

John: sermon #12

Evidence that demands the verdict: Jesus is God! (John chapter 11)

Introduction

This chapter presents what John considers to be conclusive evidence that Jesus is the divine Son of God. The evidence is Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. Though not Jesus' last miracle before the cross, it is certainly the most dramatic—one that aroused the most response from friend and foe alike. In presenting this astounding miracle, John's main emphasis is not on the miracle itself but on the response of *faith*. Indeed, John uses some form of the word *believe* at least eight times in the chapter. Jesus' intent in performing this miracle was to strengthen the belief and faith of his disciples, of his friends Martha and Mary, and of the Jewish bystanders. And John recorded the event so that the faith of his readers (including us) would be strengthened as well. And so we begin with the prayer that the Spirit will use these words to do just that in each of our lives. Lord, strengthen our belief and faith.

1. The Disciples (11:1–16)

¹ 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. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴ When 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."

⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light.¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

¹¹ After 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."¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better."¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."¹⁶ Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

We sometimes think of Jesus' original disciples as the *super-saints*—but not so. Like us, they often failed their Lord, and he sought to strengthen their belief and faith in him as the One sent from the Father. Such was the case here in John 11.

Here's the setting: Jesus was apparently about 20 miles from Lazarus' home located in the town of Bethany when he received word from a messenger that his close friend Lazarus was sick. If the messenger man had traveled quickly, he could have made the trip in one day. Jesus sent him back the next day with the encouraging message recorded in 11:4. Then Jesus waited two more days before leaving for Bethany. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days.

When the messenger arrived back in Bethany with Jesus' message, how would it have been received? **Lazarus was now dead and buried**—how would his grieving sisters Mary and Martha respond? Jesus was urging them to believe his word no matter how discouraging the outward circumstances. [Oh, how we need this message too! Lord, increase our faith.]

No doubt **the disciples were perplexed about all this.** If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did he permit him to get sick? **Even more, why did he delay to go to Lazarus' sisters, who were also Jesus' dear**

friends? Why didn't he just heal Lazarus at a distance, as he did the nobleman's son? (4:43–54). Jesus' behavior seems to be contradictory to the love they knew he had for Lazarus and his sisters. What's up with Jesus?

Comment: We are reminded that God's love for us is not merely a *pampering* love. Rather it's a *strengthening* love. The fact that he loves us, and we love him is no guarantee that we will be sheltered from the problems and pains of life. After all, the Father loves his Son: and yet the Father permitted him to drink the cup of sorrow and experience the shame and pain of the cross. We must never think that love and suffering are incompatible. Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' sickness or even healed it from where he was; but he chose not to. He saw in this sickness an opportunity to glorify the Father and to strengthen his friends. It is not important that we Christians are always comfortable, but it is important that we be used of Christ to glorify God in all that we do.

Why did Jesus delay going to Lazarus? He was not waiting for Lazarus to die, for he died at about the same time the messenger arrived at Jesus' location. The answer (as is so often noted in John) is that Jesus lived on a divine timetable (11:9) and he was waiting for the Father to tell him when to go to Bethany. **The fact that Lazarus had been dead four days gave greater authenticity to the miracle and greater opportunity for people to believe, including his own disciples (11:15).**

When our Lord announced that he was returning to Judea, his disciples were alarmed, because they knew how dangerous it would be (7-8). (Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem.) He knew that his return to Judea and the miracle of raising Lazarus would precipitate his own arrest and death. The end is drawing close; and rapidly.

The Lord calmed their fears (11-13). But the disciples not only misunderstood the delayed schedule, they also misunderstood the reason for the visit. They thought that if Lazarus was sleeping, he was getting better. It was another example of their inability to grasp spiritual truth.

Then he told them openly that Lazarus was dead (14-15). He did not say he was glad that his friend died, but that he was glad he had not been there; for now he could reveal to his disciples his mighty power. The result would be glory to God and the strengthening of their belief and faith in him.

2. The Sisters (11:17-40)

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then

the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." 40 Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

Jesus intentionally delayed his arrival so that Lazarus had been dead four days. This time lag is significant because in Jewish belief the spirit of the deceased would hover over the body for three days. After that the body would become so disfigured that the spirit would no longer recognize it and would depart. Raising Lazarus after four days would thus be an astounding, ‘impossible’ miracle.

In setting up this situation, Jesus was concerned about growing the faith of his own disciples and also the faith of his friends Mary and Martha (11:26, 40). Jesus had sent a promise to these two sisters (11:4), and now he would discover how they had received it.

Mary and Martha were quite different in personality (Luke 10:38-42). Martha was a task-oriented busy worker; Mary was more contemplative. Consistent with these personalities, Martha rushes out to meet Jesus, while Mary remains at home mourning. But both sisters use similar words to greet Jesus—displaying both disappointment and faith. Neither told Jesus what to do. They simply informed him of the need and reminded him of his love for Lazarus. They knew that it was dangerous for Jesus to return to Judea because the Jewish leaders were out to destroy him. Perhaps they hoped that he would “speak the word” and their brother would be restored to health.

Our Lord’s message to the sisters did not say that their brother would not die. It promised only that death would not be the *ultimate* result, for the ultimate result would be the glory of God. He wanted them to lay hold of

this promise; in fact, he reminded Martha of this message when she balked at having the tomb opened (John 11:40).

Martha was quick to proclaim her faith in Jesus as the Son of God (11:24, 27), and Jesus affirmed her faith by promising her that her brother would rise again. He was thinking of the immediate situation, but she interpreted his words to mean the future resurrection in the last day (Dan. 12:2–3; John 5:28–29). Here is another instance in John’s Gospel of people lacking spiritual perception.

Our Lord’s reply in verse 25 is the fifth I AM statement of John’s Gospel. It’s important to note that Jesus did not deny what Martha said about the future resurrection. The resurrection of the human body was a cardinal doctrine of many first century Jews (some, like the Sadducees, did not believe in a resurrection). But in his great I AM statement, Jesus completely transformed that doctrine in three ways:

a. First, he brought the doctrine of the resurrection out of the shadows and into the light. The OT revelation about death and resurrection is not clear or complete; it is, as it were, “in the shadows.” But the New Testament sheds new light on the issue. It was not David (in the Psalms) or Solomon (in Ecclesiastes) who “brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). Rather it was Jesus who brought this light: **By his teaching, his miracles, and his own resurrection, Jesus clearly taught the resurrection of the human body. He has declared once for all that death is real, that there is life after death, and that the body will one day be raised by the power of God.**

b. Second, Jesus took the doctrine of the resurrection out of a book and put it into a person: himself. “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25). While we thank God for what the Bible teaches (and all Martha had was the Old Testament), we realize that we are saved by the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and not by a doctrine written in a book. When we know him by faith, we need not fear the shadow of death.

c. Third, Jesus moved the doctrine of the resurrection out of the future and into the present. Martha was looking to the future,

knowing that Lazarus would rise again and she would see him. Her friends were looking to the past and saying, “He could have prevented Lazarus from dying” (11:37). **But Jesus tried to center their attention on the *present*: wherever he is, God’s resurrection power is available *now* (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:10).**

When Mary arose to go to meet Jesus (verse 28), her friends misunderstood and thought she was going to the tomb to weep. They wanted to weep with her, so they followed along. Imagine their surprise when they met Jesus! **Mary did not say much because she was overcome with sorrow and began to weep.** Her friends joined in. The word used means “a loud weeping, a lamentation.” **Our Lord’s response was to groan within “moved in spirit and troubled” (other translations say ‘moved with indignation’).** At what was he indignant?—at the ravages of sin in the world he created. **Death is an enemy, and Satan uses the fear of death as a terrible weapon (Heb. 2:14–18).**

Next we are told that, “Jesus wept” (11:35). This is the shortest, yet perhaps the deepest verse in Scripture. It was silent weeping (the Greek word is related to a tear that falls down one’s cheek) in contrast to the loud mourning of the others. **But why did Jesus weep? After all, he knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead (11:11).** The answer is that our Lord’s weeping expresses his humanity. **Through his incarnation the Son of God entered all of human experience and knows how we feel.** In fact, being the perfect God-Man, he experienced these things in a deeper way than any of us. His tears also express the sympathy of “a man of sorrows...acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). He is our merciful and faithful High Priest—we may come to him for all the gracious help that we will ever need (Heb. 4:14–16).

In Jesus’ weeping the spectators saw evidence of Jesus’ love. But some of them said, “If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did he not prevent his death?” Perhaps they were thinking, “Jesus is weeping because he was unable to do anything.” The point is this: *nobody present expected a miracle!* Thus nobody could accuse Jesus of “plotting” this event and being in collusion with the two sisters and their friends. Even the disciples did not believe that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead. The one person who declared her faith was Martha (11:27), though she failed at the last minute. “Open the tomb? By now he

smells!” Jesus gently reminded her of the message he had sent at least three days before (11:4) and urged her to believe it now. True faith relies on God’s promises and thereby releases God’s power. Martha relented, and the stone was rolled away.

3. The Jews (11:41–57)

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!"

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." 45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." 49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! 50 You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." 51 He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, 52 and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

53 So from that day on they plotted to take his life. 54 Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples.

55 When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. 56 They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" 57 But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.

The emphasis from this point forward is on the faith of the Jews who had come to comfort Mary and Martha. Jesus paused to pray (11:41) and thanked the Father that the prayer had already been heard. When had he prayed? Probably when he received the message that Lazarus was sick (11:4). The Father then told him what the plan was, and Jesus obeyed the Father's will. **His prayer now was for the sake of the unbelieving spectators, that they might know that God had sent him.**

Jesus called out to Lazarus and raised him from the dead. Since Lazarus was bound, he could not walk; so God's power must have carried him along. It was an unquestioned miracle that even the most hostile spectator could not deny.

The description of Lazarus' resurrection is for John a metaphor of what happens to a sinner when he believes in Jesus. Lazarus was dead, and sinners are likewise dead—bound up in sin. Lazarus was raised from the dead by the power of God, and all who trust Christ are given new life and lifted out of the graveyard of sin (John 5:24). Lazarus was set free from the grave clothes and given new liberty. You find him seated with Christ at the table (12:2), and all believers are "seated with Christ" in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6), enjoying spiritual food and fellowship.

Because of the great miracle in Lazarus, many desired to see him; and his "living witness" was used by God to bring people to salvation (12:9–11). There are no recorded words of Lazarus in the Gospels, but his daily walk is enough to convince people that Jesus is the Son of God. Because of his effective witness, **Lazarus was persecuted by**

the religious leaders who wanted to kill him and get rid of the evidence.

As with the previous miracles, the people were divided in their response. Some did believe and on Palm Sunday a short time later gave witness of the miracle Jesus had performed (12:17–18). **But others immediately went to the religious leaders and reported what had happened in Bethany.** These “informers” were so near the kingdom, yet there is no evidence that they believed. If the heart will not yield to truth, then the grace of God that brings salvation is blocked. These people could have experienced a spiritual resurrection in their own lives, but they would not believe.

It was necessary that the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin) meet and discuss what to do with Jesus. They were not seeking after truth; they were seeking for ways to protect their own selfish interests. If Jesus gathered too many followers, he might get the attention of the Roman authorities; and this could hurt the Jewish cause and their position.

The high priest, Caiaphas, was a Sadducee, not a Pharisee (Acts 23:6–10); but the two factions could always get together to fight a common enemy. Unknown to himself and to the council, Caiaphas uttered a divine prophecy: Jesus would die for the nation so that the nation would not perish. “For the transgression of My people was He stricken” (Isa. 53:8). True to his vision of a worldwide family of God, **John added his inspired explanation: Jesus would die not only for the Jews, but for all of God’s children who would be gathered together in one heavenly family (4:42 and 10:16).**

The official decision that day was that Jesus must die (Matt. 12:14; Luke 19:47; John 5:18; 7:1, 19–20, 25). The leaders thought that *they* were in control of the situation, but it was God who was working out his predetermined plan (Acts 2:23). Originally, they wanted to wait until after the Passover, but God had decreed otherwise.

Jesus withdrew to Ephraim, about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem; and there remained with his disciples. The crowd was gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover and the pilgrims were wondering if

Jesus would attend the feast even though he was now in great danger, because the council had made it known that anyone who knew where Jesus was must report it to the officials.

Conclusion

John 11 presents astounding evidence that demands a verdict: Jesus is indeed the divine Son of God. Yet some who saw the evidence did not believe—revealing the hardness of the human heart separated from the life of God. The rich man in Hades was like that, arguing, “If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:30). Not so. Though Lazarus came back from the dead, some refused to repent and instead sought to kill Jesus. **Miracles reveal God’s power, but an unrepentant heart turns the evidence aside and blocks the receiving of God’s grace.**

The irony here is that the religious leaders were more dead and ‘bound up’ by religious tradition and legalism than the dead and bound Lazarus. The unbinding of Lazarus is a beautiful metaphor for release from death and legalism as reflected in the following poem by Roger Ludwig. It’s titled, ***Lazarus Unwound:***

*The country was rocks, and dry.
Muscles bulged, grating rock on rock,
Opening to the dark, dank recess.
Then silence.*

*The stillness of death.
Silence within the brain.
Then a voice. "Lazarus € Lazarus, come out."*

*Deep in shadow, the still stirred.
Blood coursed, pushed through empty veins.
A breath. In. Out.
Rising from the slab, he stood. Lazarus alive.*

*With puny steps, he came,
wrapped in cloth,
the stench of the grave clothes, wound, and bound,
stumbling toward the light.*

*The muscled men gasped, falling back.
"He lives" they mouthed. Lazarus lives.
Stunned, none moved. He stood, swaying.
Lazarus, alive from [four] days, dead.*

*He heard, but muffled. Saw, but shadows
from behind the veil. Thoughts moved and swirled within.
Then again, the voice. "Loose him." "Loose him, and let him go."*

*He felt hands, tugging, untying, unwrapping, relieving,
rags dropping. Hands about him, lifting away dark cloth.
A flash, stunning the eyes shut. A long breath. So fresh.
Blinking, squinting to the brightness of sky, of earth, he saw.*

*Sun on skin, wind in face. He moved, he stepped, he swung, running,
looking, scanning.
Mouths agape. Lazarus' eyes lighting from face to face,
then fixed on he who stood alone, quietly smiling: Jesus.*

*"Jesus," he spoke as he fell before the feet.
"Jesus" he said. "My lord and my God. Thank you. I love you."*

Reaching down, Jesus spoke: "And I, you."

Jesus alone gives life—delivers from death—now and forever. And indeed Jesus has done just that, delivering us from death and unbinding us from the fetters of sin and death and has given us eternal life in his resurrection. He called us out of this world by name and gave us his very own life, his resurrection life.

Jesus has defeated death in every aspect; totally and permanently. He is the resurrection. He is the life. And we share his life and love forever.

With the close of chapter 11 the stage is now set for the unfolding of the greatest drama in all history—the passion of Christ. During the ensuing events mankind will display its worst, but God will give his best.

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

This issue continues a series in the gospel of John with material from *The Bible Expository Commentary* by Warren Wiersbe, *The New Bible Commentary*, *The Parable of Joy* by Michael Card, and *The Gospel of John* by F.F. Bruce.

Note: Bold script above covered in Worship Services.