



INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 20:
JESUS AND THE SIGN OF ULTIMATE HOPE
JOHN 11:1-44**

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JESUS AND THE SIGN OF ULTIMATE HOPE SESSION 20

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Do you agree with how the responses of the disciples, Martha, and Mary were interpreted?
2. Which of the responses do you most struggle with? Fear, resignation, or despair?
3. What do you think about Jesus being both outraged and empathetic? Have you seen or experienced something similar?

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

No person is immune from the pain and suffering of life. Rich or poor, black or white, Asian or European, male or female—none can escape the sure struggle and difficulties of this world. The causes of the pain and suffering are varied and innumerable. Much of our suffering comes from our own mistakes, sins, and oversights. Additionally, all of us have been victims of other peoples' sins, mistakes, abuses, and oversights as well. We simply cannot get away from it.

We go to great extent to minimize the pain in our lives. The United States spends more money on health care than any industrialized nation in the world—over \$8000 per person annually. That figure is to expected to rise to over \$13,000 per person in 2018. Why these costs? We are attempting to minimize pain, suffering, and protract the time until the inevitable comes—death. While pain, suffering, and death are certainly not things we should seek, maybe we can develop perspectives towards these things that provide the ability to overcome their tendency to control our lives and emotions. As we will see in this passage, Jesus provides just what we need to obtain this freedom.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Passage:

John 11:1-44

Think Through the Questions:

1. Why would John say that Jesus loved Lazarus, Martha, and Mary and so therefore waited two days to go visit them upon hearing of Lazarus' sickness?
2. What did the responses of the disciples, Martha, and Mary reflect in regards to their belief in Jesus?
3. How is Jesus' delay tied to the faith of those involved in this scene and the glorification of God and His Son?

Using the questions, summarize the teaching of the passage.

COMMENTARY

John has recorded five of Jesus' signs to this point, and has foreshadowed a sixth. They are as follows:

1. Jesus turned water to wine (2:1-12).
2. Jesus healed the official's son (4:46-54).
3. Jesus healed the lame man (5:1-9).
4. Jesus fed over 5000 people (6:1-4).
5. Jesus healed a man born blind (9:1-7).
6. Jesus cleansed the temple of money-changers, with foreshadowing to his resurrection from the dead, which is the seventh sign (2:13-22).

Each of these signs not only shows a miracle, but points to why the Messiah, the Savior of Israel and the world, is Jesus. For example, in the case where Jesus turned water to wine, we not only see Jesus' mastery over physical things, but also that Jesus is the joy and life of the party. He brings joy to life when all else falls short, and when he brings it, it is the best, as was the wine that Jesus produced from the water. When Jesus fed the crowd of over 5000 people, he was not only showing that he could create something from nothing, but that he had the potential to provide all that was needed, and then some, for his people. We must look past the miracles into the contexts of the miracles to see the true sign.

This passage gives the final sign before the fulfillment of his foreshadowed resurrection, but this sixth sign is somewhat of an introduction to the seventh. The sign is Jesus' rising of Lazarus from the dead. It will be the most significant of his signs to this point. The reaction to the sign is the subject of next week's study, but in this passage we see the orientations of three groups of people leading up to the sign, each of which reveals an opportunity for the real work that Jesus can do in people's lives.

The event is fairly straightforward, as have been most of the signs. A close friend of Jesus, Lazarus, has become sick. Lazarus's family sends a message to Jesus telling him that Lazarus is ill. Jesus doesn't respond immediately to the message and waits two days to visit Lazarus. Upon Jesus' arrival, Lazarus is dead. The family and others are mourning because of the loss. Jesus, who is also moved, raises Lazarus from

the dead. The onlookers then tend to Lazarus, freeing from his burial cloths.

The significance of this sign is profound and life-changing for those who believe. To understand the significance, we must look at the three different orientations demonstrated by those around Jesus as they anticipated and participated in what he would do. The first orientation is seen in the disciples upon hearing that Jesus wants to go to see Lazarus. The second is provided by Martha, Lazarus's sister and friend of Jesus. The third is seen in Mary, Lazarus's other sister, and the mourning crowds.

But before we get into the orientations of those involved in this event, we must first look at the setup to the sign. Upon Jesus' hearing of the news of Lazarus' illness, he responded that Lazarus' illness would not lead to death, but that it would result in the glorification of God and His Son (v.4). As we will see, Jesus' response was most likely directed to the messengers from Mary and Martha, who would have then repeated the words to the sisters. When Martha later questions Jesus about rolling back the stone of the tomb, Jesus asks her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" After this initial response, the text reports quite an unusual thing from a human standpoint. The next verse states that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. This is not an odd statement, but the following is. The next verse reads:

So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

You would think that if Jesus loved Lazarus and his two sisters, he would have immediately left to heal Lazarus. However, the text indicates that it was Jesus' love for them that caused him to remain two days longer at his present location. The previous chapter states that Jesus had returned to the area beyond the Jordan where he began his ministry and that he remained there. Scholars believe this place to be approximately four days from Jerusalem. Lazarus was only ill when the messengers left to find Jesus. Two days later, after Jesus knew that Lazarus had died (v.14), he left for Bethany and found that Lazarus had been dead for four days (v.17). Why did Jesus wait? Why did Jesus let Lazarus and his sisters suffer longer than they had to? The answer to this question will be revealed as the story unfolds.

The first group of people responding to Jesus' actions in this passage are Jesus' disciples. Either they hadn't heard that Lazarus had become sick or they believed that visiting a sick friend didn't warrant the risk involved in going to the regions around Jerusalem where people were trying to kill Jesus. Their initial response to Jesus' leading was one of fear—they didn't want to face the potential stoning by the Jews. Their concern for their safety was greater than their trust in Jesus' leading. Jesus' response to them was in the form of a metaphor and had multiple levels of meaning. The surface level of meaning simply reflects an obvious reality—people that travel during the day can see where they are going where those who travel by night stumble and fall for lack of light. But by slight twists of words and meanings, Jesus also points out that those who possess the inner light—the light of the Word of God (1:4)—they do not stumble. Essentially, Jesus' reply to his disciples is a statement that as the Son of God, he knows what he's doing. As the Son of God, he's making decisions and is fully aware of his surroundings and is not stumbling in the darkness of ignorance, deception, foolishness, or fear. Once Jesus fully explains to his disciples what he is doing, one of the disciples, Thomas, responds with fearless abandon, "Let us also go, that we may die with him," which is a statement reflecting the surety of Jesus' death should he go to Jerusalem. As the text will later show, Thomas' statements were not far from the truth. It is with Jesus' statements to his disciples that we begin to see Jesus' motivations in this particular event. Jesus was glad that he was not present at Lazarus' death, and as a result of his absence, it would enhance and strengthen their faith (v.15).

When Jesus arrives in Bethany, he first encounters Martha. Martha's first statements reflect that she wished Jesus had been present in order to save Lazarus. However, Jesus' failure to come would not undermine her belief in Jesus. She still recognized that Jesus was fully capable of demonstrating the power of God. It was not a statement expecting that Jesus would raise Lazarus, since she later objects to Jesus opening the tomb (v.39). Additionally, we must remember that Jesus earlier healed the official's son from a distance of a two-day's journey (4:46-54). He could have done so again for Lazarus. We can assume that Martha knew that Jesus knew about Lazarus' condition since her messengers had undoubtedly returned with Jesus' response—Lazarus would not die, but that this would be used for the glory of God and His Son (v.4). She doesn't know why Jesus did not come or heal Lazarus, but she remains faithful to him. After her initial statement, Jesus tells

her that her brother would rise again, to which she acknowledged her belief in Lazarus' resurrection on the last day. This was in reference to the widely believed notion that the people of God would all be eventually raised from the dead. Martha's response betrays her resignation to what has happened. To her, Lazarus' death has happened, and at this point, there is nothing anyone can do, even Jesus the Son of God. She has simply accepted what has happened and it is done. Jesus replies that through faith in Him, even those that die shall live and truly never die. Upon Jesus' inquiry of her faith in his statement, she replies that she believes that He is the Son of God, the promised Messiah. However, her reply does not truly correspond to Jesus' inquiry into her faith. She strongly believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but she seems to remain somewhat unclear as to Jesus' last statement. She was not about to deny Jesus as the Messiah, but she remained resigned to the fact that nothing could be done now in regards to Lazarus.

The next person Jesus faces is Mary, who has come to meet him. Mary's initial statement to Jesus was identical to Martha's. However, Mary's statement is accompanied by wailing and crying not only from her, but also from the crowds following her. Where Martha's reaction to Lazarus' death was resignation with confidence in Jesus, Mary and the crowd's reaction was despair and hopelessness. Most English translations get the next passage wrong. Most scholars believe that the phrase most commonly translated "greatly troubled" (v.33), would more accurately reflect the original language if it read something like, "Jesus was outraged in spirit, and troubled." Following this, Jesus asks where Lazarus' body was laid. They lead Jesus to the place, and at this point Jesus wept. In response to seeing Jesus weeping, the crowds then make a comment showing their lack of hope, stating that Jesus surely could have done something while Lazarus had been alive. But now that Lazarus was dead, nothing could be done. Jesus again is "outraged and troubled."

Why would Jesus be outraged and also empathetic? I believe that Jesus was faced with the fullness of humanity. Here, in the face of death, humanity was at its weakest point. Nothing could be done. The death of Lazarus was final. There was nothing to hope for and nothing to expect. They could not even believe in Jesus, the Son of God to do anything. Faced with this unbelief and hopeless despair, Jesus was outraged. How could they give up?! How could they stand face-to-face with him, the Son of God, and doubt the power of God to overcome

death? They didn't even simply ask him, "Jesus, could you raise Lazarus?" It hadn't even come to mind and their unconscious acknowledgment of death's power and victory was an outrage to Jesus. How could they give death the victory? But as Jesus, the Son of God full of grace, he not only saw the unbelief, despair, and hopelessness, but he also saw the weakness of humanity. It is for this reason that he wept. He could not bear to see the sorrow and pain of those he loved without also feeling and expressing the sorrow and pain as well.

Jesus then moves to the burial site and demands that the stone be removed from the opening of the tomb. Martha objects to this, as she is concerned for the odor that will come from the decaying body. Jesus reminds her of his earlier comments concerning the purpose of Lazarus' illness—it would not lead to death, but would serve for the glorification of God and the Son (v.4). The stone is removed and Jesus prays. Jesus does not ask God to raise Lazarus. God has already heard Jesus' request. Jesus' prayer is for the observers. After hearing Jesus' prayer, they will connect Jesus' words in his prayer to what is about to happen. They will recognize that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. After Jesus prays, he commands Lazarus to come out from the tomb. John reports that "the man who had died came out," which emphasized the point to be made in this sign—Jesus raised a dead man to life.

So we come back to the question, "Why did Jesus wait to come to Lazarus?" There are two reasons, a primary one that is clearly revealed in the text and a secondary reason that comes from historical understanding, which affirms the primary reason. The primary reason Jesus waited was to demonstrate his power over death which would strengthen the faith of his disciples and those surrounding the incident, giving glory to God and Jesus. As we could see in the responses from the people surrounding Lazarus, it was not even in their minds that Jesus could raise someone from the dead. What was done was done—there was nothing anyone could do. This hopelessness, despair, and resignation outraged Jesus for it gave the victory to sin and death. Jesus wanted them to know and believe that through him, death would not be victorious and that eternal life would reign! The second reason is that it was Jewish belief at the time that the spirits of the dead would hover over the body for three days, which provided a remote possibility of the person coming back to life. If Jesus waited four days to resurrect Lazarus, there would be no way for anyone to use this superstition to undermine the miracle he had just performed. Again, this secondary

reason simply supplements the first—Jesus was master over death and that life would reign through him. This is what Jesus wanted his contemporaries to believe. This is what Jesus wants us to believe.

THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

The three responses we see to Jesus in this passage are all very familiar to us. Just as the disciples, we fear what may happen to us if we truly follow Jesus. It may become uncomfortable or painful. It may even lead to our death. When faced with the pains, sorrows, disappointments, and grievances of life, many of us simply resign ourselves to defeat. We can't see that anything can be done. We'll still affirm Jesus as Lord, but we practically deny his power to do anything about the sins of the world and the death and sorrow it brings. Additionally, many of us also simply fall into despair. We mourn and wail and live defeated in our pain and sorrow without any recognition that Jesus possesses the power to bring life to the deadness of our lives. We see no possibility for hope and joy to come to our most desperate circumstances. Would Jesus respond so different to us today, even those who are mentally aware of Jesus' resurrection?

Issue: Believing in Jesus' Power to Bring Life

1. Which of the responses is most common for you, fear, resignation, or despair?
2. Why do you think that we respond the same way to the pains and sorrows of life, even when we have the benefit of knowing about the resurrection of Jesus?
3. What do you think you could do to strengthen your faith in the power of Jesus to give life?
4. How do you think a change in your responses to life's challenges would cause others around you to grow in their faith in Jesus?

Respond to the Questions Below:

DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

MEAL #1: THE GLORY OF GOD

Read John 11:1-4

1. What is the glory of God?
2. Why is it important that God is glorified?
3. When is God glorified?

MEAL #2: JESUS WAITS TO VISIT LAZARUS

Read John 11:5-6

1. Don't you think it is strange for Jesus to wait to visit Lazarus if he loved him?
2. What do you think is going to happen and why did Jesus do this?

MEAL #3: JESUS, THE RESURRECTION AND LIFE

Memorize John 11:25-26, leaving out "Jesus said to her," and "Do you believe this?"

MEAL #4: JESUS RAISES LAZARUS FROM THE DEAD

Read John 11:38-44

1. Imagine yourself at this scene. Think of your best friend or a close family member dying. What would you think if that person were suddenly raised from the dead by Jesus?
2. What would you think of Jesus?



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