see this same truth in verse 3 when the

⁶ Burge 311.

⁷ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1-11*. Chicago: Moody Publishers 2006. Print. Page 455-456.

sisters note that the one you love is sick. Even in verse 36 the crowd sees Jesus' reaction to Lazarus' death and comments that he loved him.

Jesus' Response

After staying in their location for two days, Jesus and the disciples head toward Bethany. They arrive after Lazarus has been dead for four days. The Jews believed that the soul hung around for three days after a person died hoping to reenter the body. However, on the fourth day, once the body began to decompose, the soul left. At that point death was considered completely irreversible.⁸

The point is Lazarus is really dead, there is no question. This wasn't just a fainting episode or some medical oddity. Jesus nears the village. Many mourners had come from Jerusalem. The first seven days of mourning were the most intense and the mourners would stay with the sisters for the week.

Mourning customs (shiva) generally dictated that the sisters stay home and allow Jesus to come to them⁹, but Martha ran to greet Jesus. She says, probably what she and her sister had discussed for many days, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." It doesn't seem like a particularly angry statement, just a factual one.

Theological

She and Jesus engage in a theological discussion. Jesus tells her, "Your brother will rise again." This hardly comes as new information to Martha she agrees that indeed her brother will rise again at the last day. This was a common Jewish understanding. She already knows this and believes it.

I AM

Then Jesus moves from the theological concept to the personal application when he says, "*I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?*" Martha clearly is a woman of faith and asserts, ²⁷"Yes, . . ."*I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.*"

Interestingly at this point, Martha goes to retrieve Mary to let her know that Jesus is asking for her. She uses the word, Teacher. That term would have been a common title from a disciple to their Teacher, but it was unusual coming from a woman. Rabbis in the early first century refused to instruct women, yet Jesus did.¹⁰ Mary falls at Jesus' feet and she too notes that if Jesus had been there her brother would not have died. She begins to weep as do the mourners.

Personal: Entering into Grief

Now the discussion moves from a theological one to a very personal one as Jesus enters into their grief. The mourners are wailing and loudly expressing their grief.

⁸ MacArthur 461.

⁹ Kostenberger, Angreas J. Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: John. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004. Print. Page 334.

¹⁰ Baker 337.

Then we read that short verse, *Jesus wept*. The Greek word is not the one for loud mourning, but a quiet weeping and shedding of tears. Jesus knew what he was going to do. He knew how the situation was going to end, so why did he weep?

There are likely two reasons. The first is that the scene of seeing someone that you love deeply distressed is a very powerful one. Have you ever found yourself weeping over the death of someone you don't even know when you see the grief of their loved ones? Jesus knew this family and he loved them. He saw their pain. He was moved by it. It is a good reminder for us to approach these situations not only with theological truth, but with empathy for those who grieve.

Secondly, commentators note that Jesus was expressing sorrow over the devastating consequences of sin. The words "deeply moved" contain elements of anger, outrage, and indignation. The world was not created to be like this. Sin had marred and ruined the good gifts that God had given. The hired mourners were mourning as those without hope.

The Ultimate Response

It is time for action. Jesus' delay of two days, will now seem inconsequential. Jesus will back up his statement that he is the Resurrection and the Life, by demonstrating his absolute power to resurrect and bring back to life.

He asks to be led to the burial site. The mourners recall his ability to open the eyes of the blind man and ask could he not have kept this man from dying? Jesus will demonstrate something far greater than the initial healing they had in mind.

Jesus is giving all the commands at this point. He tells them to roll away the stone that is covering the grave. Martha objects. I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt before with her strong statements of faith, but clearly Martha has little understanding of what is about to happen. She is concerned with the propriety of the situation. There will be an odor to the body from being in the grave for four days. It will be a public humiliation for her brother's body to be exposed this way.

Jesus gently chides her, "*Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?*" It is another reminder that God's vantage point of reality is much clearer than ours. Now we read the climax, verse 41:

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

Jesus has the power to bring life to those who are dead both spiritually and physically. Some have speculated that he yelled because there could be no comparison with the pagan mutterings and incantations, this was sheer power like no other. Others have said he called Lazarus by name because if he hadn't his power was so great that all the dead within the sound of his voice would have walked out of their tombs.

44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Can you

even imagine what the crowd of witnesses thought, what Mary and Martha thought, what Lazarus thought? He was alive. We will read about him later at a dinner party. There was no denying this miracle.

It would be a powerful sign to the disciples that Jesus really is the Messiah and that he will do just as he says and Rise Again from the dead. However, it will be a while before they connect the dots. Jesus also demonstrated to Mary, Martha, and all of us that the Resurrection power is not just something that will happen way in the future, but the power of God is present with us now.

Reactions to the Miracle

People

Verse 45 tells us that many of the Jews who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha and saw Jesus' miraculous raising of Lazarus from the dead put their faith in Jesus and believed. However, some of the people went to the Pharisees and told them what was happening.

Religious Leaders

The religious leaders seem to have no debate about the truth of what Jesus is doing. They agree that these miracles are a powerful witness. However, their reaction is distressing. Beginning in verse 47, *Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.* You recall from one of our early lessons, the Sanhedrin was the Jewish judicial, legislative, and executive governing body that managed the Jewish affairs of the nation, but was subject to Roman authority.

"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation."

Note that their hearts were so hard they are unable to believe in Jesus no matter the compelling nature of the miracle. They are concerned that this frenzy of messiah expectations from the people will set off chaos that was sure to bring the full weight of Rome crashing down upon them.

The irony is staggering, the religious leaders know that Jesus is performing astounding miracles, but they never seriously consider that he may indeed be the Messiah. Yet, the thing they feared most, losing their temple, their nation, and their status happened anyway just a few decades later. They missed the Messiah and still were unable to secure what they treasured.

Caiaphas

Last we encounter Caiaphas who was the high priest, the highest ranking Jewish religious official. High priests were to serve for life, but Rome had imposed their own rules on the priesthood. They had removed his father-in-law Annas as high priest years before.

⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

Jesus would be the sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world. Sadly, from that day on, the council, the religious leaders, plotted to take Jesus' life. Jesus withdrew to the village of Ephraim with his disciples. It was no longer safe to move among the Jews, the divine clock was counting down, to a savage death but an even greater resurrection miracle.

In another twist of irony as Passover approached, the members of the Sanhedrin would join those approaching Jerusalem mindful of the need for ceremonial cleansing so that they could participate in the Passover. This concern for cleanness as they plot the death of the Son of God is the ultimate irony.

Applications

And so next week the narrative will continue as we approach the cross. This is a very rich chapter, I encourage you to take the time to read it again this week. When you do consider some of the lessons we have pondered together:

- Our individual stories with all of our weaknesses, needs and hurts are part of a larger story displaying God's glory.
- We have to intentionally Mind the Gap between our expectations of God and our reality. The best way to do that is to remember he loves us.
- We have to trust that Jesus has a fuller perspective of reality than we do.
- Finally, the resurrection power is part of our lives today, not just in the distant future.

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