

John 11:1-37 Why Jesus Lets Those He Loves Suffer

Introduction: John wrote his Gospel as an evangelistic tract. His goal was to persuade unconverted Jews, living throughout the Roman Empire, to believe in Jesus. As we read this, ask yourself, *How did John design this information to cause an unbeliever to believe in Jesus?*

Outline:

John 1—Introduction
John 2-10—Jesus in Public
John 11-17—Jesus in Private
John 18-21—Jesus in Glory

Today: John 11 contains the account of Jesus raising a man from the dead. The irony is that raising him from the dead got Jesus the death penalty.

Last Week: Last we read where the leaders picked up stones to kill Jesus, then after He talked them out of it, tried to arrest Him. As a result, he left Jerusalem and went away, across the Jordan River (10:40).

******How did Jesus respond to news that a friend was ill (11:1-4)?** He declared the illness not unto death, and further said that the illness would result in God's glory.

Jesus knew Lazarus would in fact die (11:4). What did Jesus mean when He said that the sickness was not unto death (11:4)? Jesus did not mean that the sickness was not fatal, but that he would not stay dead.¹

How did John identify Lazarus for his readers (11:1-2)? John identified Lazarus as Mary and Martha's brother, and that Mary was the Mary who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair (not Jesus' mother).

What insight does 11:1-2 offer us into John's readers: This surprising thing about this information is that Mary and Martha have not yet been introduced in John's narrative. Furthermore, the record of Mary anointing Jesus feet is not found until the next chapter. John's readers were unbelievers, yet they clearly already knew about Mary and her unusual way of honoring Jesus. This shows there was considerable contact between Christians and unbelieving Jews at that time.²

Archaeology: In 1873, a tomb inscription was found in Bethany with the names Mary, Martha and Lazarus on it. There is no way to prove it is their tomb, but it does show that these names were common at that time in that place.³ This is not some story made up years after the events supposed happened.

¹ Carson, *John*, 406.

² Carson, *John*, 405.

³ Carson, *John*, 404.

Based on 11:3, what relationship existed between Jesus and Lazarus? Jesus loved him; they clearly were friends, yet Jesus did not choose him to be one of his disciples.

Insight: The sisters never told Jesus what to do, they didn't ask Him for anything. They merely presented their problem to Him.

According to 11:4, why did Lazarus get sick? One purpose was so that both God and Jesus would be gloried through it.

Perspective: We all get sick. It can be miserable to be sick. We are tempted to ask, "If God loves me and is sovereign, why is He letting me suffer like this?" Yet we must remember that God is sovereign over everything in our lives. Therefore, we should have the same attitude Paul had:

ESV **Philippians 1:20** . . . it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

ESV **Hebrews 12:6** . . . the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.

ESV **1 Peter 5:10** . . . after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

What evidence is there in 11:4 of the deity of Christ? Jesus said Lazarus' sickness was for the glory of God, then immediately said it was so the Son of God would be glorified through it.

ESV **John 5:22-23a** The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

******Why did Jesus purposely allow Lazarus to die (11:5-16)?** It was to strengthen the disciples' faith (11:15). Earlier He said it would glorify God, 11:4).

What unexpected cause and effect statement did John make in 11:5-6? The word "so" (11:6) indicates a cause and effect or consequence or conclusion. One would expect that because Jesus loved them, He hurried back to heal Lazarus. Instead, John wrote that Jesus' love for them motivated Jesus' delay. He loved them so much He was willing to do whatever it took to ultimately strengthen their faith (11:15).

Applications: God sometimes puts us through some painful lessons, and there is often a delay between our problem and God's solution.

When after two days, when Jesus finally left for Judea, why the disciples object (11:8)?

They couldn't understand why He would go someplace where they were actively seeking to kill him.

How would you interpret Jesus' answer to their objection (11:9-10)? Jesus was speaking metaphorically. Jesus walked in the light of the Father's will and it clearly was the Father's will that Jesus go back to Judea. Sometimes Jesus fled from dangerous situations, and sometimes He walked directly into them. There is a balance between the two. As long as Jesus was in the Father's will, nothing could happen to Jesus that was outside of God's will.

ESV **John 10:17-18** . . . I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.

What argument did the disciples offer in 11:11-12 to persuade Jesus not to go? They said if Lazarus was merely asleep, Jesus did not need to risk his life merely to go wake him up.

When Jesus said Lazarus was asleep, what did He mean (11:13)? Lazarus was dead.

How did Jesus know that Lazarus had died (11:13)? Jesus is God.

What unexpected word did Jesus use to describe how He felt about not being there to heal Lazarus (11:14-15)? Jesus said he was "glad" that He was not there!

Why was Jesus glad he was not there to heal Lazarus (11:15)? It was so that the disciples might believe.

What cheery words did Thomas offer his fellow disciples (11:16)? He thought they were all going to die. He was willing to go down with the ship.

Application: Thomas' sober words should be considered by all would-be disciples.⁴ There is cost involved with following Jesus. It could potentially even cost you your life. Jesus said:

ESV **Mark 8:34** If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Lesser costs might include social ridicule, friends, promotions at work, etc.

******What regret did Martha express when Jesus finally got there (11:17-27)?** She regretted that Jesus had not gotten there sooner, for then Lazarus would not have died.

Lazarus had been in the tomb four days by the time Jesus got there (11:17). Why is that important information? It shows Lazarus was really and truly, genuinely dead. As Martha said later, "by this time he stinketh" (11:39).

⁴ Carson, *John*, 410.

What was John's purpose in telling his readers that Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off (11:18-19)? Since Bethany was close to Jerusalem, many of "the Jews" from Jerusalem were able to go console the sisters. Whether by "the Jews" John meant the leadership, or merely Jewish people in general, is unclear.

In 11:20, we are told that when Marta heard Jesus was coming, she slipped out to meet him. The sentence begins with the word "so". What does 11:20 have to do with 11:19? Perhaps because "the Jews" (His enemies) were at her home, she went out to intercept Jesus before He got there. On the other hand, it may be been simply to have a private moment with Jesus, apart from the crowd of mourners.

Why do you suppose Mary remained seated in the house even though Jesus was coming (11:20)? It sounds as if she was depressed or disappointed. Perhaps she didn't even know He had come.

What do you think? Did Marta utter 11:21 more in regret or in criticism? Considering how respectful she is of Jesus in the rest of the conversation, it was probably more in regret. She had no idea that He had purposely delayed in coming.

What was the intent behind what Martha said in 11:22? She was expressing confidence in Jesus' supernatural powers, highlighting the pity of Jesus *not* being there in time to heal Lazarus. That Jesus could also raise Lazarus from the dead had not even occurred to her (as is obvious from the rest of the conversation).

When Jesus said that Lazarus would rise again (11:23), what did Martha think He meant (11:24)? She thought He meant at the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age.

ESV **John 5:28-29** . . . for an hour is coming 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.

What does it mean for Jesus *Himself* to be the resurrection and the life (11:25)? There will be neither resurrection nor eternal life apart from Jesus.

What paradoxical statements did Jesus make in 11:25-26? He said those who believe in Him will live even if they die, and that those who live will never die.

What two types of death did Jesus mean in 11:25-26? Jesus referred to both physical death and spiritual death. Those who believe in Jesus will die physically, but will not die spiritually.

We all know what physical death is; what is spiritual death? The Bible indicates that everyone will eternally experience a conscious existence after death. Physical death is when your soul is separated from your body. Spiritual death is when your soul is separated from God.

What did Jesus mean when He said that those who live and believe shall never die (11:26)?

He meant they will never experience spiritual death. Eternal life is not something you get after your body dies. It begins at the moment you are born again and continues on for eternity. Those who believe in Jesus immediately possess eternal life.

What important question did Jesus ask Martha in 11:26? The Pharisees all believed in the future resurrection of the dead; what they did not believe is that Jesus would be responsible for it! Jesus wanted Martha to personally apply the truth to her own life, so He asked her if she believed that Jesus Himself were the resurrection and the life.

Application: John wanted each of his readers to ask themselves this same question. It is one thing to abstractly believe in the resurrection of the dead. It is quite another thing to personally believe in Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

Application: Jesus did not ask her if she felt better, nor if she was comforted, or if she felt her old optimism coming back. He asked her about her faith. Faith in Jesus is a major component in dealing with grief and difficult trials.⁵

Based on 11:27, what did Martha believe about Jesus? She believed Jesus to be the resurrection and the life, Lord (in this case, merely a title of respect/authority), Christ, the Son of God and the One who is coming into the world.

What Marta mean when she said she believed that Jesus was “coming into the world” (11:27)? This evidently is a belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and that He would manifest Himself to the world in a more public way than He had hitherto.

ESV **John 1:9** The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

ESV **John 6:14** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

******What did Mary have to say to Jesus when she saw him (11:28-37)?** She said the same thing Martha had said.

Do you think Mary’s words were said in grief-stricken perplexity, regret, or rebuke (11:32)?
Why? I think she spoke out of puzzled regret. She knew Jesus could have healed him, but didn’t understand why He didn’t come sooner. She seemed to be enough in awe of Jesus, falling at His feet, that I doubt she said it as a rebuke.

Why do you suppose Martha told Mary *in private* that Jesus wanted to see her (11:26)?
Perhaps it was because of potential hostility from “the Jews” or it may simply have been to have a private moment with Him.

⁵ Cole, “Lesson 61: “Overcoming Faith (John 11:17-21), Bible.org. Accessed January 12, 2020.

Why did the Jews follow after Mary when she left (11:31)? They thought she was going to the tomb to mourn.

What reason was given for causing Jesus to weep (11:33-35)? It clearly had *something* to do with Mary and the Jews crying.

The Greek word used to describe Mary and the Jews crying is different that the word used to describe Jesus' crying.⁶ The word that described Jesus' crying was use to refer to the lament before a tragedy. Furthermore, the Greek behind "deeply troubled" (11:33) is *embrimaomai*, which outside the Bible was used to refer to the snorting of horses. When applied to people, it meant anger, outrage or emotional indignation. The HSV reads, "When Jesus saw her crying, and the Jews who had come with her crying, He was angry". What could have made Jesus angry? Perhaps he was angry at the hypocritical weeping of "the Jews". Moreover, perhaps He was angry over the sickness and sorrow caused by sin.⁷

What musing did some of the Jews express in 11:37? They rightly surmised that someone who had opened the eyes of the blind could also have keep Lazarus from dying.

Perspective: *All of them*, Martha, Mary, and even the Jews, believed that Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying. However, *none of them*, not Mary, not Martha, not the Jews, ever expected Jesus to raise Him from the dead.

So What?

Based on John 11:1-37, who is Jesus? He is the resurrection and the life. He is Christ. He is the Son of God.

Based on John 11:1-17, what does Jesus want from you? He wants you to believe in Him personally, as did Martha.

Based on 11:25-26, how can you live forever? Those who believe in Jesus will live forever.

Perspective on Suffering: In strengthening Martha's faith, Jesus knew it was necessary to allow her to first suffer. God sometimes allows those He loves to suffer. It may not be God's will for you to be healthy and wealthy. Perhaps it is better not to ask God "why" but rather "what", what do you want me to learn from this, or "how" can I glorify you through this? It could be for God's glory, or to strengthen your faith, or to purge sin from your life. Always interpret your suffering in light of God's love.⁸

**** = Ask this question before reading the text. This will engage people's minds and focus their attention.

- You can hear this lesson being taught at SermonAudio.com/NTRF.
- Stephen E. Atkerson NTRF.org Revised 01/12/2020

⁶ Carson, *John*, 416.

⁷ Carson, *John*, 416.

⁸ Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 59: Loved, But Suffering (John 11:1-6)", Bible.org. Accessed January 12, 2020.