

John 11:1-44: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] John chapter 11, verses 1 to 44. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.

So the sisters sent to him, saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill. But when Jesus heard it, he said, This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, Let us go to Judea again.

The disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again? 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.

But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him. After saying these things, he said to them, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.

[1 : 07] The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover. Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest and sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died.

And for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him. So Thomas called the twin and said to his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him. Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha said to him, I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.

[2 : 09] Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.

Do you believe this? She said to him, Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world. When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, The teacher is here and is calling for you.

And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.

Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled.

And he said, Where have you laid him? They said to him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. So the Jews said, See how he loved him. But some of them said, Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?

[3 : 25] Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, Take away the stone. Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days.

Jesus said to her, Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God? So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

I knew that you always hear me. But I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me. When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out.

The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, Unbind him and let him go. The raising of Lazarus in John chapter 11 is a pivotal event within the gospel.

It completes the cycle of seven signs that compose the book of signs, which is the first half of John's gospel. It is also an event that sets in motion many of the things that will occur in the second half of the book, the book of glory, concerned with Christ's death and resurrection.

[4 : 36] It might even be regarded as the fulcrum upon which the book turns. It is also important to consider some of the themes that are in play within it. As we've seen in other episodes within the first half of the book of John, figures within the book can serve as archetypes or paradigms for understanding larger groups of people.

The man born blind in chapter 9, for instance, is a paradigmatic disciple. Lazarus, a man who is loved by Christ and raised by his voice, might be another example of a paradigmatic figure.

In its introduction of Lazarus, the chapter does not immediately tell us that he was the brother of Mary and Martha. Rather, it is said that he comes from their village of Bethany. The hero of the gospel is presumed to know who Mary and Martha are already.

This might be an instance of John assuming knowledge of one of the synoptic gospels of his readers. In verse 2, we are told about the action of Mary that will occur in the chapter that follows. In reading the beginning of this chapter, we should probably also pay attention to the order of days. There is a first day that Jesus is told about the sickness of Lazarus. Then there is a two-day waiting period. And then there is four days that he has been in the tomb. This might suggest a seven-day pattern, corresponding with the one that we see in chapters 1 and 2 of the gospel.

[5 : 47] In verse 4, Jesus declares that the illness will not lead to death. We might assume that this means that Lazarus will not die. However, Lazarus goes on to die, which suggests that Jesus' words have failed.

As we will later see, the sickness does not ultimately lead to death. It leads through death, however. The illness is rather there to be a means by which Jesus is glorified. The raising of Lazarus will set a ball rolling that ultimately leads to Christ's crucifixion and to his own resurrection.

It is also the most climactic sign, the event in which Jesus reveals his identity as the resurrection and the life. As Jesus is glorified through the raising of Lazarus, and as the raising of Lazarus sets things in motion for the culmination of Jesus' own mission and life, the stories of Jesus and Lazarus become entangled together in important ways.

When Jesus finally determines to go to Judea on the third day, his disciples are hesitant. They know that the Jews have been seeking to take Jesus' life, and Thomas the twin, presumably speaking for the other disciples, expresses his sense of foreboding.

Jesus speaks in a cryptic way about Lazarus having fallen asleep and his going to awake him. In verse 9, he talks about the importance of walking in the day, when a person might see the light of this world.

[6 : 59] Jesus had formerly spoken of himself as the light of the world in chapter 9. Lazarus has fallen asleep, a state associated with the night, but now the light of the world is going to visit his situation and bring with him the dawn of Lazarus' resurrection.

Jesus' delay and absence from the scene is an important part of the story. In verse 15, we see it is one of the reasons why the sign will be more effective, leading people to believe. Later on, it will also be this detail that the two sisters highlight in their conversation with him.

When reading scripture, we can often see literary structures and parallels that can help us to understand deeper meanings. In John chapter 11, Jesus' two encounters, his encounter with Martha and his encounter with Mary, are paralleled with each other and contrasted also.

Both of them present Jesus with a similar challenge. Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. The similarity invites us to reflect both upon the likeness and also the differences between the two encounters.

The difference that really stands out is what Martha says after that statement. But even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. The later encounter with Mary does not include that element.

[8 : 07] Indeed, Mary's association with the Jews at this point suggests some element of unbelief on her part. There is a sort of contrast between the faith that Martha exhibits and the limited faith that Mary exhibits.

In the Gospel of Luke, we have a far more negative portrayal of Martha. She's the sister who is busy with the work of the house and fails to pay attention to the one who was visiting, Christ himself. Whereas Mary was the one who sat at Jesus' feet.

And once again here, we see Mary associated with Jesus' feet. She throws herself at his feet. And later on in the chapter that follows, she anoints his feet. And so there's a particular attachment that Mary has to Christ.

Very personal attachment. Yet perhaps it's more easily wounded as a result of that. She feels maybe that her love for Jesus has been wounded or betrayed by his failure to come when he was called.

Martha does not seem to be quite so wounded by Jesus' absence. She's still able to exhibit her sense of faith and hope, even in this situation of tragedy. Even now, I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.

[9 : 07] Perhaps taking the synoptic portrayals of these two sisters and the portrayal of them in the Gospel of John together, we can recognise rounded personalities that have differing strengths and weaknesses.

Considering that John's Gospel is written so that we might believe, and that in believing we might have life, John might want us to reflect upon these two paradigmatic responses to a sense of Christ's absence in tragedy.

Jesus' delay is not out of an absence of love. Indeed, in the Gospel, Jesus' relationship with Lazarus is defined by love. And in this episode, Jesus enters into the emotions associated with the tragedy of human loss and the pain inflicted by the enemy of death.

That Jesus does not always turn up when people first need him is a spur to a dogged and persistent faith. Rather than doubting his character or his love, those who have faith are supposed to persevere in the darkness, confident in his character that he will act in their situation.

When Jesus declares to Martha that her brother will rise, she believes that he's referring only to some event in the distant future. Jesus elicits and encourages her resurrection faith, but he wants to take this faith even further.

[10 : 14] The statement of verse 25 is one of the strongest and most important in the Gospel. I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. This is another one of the I am statements, a statement of divine identity.

However, Jesus is also here presenting himself as resurrection and life come in person. We should think back when reading this chapter to chapter 5 verses 24 to 29.

There Jesus stated, Truly, truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

[11 : 20] In this chapter, Jesus gives a demonstration of the power of his word, the power that he possesses as one who has life in himself, and the way in which his voice is that which will raise the dead.

Resurrection is not a generic theological truth. It's not just a truth about some event that will befall people in the future. It's a personal reality, present in Jesus Christ.

He is resurrection personified. He is the one who has life within himself. He is the one whose word will raise the dead and give life to those in the tomb. When Jesus comes into this situation, he comes bringing life, and the fullness of life with him.

