

Exegesis

Vs. 7-10 – Jesus tells his disciples, “Let us go into Judaea again.” The Lord gives no explanation as to why it was time for them to leave. And so, understandably, his followers are confused. In fact, they protest such a journey by saying, “Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again?” In other words, “Rabbi, only death awaits you in Judea.” What would compel their beloved Teacher to go back into the proverbial lion’s den? Does he not remember that they tried to stone him last time he was in town (cf. 10:31, 39)? What kind of person would go willingly to a place where he knows he might meet his end (cf. 10:17)?

In response to their objections, the Lord says, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.” As was Jesus’ habit, he used a relatively pedestrian illustration to explain a remarkable principle. After all, who wouldn’t understand that if a person were to walk in the day, they’d see clearly enough not to “stumble.” But his seemingly straightforward metaphor becomes enigmatic when instead of saying that someone stumbles in the night because there is no light, he says there is “no light *in him*.” Before, the light Jesus spoke of was external; now, he talks about an internal light.

Jesus’ response works on two levels. First, in both verses, “light” is a way that the Lord spoke about himself (cf. 8:12), and “day” seems to refer to his earthly ministry. In fact, Jesus has used similar language before in 9:4-5: “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” The disciples thought it was too dangerous for him to go to Judea. But Jesus is telling his followers that just because there is significant risk and nightfall is quickly approaching does not mean he should not go. The Lord still has some work yet to do. And, yes, even though danger is on the horizon, the Lord tells his friends that they will not fall—i.e., stumble (cf. 1 Jhn 2:10).¹ The day may be long spent, the sun appears to be setting, and the predators of the night are beginning to stir, but there is still some daylight left. Jesus, like the sun, has not set. And before he would go to the cross, the Lord was determined to raise his friend from the grave. As dangerous as it may have seemed to the disciples, the Lord assured them that no one would be able to touch them before his “hour” had come (cf. 7:30; 8:20; 12:23).

On the second level, Jesus refers to his disciples when he speaks of the “man.” Just as the day is only so long, so was Jesus’ earthly ministry. Eventually, his final hour would begin, the night

¹ Morris (1995), p. 481.

would fall, and his work on earth would end (cf. 13:30).² Thus, once the Lord's light has set and that long night begins, his followers will fall away. They, like those who walk at night with no light, will end up *stumbling*. For though they had walked with the Light of the world for some time, they had yet to be given the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (cf. 7:39; 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). Until then, they will be scattered like sheep without a shepherd (cf. 16:32).³ And so long as "there is darkness in the soul, then we will stumble indeed."⁴

Vs. 11-13 – More than likely, Jesus' comments were met with blank stares. After all, the disciples would not understand much of what the Lord said until after the resurrection (cf. 12:16). So, rather than explain what he meant, Jesus said, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep." That he says "our friend" is significant as it implies that the disciples, not just Jesus, had a close-knit relationship with Lazarus, too (cf. vs. 3, 5). But the disciples misunderstood Jesus. They said, "Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well."⁵ However, while they were mistaken, John would not let his audience be confused, so he explains, "Howbeit Jesus spake of his [Lazarus'] death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking rest in sleep." Augustine's comments are worth noting:

"It was really true that he was sleeping. To his sisters he was dead; to our Lord he was sleeping. To those who could not raise him again, he was dead. Our Lord awoke him with as much ease from his grave as you might awake a sleeper from his bed."⁶

The use of "sleep" as a metaphor for death was common enough in both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. Not only do we find the phrase "slept with his fathers" throughout the O.T. (cf. 1 Ki. 1:21; 2:10; 1 Chr. 17:11; 2 Chr. 16:13; etc.), but the Greek gods, Hypnos and Thanatos, were portrayed as twin brothers with each being the personification of sleep and death respectively.⁷ However, while this kind of metaphor may have been known, it probably wasn't so common that someone would've immediately picked up on the implication. This would account for the disciples' misunderstanding. Combined with the fact that Jesus had just gotten

² Carson (1991), p. 409.

³ Köstenberger (2004), p. 330, cautions against connecting Jesus' words here with the "crucifixion and the like," thinking that they "seem to go beyond the image field conjured up by Jesus' saying." However, except for referencing Ridderbos 1997, p. 391, he gives no reason why he thinks so.

⁴ Morris (1995), p. 481.

⁵ Ibid., p. 482, this could also be translated as, "He will get better."

⁶ Elowskey, Joel C., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament IVb, John 11-21, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 7.

⁷ Keener (2003), 2:841.

done using confusing imagery and the original message spoke only of Lazarus' sickness and not his death, it makes perfect sense that Jesus' followers thought he spoke of actual sleep.⁸

Interestingly, Christians took every opportunity to speak of dying as if it were sleeping. So much so that it became an idiomatic phrase characteristic of our faith.⁹ The Greek term used for "sleepeth" in verse 11 is **κοιμάω** (*koimaō*), and, of the eighteen uses in the N.T., there are only four instances where it refers to actual sleep (cf. Mat. 28:13; Lu. 22:45; Jhn. 11:12; Ac. 12:16). Compare that to the other fourteen uses where it's in reference to death (cf. Mat. 27:52; Jhn. 11:11; Ac. 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Tim. 4:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:4).¹⁰ Because of a theology that has Christ's resurrection as its centerpiece, followers of Jesus have long thought of death as a momentary separation no more permanent than if one were merely taking a long rest. Eventually, all who have been spiritually buried with Jesus in his death through faith will share in his bodily resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:50-58).

Vs. 14-15 – In the frankest way possible, Jesus says, "Lazarus is dead." Note that he frames his words in the aorist tense, making it a declarative statement.¹¹ Thus, when we contrast this with not only the present tense of vs. 3-4 ("Lazarus is sick") but also the perfect tense of vs. 11 ("Lazarus sleepeth"), it suggests to us that Jesus is speaking about Lazarus' literal time of death. Just as the Lord knew the woman at the well had multiple husbands (4:18), and just as he saw Nathanael sitting under a fig tree (1:48), Jesus knew the very moment his friend drew his last breath.

In the wake of such a shocking declaration, Jesus tells the disciples, "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." If we should assume that Lazarus was close friends with them all, as vs. 11 suggests, then it stands to reason that the disciples would've been saddened to hear that he had died. Yet, in a moment of misery, Jesus does not speak about sorrow but gladness. The Greek term he uses is **χαίρω** (*chairō*), and it refers to joyfulness, happiness, and cheerfulness (cf. 3:29; 4:36; 8:56; 14:28; 16:22; 20:20), which are all things one does not associate with the death of a loved one.¹² What is the cause of Jesus' gladness? He says it that they might "believe." Presumably, had Jesus

⁸ Carson (1991), p. 409, gives five reasons why the disciples' "obtuseness" is perfectly reasonable.

⁹ Morris (1995), p. 481.

¹⁰ While not found in John, the Greek term **καθεύδω** (*katheudō*) is used twenty-two times in the N.T. and it usually refers to actual sleep (cf. Mat. 8:24; 13:25; 25:5; 26:40, 43; 45; Mar. 4:27, 38; 13:36; 14:37 (2x), 40, 41; Lu. 22:46; 1 Tim. 5:7 (2x)). But even this term is used to refer to death (cf. Mat. 9:24; Mar. 5:39; Lu. 8:52; Eph. 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:10).

¹¹ Morris (1995), p. 482.

¹² Christians habitually rejoice where one might be expected to lament (cf. Mat. 5:12; Ac. 5:41; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 1:18; 2:17; 1 Pet. 4:13).

been with Lazarus, he would've healed him of his sickness.¹³ This would've been a good thing, but the disciples' belief wouldn't have been enhanced. After all, they had seen him do many miracles. They had even seen him raise the dead before (cf. Mar. 5:21-43; Lu. 7:11-17). But they never saw Jesus raise one of their own friends from the grave who had been dead for four days. This miracle would do wonders for their faith.¹⁴ Morris' comments are most helpful:

"Without a doubt they [the disciples] were already "believers." Yet their faith was not strong, for at the critical hour they were all to forsake him. The meaning will be that faith is progressive. There are new depths of faith to be plumbed, new heights of faith to be scaled. The raising of Lazarus will have a profound effect on them and give their faith a content that it did not have before."¹⁵

Thus, Jesus' appeal, "let us go unto him," was not an invitation for the disciples to share in Mary and Martha's sorrow but a proposition for them to share in his gladness. They may be headed to Judea to attend a funeral, but the Lord would have them be prepared to shout for joy.

Vs. 16 - John then relays that one of his fellow disciples, a man named "Thomas, which is called Didymus," speaks up and says to the others, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Grammatically, Thomas may be referring to Lazarus; but the "him" he is referring to is more likely Jesus. Was it not the Lord's "stoning" that prompted this discussion in the first place (cf. 8)?¹⁶ Furthermore, the "go" is clearly about Jesus' journey to Judea. It would be nonsensical if it referred to Lazarus.

Interestingly, "Didymus" is a transliteration of the Greek term **Δίδυμος** and it means "twin." This may imply that Thomas had a sibling, but nothing is known about him/her if he did. The issue is complicated further when we consider that "Didymus" can also be a proper name in its own right. So, we cannot assume that Thomas had a twin brother or sister.¹⁷ Coincidentally, the name "Thomas" itself comes from a Hebrew noun that also means "twin" (cf. Gen. 25:24; 38:27; Song. 4:5; 7:3).¹⁸

Except for his name being listed amongst the roster of disciples (cf. Mat. 10:3; Mar. 3:18; Lu. 6:15; Ac. 1:13), nothing had been recorded involving anyone named "Thomas." Indeed, if not for John, his name would be the only thing we knew about him. But here, in his grand introduction, we find a man who speaks fearlessly, boosting the morale of his friends. It is a

¹³ Carson (1991), p. 410.

¹⁴ Kruse (2017), p. 286.

¹⁵ Morris (1995), p. 483.

¹⁶ Kruse (2017), p. 287.

¹⁷ Köstenberger (2004), p. 331.

¹⁸ Morris (1995), p. 483.

shame that Thomas is better known for his doubt than his bravery. If anything, knowing how cynical he will become (cf. 20:24-25) should testify to how devastated he must've been after the crucifixion. Even though it likely would've meant his own death if he went to Judea, Thomas was willing to go with Jesus. Only a great heartache could quite a heart so courageous.

But Thomas presumed too much. He could not die "with" Jesus in Judea. The Lord's death was his own. In fact, far from dying with him, Thomas, like most of the other disciples, would eventually abandon Jesus (cf. Mat. 26:56). Nevertheless, as Carson points out, "his words have become a clarion call to would-be disciples, after the resurrection, to take up their cross daily and follow Jesus (cf. 12:25; Mk. 8:34; 2 Cor. 4:10)."¹⁹ Just as the American Revolution gave birth to numerous calls to arms, from "no taxation without representation" to "join or die" to its most notorious saying, "give me liberty or give me death," Jesus' resurrection inspired a battle cry of its own. And, lo and behold, this rallying cry was coined by none other than "Doubting" Thomas himself: Let us also go, that we may die with Christ. Never forget, the cross we bear is a death sentence leading to life. We die daily to ourselves so that we might find a new way to live in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:31). Thomas lost sight of that, this is true, but, at least at this moment, he "looked death in the face and chose death with Jesus rather than life without him."²⁰ May we be so bold.

¹⁹ Carson (1991), p. 410.

²⁰ Morris (1995), p. 484.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Wednesday Night Live | John | Week 23

Text: **John 11:7-16**

The American Revolution gave birth to numerous calls to arms: “no taxation without representation,” “join or die,” and probably its' most notorious saying, "give me liberty or give me death.” Likewise, Jesus' resurrection inspired a batty cry of its own. And, lo and behold, this rallying cry was coined by none other than Doubting Thomas himself: “Let us also go, that we may die with Christ” (Jhn. 11:16).

The cross we bear is a death sentence leading to life (cf. Jn. 12:25; Mk. 8:34; 2 Cor. 4:10). We die daily to ourselves so that we might find a new way to live in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:31). Like most of the other disciples, Thomas would lose sight of that; this is true (cf. Mat. 26:56). But, at least in our passage tonight, he chose to go with Jesus to Judea and to almost certain death. May we be so bold.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/sXOkEgG>