

## 11:1-12:19 - Summary

This next section has, as its centerpiece, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. This is the seventh and final sign within John's account (cf. 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-18; 6:1-14, 15-25; 9:1-7), and it acts as a bridge connecting Jesus' ministry to the Jews (cf. 1-10) and the Passion (cf. 13-20). Needless to say, it is difficult to overemphasize how pivotal this segment is. In a manner of speaking, chapters 11 and 12 are the very hinge upon which John's entire account swings.<sup>1</sup> Without it, the whole story would fall apart.

But surrounding this spectacular miracle, John sheds light on a variety of issues taking place on the periphery. For instance, the Beloved Apostle does not shy away from exposing the sadness that Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, experience in the wake of their brother's death. Interestingly, their grief seems to have been amplified because their belief in Jesus was *not* in question. They knew he was more than capable of healing their brother. Yet, despite having plenty of notice, their beloved teacher just didn't get there in time. In fact, he purposefully delayed. And so, while coping with a significant loss, they were also thrust into a crisis of faith. Would their trust in the Lord be strong enough to survive this funeral?

Simultaneously, our faithful narrator also points out the ever-widening division of the Jewish people. In the wake of Lazarus' resurrection, more than a few had been convinced that Jesus was the Christ. Yet, there were still those who refused to believe. And just like a child might tattle to a teacher, we'll watch as these unbelievers report the raising of a person who had been dead for four days as if it was a *bad* thing! Ironically, rather than bow before the "resurrection and the life" (11:25), they preferred to have him killed.

And if all that wasn't enough, John not only relays the episode of Mary anointing Jesus in Bethany, but he also conveys the scene where Jesus enters Jerusalem riding a donkey. This is not a quiet arrival either, as his supporters proclaim for all to hear, "Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord" (12:13). Commonly referred to as the 'Triumphal Entry,' this is one of the few scenes recorded in all four gospels (cf. Mat. 21:1-11; Mar. 11:1-11; Lu. 19:28-44).<sup>2</sup> But, make no mistake, John is still an outlier amongst his contemporaries as only he explains the crowd's jubilation by linking it with Lazarus'

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<sup>1</sup> Carson (1991), p. 403.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the other scenes recorded in all four gospels are as follows: feeding of the five thousand (cf. Mat. 14:21; Mar. 6:44; Lu. 9:14-16; Jhn. 6:10-11); Jesus' anointing at Bethany (cf. Mat. 26:6-13; Mar. 14:3-9; Lu. 7:36-50); Peter's denial of Jesus (cf. Mat. 26:69-74; Mar. 14:66-71; Lu. 22:55-62; Jhn. 18:15-18); Jesus' being crucified as the 'King of the Jews' (cf. Mat. 27:35-37; Mar. 15:25-26; Lu. 23:33, 37-38; Jhn. 19:18-19); and, most importantly, Jesus' resurrection (cf. Mat. 28:1-10; Mar. 16:1-14; Lu. 24:1-44; Jhn. 20:1-29).

resurrection.<sup>3</sup> If Jesus could raise the dead, it's no wonder that "the world is gone after him" (cf. 12:19).

But as we read through this scene, we must remember that Lazarus' death and resurrection *foreshadow* Jesus' own. The Lord loved Mary and Martha; this much is obvious (cf. 11:35). But the sorrow of grieving sisters is *not* what motivated Jesus to raise their brother from the dead; a zeal for God's glory motivated the Lord (cf. 11:4). After all, if he only wanted to alleviate sadness, he would've healed his friend from a distance (cf. 4:46-54; Mat. 85-13; Mar. 7:24-30). Therefore, do not miss that Lazarus' death was a part of the plan all along. No. God did not cause the sickness; instead, the sickness was cause for God's intervention. How else would Jesus be able to demonstrate his power over the grave if he didn't allow one of his friends to die? Like all the miracles that came before it, Jesus raised the dead so that he might glorify the Father. And few things praise God more than when the grave is robbed of its prey. But even this was also a demonstration of his love for his followers (cf. 11:5-6). We are truly loved when God's glory is revealed and his Son is glorified.

### Exegesis

**Vs. 1-4** – John begins this next section of his account with a simple introductory sentence: "Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha." Burial inscriptions from around this time indicate that "Lazarus" would've been a fairly common name in Israel.<sup>4</sup> This is why we shouldn't be surprised that "Lazarus" shows up in other places throughout Scriptures. In the N.T., for instance, it comes on the lips of Jesus during one of his stories (cf. Lu. 16:19-31). However, it is unlikely the two individuals are linked. They have nothing in common except for a shared name, and that death plays a prominent role in both passages. Interestingly, the name Lazarus is short for "Eleazar," which is Hebrew for "he whom God helps."<sup>5</sup> And this form of the name shows up on multiple occasions throughout the O.T. as it referred to Aaron's third son and successor to the priesthood (cf. Ex. 6:23; Num. 3:4, 32; 20:28; etc.).

The mention of Bethany is significant to the story as the town was within a few short miles of Jerusalem in Judea.<sup>6</sup> And considering how the last chapter ended, readers who know their geography well would immediately pick up on how dangerous this area would be for Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Full disclosure, some doubt the historicity of this event. This is because John is the only gospel writer to record the resurrection of Lazarus and the only one to connect it to the Triumphal Entry and the Passion narrative. For more on this, see the 'Additional Notes' section.

<sup>4</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 325.

<sup>5</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> Carson (1991), p. 405.

Note, this Bethany is to be distinguished from John the Baptist's "Bethany" (1:28) as that town was "beyond Jordan" (cf. 10:40) in the north and within a day's walk of Galilee (cf. 1:43).

That John would need to explain who Lazarus was but not his sisters is clear from what he says next: "It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick." While John will later relay Mary's anointing of Jesus (cf. 12:1-8), it is clear this event had been widely publicized at the time of his writing (cf. Mat. 26:6-13; Mar. 14:3-9; Lu. 7:36-50). Jesus' words had indeed been fulfilled within a single lifetime (cf. Mat. 26:13; Mar. 14:9). And she and her sister, Martha, were also well-known through another story involving sibling rivalry (cf. Lu. 10:38-42). Thus, these siblings were already recognizable in Jesus' entourage. Remarkably, it was Lazarus who no one knew about; except for those who knew him personally or lived in or around Bethany. Imagine believers outside a Jerusalem context hearing that the famous Mary and Martha had a brother who was not only a disciple of Jesus like them but was also raised from the dead!

Because of their close connection with Jesus, John tells us that the sisters sent a message to him saying, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick." This message implies a plea for Jesus to come and heal their brother. The term "lovest" is the Greek word **φιλέω** (*phileō*), and it indicates a deep fondness between two individuals (cf. 5:20; 12:25; Mat. 6:5; Rev. 3:19).<sup>7</sup> The fact that these sisters knew how to find Jesus also implies that he had a close-knit relationship with this family.<sup>8</sup> It is hard not to see the similarities between this and when Jesus' mother politely asked him to turn the water into wine (2:3).

Jesus responds to the news by saying, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God...." Yes. Lazarus was sick. But he wasn't sick just so that he would die. Though this does happen. Instead, Jesus says this sickness has come upon Lazarus for God's glory. And, as with our discussion in 9:3, we should not suppose that Lazarus was sick *because* of God's glory. Just as there was no apparent cause for the blindness in chapter 9, there is no evident cause for Lazarus' sickness in chapter 11. It was merely an *occasion* for God to intervene.<sup>9</sup> To conclude anything else presumes too much on the text.

Jesus also says that "the Son of God" will "be glorified thereby." What was a trying time for Mary and Martha is the exact thing God will use to reveal himself and glorify his Son. God's self-disclosure—i.e., his glory displayed in our world—was shown through the works of his Son

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<sup>7</sup> In light of the sister's words, some have argued that Lazarus is the "Beloved Disciple" who wrote this account. This is an appealing proposition, but, as Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 183, notes, given John's use of the term **ἀγαπάω** (*agapāō*) in vs. 5, it is more likely we should think that this was a "beloved family and not simply of the beloved brother."

<sup>8</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 327, records this observation from Burge, G.M., *The Gospel of John*, N.I.V. Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 2000), p. 312.

<sup>9</sup> Kruse (2017), p. 284.

(cf. 1:14-18).<sup>10</sup> In our immediate context, that glory would be revealed when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. But do forget that Lazarus' death and resurrection *foreshadow* Jesus' own. What Jesus does here will also set into motion the Passion. And it is in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus himself that the Father is genuinely glorified (cf. 12:23, 27-28, 31-32; 13:31-32; 17:1).<sup>11</sup> Lazarus' resurrection is the appetizer; Jesus' resurrection is the entrée.

**Vs. 5-6** - Unlike how he responded immediately to his mother's request (2:7), Jesus purposefully delays coming to Lazarus. The Evangelist explains, "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was." Jesus' response in vs. 3 and his delay vs. 6 could be misinterpreted. Some might've thought that the Lord cared little for Martha and Mary. But John didn't want his audience to get the wrong impression. And so, our faithful narrator reassures us that Jesus did, in fact, love these sisters. John even uses the strongest Greek term for love there is, **ἀγαπάω** (*agapáō*).<sup>12</sup> And, in a few short moments, all doubt as to whether or not Jesus' loved them will be put to rest.

John tells us Jesus stayed where he was for forty-eight hours. We'll learn later that by the time Jesus gets to Bethany in Judea, Lazarus will have been dead for four days. John mentions this point twice throughout the story (cf. 17, 39). This seems to imply we should take particular note of this fact. Not surprisingly, the timing of this passage has prompted two interpretations. Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 188, assumes it was only a day's journey to Lazarus.<sup>13</sup> According to him, this suggests that Lazarus must've died shortly after the message was sent, taking only a day to get to Jesus. The Lord tarries for those two days and then travels a day to get to Bethany, making it so that he arrives on the fourth day. However, this ignores Jesus' pronouncement in vs. 14, which strikes us as a literal T.O.D. ("time of death"). Furthermore, the region that Jesus was in around Galilee was roughly 75 miles<sup>14</sup> from Jerusalem and would've taken at least four days' travel just to get from one to the other.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it appears that even if the Lord had left immediately, he still wouldn't have arrived in time.<sup>16</sup> Rather than Lazarus being four days dead, he would've only been dead for two days. This reinforces our point above that God's glory was not the *cause* of Lazarus' death; instead, it was the *occasion* for God's Son to *intervene*. This also makes better sense of John's connection between Jesus' love for the sisters and his delay. As Carson points out,

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<sup>10</sup> Carson (1991), p. 406.

<sup>11</sup> Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 187.

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in 3:16 for a more thorough unpacking of this word.

<sup>13</sup> Keener (2003), 2:839, follows this logic as well.

<sup>14</sup> Carson (1991), p. 407.

<sup>15</sup> Köstenberger (2004), p. 328, claims that typically a person only traveled twenty to thirty miles per day during this time.

<sup>16</sup> Kruse (2017), p.285

"Lazarus' illness will not finally issue in death; it is for the glory of God (v. 4). This does not mean Jesus is indifferent to human suffering. Far from it: Jesus loves Martha, Mary and Lazarus (v. 5). Indeed, it is in consequence of that love that he delays his departure by two days, waiting for the divine signal, the news of Lazarus' death, before he sets out on the four-day journey (v. 6), for this delay will make a substantial contribution to the strengthening of the faith of the Bethany family."<sup>17</sup>

Jesus' delay was not only how God is most glorified, it is also how Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were most loved. Once Lazarus stepped from that grave, that family's faith would be able to withstand most anything.

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<sup>17</sup> Carson (1991), p. 408.

## Additional Notes

**Introduction** – Some writers have called into question the historicity of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This is because some simply deny any supernatural account as unbelievable. Others see it as a "historicizing" of Jesus' story in Luke 16:19-31.<sup>18</sup> But, as was noted in the commentary proper, the two individuals share only two things: their names and the fact that both died. And the strongest of those two shared data points is "Lazarus," but, as we said, this was a common name, so even it is weak.

Another critique against John's account is that some think it's unusual that he connects the Triumphal Entry and the Pharisee's plot to kill Jesus with the resurrection of Lazarus when the rest of the gospels make no mention of the miracle.<sup>19</sup> They argue that if this event was as monumental as John seems to indicate, why didn't Matthew, Mark, or Luke make the same connection? From there, they seek to undermine the factual nature of John's account, calling into question other miracles, such as the feeding of the five thousand, even though there are synoptic parallels. Ironically, these so-called "critics" have the same problem that the religious leaders had in John's account: they lack faith. Or, as Morris puts it, "There appears to be something other than the absence of Synoptic attestation that causes the hesitation."<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to see how anyone reading John's account would come to this conclusion. John gave no indication, within the narrative itself, that this was anything but historical fact. Thus, to assume that the raising of Lazarus is fictional is also to suppose that John himself was a liar. Yet, reading his account reveals a diversity of facts (i.e., names, places, distances, reactions, consequences, etc.). Either he fabricated them, or they're the telltale signs of firsthand experience. And if it's the first of those two options, why believe anything John wrote?

As to why the Synoptic writers would've left out the story of Lazarus, many theories are far more plausible than thinking it's an invention of John's imagination. Keener speculates that the other gospels writers, particularly Mark, might've been wary of mentioning Lazarus and his sisters, who were likely still alive at the time they wrote their accounts. So, referencing them might've put them in harm's way (cf. 12:10-11).<sup>21</sup> But, personally, the most believable explanation was that the Synoptics had more than enough material to work with (cf. Jhn. 21:25). Even the resurrections they do mention are dealt with briefly. Take, for example, the raising of Jairus' daughter (cf. Mar. 5:21-43; Lu. 8:40-56). Mark and Luke mention the healing,

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<sup>18</sup> Carson (1991), p. 403.

<sup>19</sup> Keener (2003), 2:835.

<sup>20</sup> Morris (1995), p. 474.

<sup>21</sup> Keener (2003), 2:836.

but they sandwich the event between other miracles, which are just as remarkable. In fact, that particular resurrection comes right after Jesus heals a man who had been demon-possessed. Save for John 13:27, John makes no mention of Jesus casting out demons. Should we be suspicious of the Synoptic writers because they recorded it and John didn't? Maybe John is the only reliable account, and the others were in league with one another to engineer events?

Arguing that since the Synoptics fail to mention Lazarus' experience, we should hold John's account in suspect is faulty logic. Personally, I have never traveled to Australia, but I do not doubt that it exists because I've heard from people who have been there. John the Beloved was present when a man who had been dead for four days stepped from his own grave. He was an eye-witness. Why not trust him?

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 22

Text: **John 11:1-6**

As you read through the gospels, it is clear that Jesus loved his followers. However, as they say, hindsight is twenty-twenty. It is easy to make this conclusion when we have the story of Jesus nicely written for us in four separate accounts. What about those who actually had to live it? Today's passage explores this question. And Jesus' desire to glorify his Father and his wish to exhibit his love for those around him compelled him to do some curious things. As we'll explore this evening, it actually made him stay where he was when most people wouldn't have delayed.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: