

# John 11:1-45

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## Limits of the Text

The story of the raising of Lazarus (1-44) is one logical unit. Verses 45 and 46 are transitional. Those who believed in Jesus (45) looks back to the raising of Lazarus; those who went to tell the Pharisees (46) looks ahead to their plot to kill him.

## Interpretation

The theological background for this story is death. Death is a “great horror,”<sup>1</sup> yet it is also the logical consequence of Adam’s sin in the Garden. Ro 5:12 says, “Just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned.”<sup>2</sup> Death is not a natural part of life; there was no death in the garden. Death is an enemy that Jesus will eliminate (1 Co 15:26).

1 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3 So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick.”

4 But when Jesus heard this, He said, “This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it.” 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.

Jesus must have been a friend to this family for a while, as the sisters referred to their brother as “he whom you love” instead of naming him. The word they sent Jesus was a plea for help though not a demand that Jesus come; they knew that he would be in danger if he returned to Judea (11:8). They simply asked for help, allowing Jesus to decide what was best to do.<sup>3</sup>

When this happened, Jesus knew that it was an opportunity to powerfully demonstrate who he was.<sup>4</sup> Lazarus would die but not stay dead. Jesus planned to reveal God’s glory so that he himself would be glorified and his disciples (11:15), the sisters (11:40), and the people (11:45) would believe in him.

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<sup>1</sup> Walvoord, 2:312.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from the NASB95 unless specified otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, 478.

<sup>4</sup> Kostenberger says, “It is not that the sickness occurred *in order* for God to be glorified, but rather that it constituted an *occasion* for God’s glory to be revealed” (327).

Jesus' opportunistic use of this event might sound cold and calloused, but that was not so. John was careful to say that Jesus loved them, and it is specifically because he loved them that he waited two days.<sup>5</sup> He could have responded immediately to the sisters' call—this is exactly what we would expect him to do—but he deliberately did not. Jesus waited in accordance with God's will and timing; he did not move according to the demands of people around him. Additionally, the delay ensured that Lazarus was definitely dead, well beyond the time where someone might claim that Jesus had merely resuscitated him.<sup>6</sup> "What defies human reasoning is upheld when the glory of God is the driving motivation and the sovereignty of God is the guiding force."<sup>7</sup>

7 Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

8 The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"

9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 "But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

His disciples were concerned for his safety and warned him about returning to Judea. The last time he was in Judea, approximately two months ago,<sup>8</sup> the Jewish leaders had tried to stone him and arrest him for claiming to be God (10:31, 33, 39). Jesus knew he was in no danger, and he used a word-picture to illustrate this. If someone walks during the day when there is light, he won't stumble and fall. Similarly, so long as he obeyed the will of his Father, he was perfectly safe. "The disciples need not fear to go up with him, because he cannot die before the appointed time, and there is still a little time left."<sup>9</sup>

11 This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."

12 The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. 14 So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, 15 and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."

16 Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."

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<sup>5</sup> Contra the NIV's poor translation of "yet" that puts these in tension.

<sup>6</sup> See the commentary on verse 17 for more on this.

<sup>7</sup> Kostenberger, 328.

<sup>8</sup> Per Kostenberger's estimation (329).

<sup>9</sup> Morris, 481.

Sleep is a common euphemism in the New Testament for the death of a believer. Since Jesus knew that Lazarus had already died—Jesus apparently had supernatural knowledge of his death—he could say that he was going to wake him up. At this point, however, the disciples did not understand this, so it was natural for them to misunderstand his meaning. If Lazarus was merely sleeping, they replied, then he would recover. No doubt they were hoping this was a good reason to avoid a dangerous return to Judea. Jesus corrected the misunderstanding by telling them that Lazarus was dead.

In a somewhat shocking statement, Jesus said that he was glad that he was not present when Lazarus died, presumably because he would have healed him and prevented his death. This was not because he didn't love Lazarus or enjoyed the suffering of his friends; rather, Jesus said this because this would be an amazing opportunity to strengthen the faith of his disciples, an opportunity that would have been lost if Jesus had healed him.<sup>10</sup>

17 So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning their brother. 20 Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house.

21 Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

When Jesus arrived in the area, he found that Lazarus had already been dead for four days, a significant number in Jewish culture. "The general belief was that the spirit of the deceased hovered around the body for three days in anticipation of some possible means of reentry into the body. But on the third day it was believed that the body lost its color and the spirit was locked out. Therefore the spirit was obliged to enter the chambers of Sheol (the place of the dead). The passing of the third day, therefore, signaled the conclusion of the last modicum of hope for the mourners."<sup>11</sup>

Martha, apparently the older sister and now mistress of the household, went to Jesus, while her sister remained seated in the house, the typical place and posture for mourning. Martha's greeting is a profession of faith and an expression of grief. She believed that Jesus could have healed her brother, and she regretted that he had not

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<sup>10</sup> Carson, 410.

<sup>11</sup> Borchert, 354.

been here. Even in her grief, she had confidence in Jesus, recognizing “the particularly intimacy he enjoys with his Father, an intimacy that ensures unprecedented fruitfulness to his prayers.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus wanted to take her faith in him deeper, so he said that Lazarus would come back to life. “Martha apparently took it as a customary statement of consolation and joined Jesus in professing belief in the general resurrection of the body at the end of the age.”<sup>13</sup> This was the prevailing belief of the day, taught by the Pharisees<sup>14</sup> and Jesus himself (5:28-29). Jesus, however, was talking about more than a general statement of reality; he was pointing to himself, the one who could raise Lazarus now. He was seeking “to shift Martha’s focus from an abstract belief in resurrection on the last day to personal trust in the one who provides it in the here and now.”<sup>15</sup>

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Jesus said that he was the resurrection and the life, thus asserting that he was victory over death and the grave. In one sense, Jesus was talking about the future. There will be a day when he will eliminate the enemy of death (1 Co 15:26). He will raise the dead to life and change their physical bodies from perishable to imperishable, thus death will no longer have any power (1 Co 15:52-55). Belief in Jesus leads to resurrection leads to eternal life (3:15-16). This future is so certain that Paul said Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Ti 1:10).

In another sense, however, Jesus was talking about the present. He had the power of resurrection now. “Even though [Lazarus] had entered Sheol (the four days), he was not beyond the range of Jesus’ power.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, and he could raise himself from the dead as well (10:18). He could give life to Lazarus, and he could give life anyone who believed in him.

Jesus statements in the rest of verse 25 and verse 26 sound paradoxical, because he jumped back and forth between physical life and spiritual life without clearly differentiating between the two. When extra words are added, his meaning becomes clearer: The person who believes in Jesus will have eternal life even if he dies physically. Everyone who has spiritual life by believing in Jesus will never die spiritually. To say it simply: Salvation gives abundant life now, though it does not prevent death; it also gives eternal life and prevents eternity in hell. Jesus told the Jews, “I assure you: If anyone keeps My word, he will never see death—ever!” (8:48, HCSB).

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<sup>12</sup> Carson, 412.

<sup>13</sup> NET.

<sup>14</sup> Borchert, 355.

<sup>15</sup> Kostenberger, 355.

<sup>16</sup> Borchert, 356.

Jesus asked Martha if she believed what he said. “His words about faith and life are not a philosophical dictum to be critically argued. They are saving truth to be received in faith and acted on.”<sup>17</sup>

27 She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.”

Martha again professed her faith in Jesus. She agreed that he was the resurrection and the life; “she may not understand fully the implications of what he has just said, but as far as she can she accepts it.”<sup>18</sup> She believed that he was the Christ, the Messiah promised to the Jews. She believed that he was the Son of God, one who had a close, personal relationship with God. She believed that he came into the world; he was God who became man. Taken together, this is a powerful statement about her faith in Jesus. Even so, she didn’t realize how much more he was, and she didn’t have any idea what Jesus intended to do for her brother.

28 When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.”

29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. 31 Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Much like her sister, Mary greeted Jesus by professing faith in Jesus while expressing her grief. But where Martha conversed with Jesus, Mary simply cried with Jesus. Like her sister, Mary believed Jesus had power over sickness, but she also did not realize how much more he was.

33 When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,

Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. The word translated here as “deeply moved in spirit” (ἐνεβρομήσατο) can have one of two different meanings, either to have strong emotions or to have anger and displeasure at something.<sup>19</sup> To be troubled (ἐτάραξεν) is to have inward turmoil, to be disturbed, or to be unsettled.<sup>20</sup> Which of these, then, was Jesus’ reaction to their weeping? It may simply be that Jesus was touched by the sincere expressions of love and sorrow that Mary, Martha, and the

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<sup>17</sup> Morris, 489.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, 489.

<sup>19</sup> Arndt, 322.

<sup>20</sup> Arndt, 990.

mourners were displaying. They were grieving, and so he grieved with them. This is how the LEX translates it: “Jesus...was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled within himself.”

But it may be that Jesus saw their emotion and got angry, not at the crowds or at the sisters, but at the power of death and sin that had destroyed life and relationships. “He was angry because he found himself face-to-face with the manifestations of Satan’s kingdom of evil. Here, the realm of Satan was represented by death.”<sup>21</sup> He bristled at his imminent encounter with death.<sup>22</sup> This is how the HCSB translates it: “He was angry in His spirit and deeply moved.” “Clearly Jesus did not like death. Death, like sin, was an enemy for him.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus had come to give life and destroy death. This understanding more closely matches his assertion that he was the resurrection and the life, thus it is more likely.

34 and said, “Where have you laid him?”

They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.”

35 Jesus wept.

36 So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?”

Why did Jesus cry? Was it because he was sorry for Lazarus? Was he being empathetic Martha and Mary? While this is true—and this is certainly how the crowd understood it—there are two reasons why this understanding is incomplete. One, Jesus knew he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead! That has been his plan for the last three days. Two, John carefully used a different word for Jesus’ actions than for everyone else’s. Mary was weeping and the mourners, both personal and professional, were weeping with her (11:35). This verb describes a loud crying and wailing that was heard by those around. Jesus, however, cried, a different word that means a quiet expression of tears. Jesus did not wail.

What is the significance of these two reasons? What is the rest of the reason for his tears? He cried because of the lack of understanding of everyone around him. The sisters believed that Jesus had to be present when Lazarus was still alive so that he could heal him from his sickness. The crowds believed the same thing. Neither the crowds nor the sisters understood the fullness of what it means for Jesus to be the resurrection and the life. Yes, some day he will raise them to life, but he also had power

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<sup>21</sup> NET.

<sup>22</sup> Kostenberger, 339.

<sup>23</sup> Borchert, 359.

over death right then. Nothing is beyond the power of God-in-the-flesh, but they couldn't see it. They did not fully understand him or his mission from God.<sup>24</sup>

38 So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. 39 Jesus said, "Remove the stone."

Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days."

40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

41 So they removed the stone.

When Jesus arrived at the tomb, he experienced anger and displeasure all over again. The tomb held his friend; death, his enemy, held sway here.

Jesus' command to remove the stone was a test of the sisters' faith and understanding. Did they trust him? Did they understand who he was? They did not pass the test; instead, Martha objected due to the stench. Certainly it would have stunk, as the body would have been quite decomposed by this time. The Jews did not embalm their dead as the Egyptians did; they merely used spices to keep the worst of the stench away. The point of her remark, however, is that she can't possibly imagine what Jesus could do about this problem; after all, Lazarus is dead!

Jesus gently reminded her to trust him, promising that if she did she would see the glory of God. If "Jesus the Messiah is the resurrection and the life, then even in the face of this death he is to be trusted, for he will do nothing other than that which displays the glory of God."<sup>25</sup> The sisters then trusted and allowed the stone to be removed.

Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me." 43 When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." 44 The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Before he did anything, Jesus prayed. He addressed God as his Father, expressing their closeness. He was thankful that God heard him, acknowledging that he did God's will. "Jesus acts not on of his own volition but in dependence on the Father."<sup>26</sup> Then he gave the reason for praying aloud: He prayed so that the people might believe that he was

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<sup>24</sup> Morris, 495; Borchert, 360.

<sup>25</sup> Carson, 418.

<sup>26</sup> Morris, 498.

fulfilling God's plan.<sup>27</sup> He was seeking to draw his hearers into the intimacy of his own relationship with God.<sup>28</sup>

Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out, and he did! Though alive, he was still bound with small strips of cloth, which had to be removed to give him sight and freedom of movement.

This is the seventh sign recorded by John, and it is "the climatic and most dramatic"<sup>29</sup> of them all. Nothing else he did demonstrated so clearly that he was the Christ and the Son of God and was worthy of people's trust (Jn 20:30-31). Lazarus is not the only person Jesus raised from the dead. The Synoptics record his raising of the daughter of Jairus (Mt 9:18-26) and the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17). "The resurrection of Lazarus, occurring before that of Jesus, could only be a pale anticipation of what was yet to come."<sup>30</sup> It foreshadowed his own resurrection as well as the resurrection of all who believe in Christ (1 Th 4:16).

[45 Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.](#)

The miracle had exactly its intended effect for many. They saw the miracle as proof of Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, and they believed in him.

## Textual Outline

1. Jesus received a plea for help (11:1-6).
2. Jesus instructed his disciples (11:7-16).
3. Jesus spoke with Martha (11:17-27).
4. Jesus spoke with Mary (11:28-37).
5. Jesus raised Lazarus (11:38-45).

## Central Truth of the Text

John wrote 11:1-45 in order to reveal Jesus as the resurrection and the life who gives eternal life to those who believe in him.

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<sup>27</sup> A statement that is not unlike the main point of the gospel (20:30-31).

<sup>28</sup> Carson, 418.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, 403.

<sup>30</sup> Carson, 419.



## Teaching Outline

Jesus gives eternal life to those who believe in him, and today I want to encourage you to keep believing in him. From our text in John 11, we are going to see four reasons to believe in Jesus.

1. Believe in Jesus: He raised Lazarus to reveal God's glory (1-16).
2. Believe in Jesus: He raised Lazarus to promise eternal life (17-32).
3. Believe in Jesus: He raised Lazarus to predict his victory over death (33-38).
4. Believe in Jesus: He raised Lazarus to help you believe in him (39-45).

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