

JOHN 11

John 11:1–6. Introduction: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus

The Evangelist assumes that his reader already has some familiarity with Mary and Martha, perhaps because of their appearance in Luke 10:38–42. To ground the story, the author thus points backward toward the pre-existing traditions about the family in Bethany and forward to Mary’s anointing of Jesus (John 12:1–9). Note that this is *not* Mary Magdalene but a different disciple named Mary. A Greek version of the Hebrew Miriam (Moses’s prophetic sister), Mary is by far the most common female name that we encounter in the New Testament.

As in the case of the blind man (9:1–5), Jesus does not place the blame for the illness on personal sin but sees in it an opportunity to reveal the power and goodness of God. Though it may be difficult for us to recognize it while mired in adversity, God so often paints His most beautiful masterpieces through the medium of suffering. We should not understand this to mean that God is the cause of such suffering; suffering is the natural human condition, and relief comes only as a result of God’s grace.

The introduction closes with an interesting comment. The Evangelist writes, “Jesus loved Martha, and her sister and Lazarus” and then records that Jesus remained where He was for two days before going to them. These two ideas seem contradictory—if Jesus loves them so much, why does He not take immediate action? We might expect the two sentences to be joined by a marker of contrast—“Jesus loved them, *but* He remained for two days.” Instead we have the logical succession, “Jesus loved them, *therefore* (Greek *oun*) He remained for two days.” Jesus does not delay *even though* He loves the family, but *because* He does. Why? Perhaps Jesus recognizes that even more than an immediate healing, the family will benefit from the lesson He will teach them about life, resurrection, and faith. Sometimes, perhaps, God delays answering our prayers because He knows that the coming struggle will be a greater blessing to us than an immediate answer.

John 11:7–16. Jesus Decides to Return to Judea

The decision to return to Judea could not have been an easy one. Opposition to Jesus in Jerusalem has been steadily growing, culminating in two attempts to have Him stoned (John 8:59; 10:31). Since Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem, Jesus would be risking His life by answering the sisters' plea. With the memory of the attempted stoning fresh in their minds, the Twelve try to dissuade Jesus, but Jesus's remark in verses 9 and 10 show that His purposes are not to be disrupted by opposition. The daylight hours of His ministry are drawing to a close, but His work remains unfinished.

In a classic motif in the Gospel of John, the disciples cling to the literal meaning of Jesus's words in verse 11, failing to comprehend the deeper meaning. In Hebrew and Greek literature, as in English, sleep is a common metaphor and euphemism for death. As the time of His departure approaches, Jesus begins to be more direct with His disciples—hence the abrupt and blunt declaration, “Lazarus is dead.” The coming events will be a teaching moment for the Twelve, as they will be for the family at Bethany.

John 11:17–27. Jesus Meets Martha on the Road

Martha's opening words are filled with sorrow, faith, and even frustration. She has unquestioned confidence in Jesus's abilities, but we may sense in her words a soft criticism of His motivations. Assuming that He is speaking of the end-times Resurrection, Martha takes only partial comfort in Jesus's words. She has what we may call eschatological faith in God—that is, faith that God can and will right all wrongs but will only do so when life and history have run their full course. She does not yet understand God's willingness to provide help and aid throughout the journey of mortality.

Jesus must gently remind her that she is standing in front of the embodiment of life and resurrection. His presence is living proof that God does not wait until the end of time to help His children. This is an example of realized eschatology, in which the eventual blessings promised by God are made available here and now through the mediation of Jesus Christ. In response to this, Martha gives a powerful confession of faith—in fact, this confession may be the only one in the Gospel of John that does not require immediate correction or emendation by Jesus. Martha finally understands who Jesus is.

John 11:28–37. Jesus Meets Mary

Realizing that Jesus has arrived, Mary rushes to meet Him and tearfully exclaims virtually (the order of one word is different in the Greek, but this is probably not significant) the same words that her sister Martha spoke. Note how well Jesus knows and loves the two sisters—although they express their grief through the same words, Jesus knows how to console them individually. The assertive, practical Martha required a verbal affirmation, words of hope. The introspective Mary, on the other hand, needs her friend to mourn with her—so mourn Jesus does, though He knows that Lazarus will soon be revived. Thus, “Jesus wept.”

John 11:38–44. Lazarus Raised from the Dead

This is the final, culminating miracle in the Gospel of John (with the exception of Jesus’s own resurrection), and it affirmatively demonstrates Jesus’s power over death. Careful readers have noticed the inclusion of seven miracles in the Gospel of John, designated as “signs” (Greek *sēmeia*): turning water to wine (2:1–11), healing a nobleman’s son (4:46–54), healing a man at Bethesda (5:1–9), feeding the five thousand (6:5–13), walking on water (6:17–21), healing a blind man (9:1–7), and raising Lazarus (11:38–44). As signs, these miracles each reveal something about Jesus, His power, and His mission. The last and greatest of these, the raising of Lazarus, points forward to Jesus’s own death and Resurrection.

John 11:45–53. The Sanhedrin’s Decision to Execute Jesus

As is the case with Jesus’s other miracles and teachings in the Gospel of John, this miracle evokes a mixed response. Many of the observers believe, but some others immediately leave and report the matter to the Sanhedrin. Jesus’s growing acclaim has caused a major problem for these authorities. Should He become wildly popular or choose to lead a revolt against Rome, His influence would surely destabilize the region and perhaps lead to massive Roman reprisals (including the loss of these authorities’ positions), the fear expressed in verse 48. Moreover, Jesus’s miracle-working combined with His failure to observe the strictures of certain interpretations of the law of Moses may have led the Sanhedrin to condemn Jesus as a false prophet who was using signs or wonders of the sort disallowed in Deuteronomy 13:1–4. The prescribed penalty for such a person was, of course, death (Deuteronomy 13:5).

The prophecy of Caiaphas is interesting. Caiaphas, no doubt, thinks that he is speaking the truth, and he is—but not in the sense that he intends. In Caiaphas’s mind, Jesus’s death is necessary because it will placate the Romans, but in reality it is necessary to save humankind from sin and death. Truly, it is better “that one man should die for the people.” The Evangelist takes pains to note that Caiaphas utters these words not in his personal capacity but rather officially as the high priest. Jesus has met hostility—even murderous hostility—before as recorded in the Gospel of John, but those were isolated, spontaneous incidents. From this point forward, for the remaining few weeks Jesus will operate under an outstanding warrant for His arrest authorized by the highest religious authorities in the land.

John 11:54–57. Jesus Awaits the Passover in Ephraim

Aware of the inflammatory consequences of His miracle, Jesus can no longer reside in Judea. Verse 57 makes it clear that there is now a warrant out for His arrest. What remains to be decided, once He is taken into custody, is how He should be executed and who should carry out the execution. We can see that the raising of Lazarus is not just the greatest and most famous of Jesus’s miracles but also is, very likely,

the proximate cause of His death. In this instance, Jesus demonstrated His great love by “lay[ing] down His life for His friends” Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

The chapter ends on a suspenseful note: will Jesus risk His life by attending Passover in Jerusalem? Though law and custom require it, it seems doubtful to the observers that He will make the pilgrimage. As we know, Jesus *will* make the journey to Jerusalem, and the moment He sets foot in the city, He has willingly laid down His life. He is aware of the consequences that He will face and knows the price that must be paid now to protect His followers and to provide salvation to all humanity.

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