

JOHN CHAPTER 11

THE LAST MIRACLE—THE LAST ENEMY

The raising of Lazarus from the dead was not our Lord's last miracle before the Cross, but it was certainly His greatest and the one that aroused the most response both from His friends and His enemies. John selected this miracle as the seventh in the series recorded in his book because it was really the climactic miracle of our Lord's earthly ministry. He had raised others from the dead, but Lazarus had been in the grave four days. It was a miracle that could neither be denied nor avoided by the Jewish leaders.

If Jesus Christ has no power over death, then whatever else He can do amounts to nothing. *"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable"* (1 Corinthians 15:19). Death is man's last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), but Jesus Christ has defeated this horrible enemy totally and permanently.

The emphasis in John 11 is on faith—there is some form of the word *believe* at least eight times in this account. Another theme is *"the glory of God"* (John 11:4, 40). In what Jesus said and did, He sought to strengthen the faith of three groups of people.

I. **The Disciples (John 11:1–16)** *"¹ Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with perfume, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. ³ So the sisters sent 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 is 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 in the place where He was. 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." ¹¹ He said these things, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him." ¹² The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be saved from his sickness." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of actual 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.”¹

We sometimes imagine the disciples as spiritual giants who rarely struggled, but that was not the case. They often failed their Lord, and He was constantly seeking to increase their faith. After all, one day He would leave them, and they would have the responsibility of carrying on the ministry. If their faith was weak, their work could never be strong.

Jesus was at Bethabara, about twenty miles from Bethany (John 1:28; 10:40). One day, a messenger arrived with the sad news that our Lord’s dear friend Lazarus was sick. If the man had traveled quickly, without any delay, he could have made the trip in one day. Jesus sent him back the next day with the encouraging message recorded in John 11:4. Then Jesus waited two more days before He left for Bethany; and by the time He and His disciples arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. This means that Lazarus had died *the very day* the messenger left to contact Jesus!

Allowing one day for travel, the events would have occurred as follows:

Day 1— The messenger comes to Jesus (Lazarus dies).

Day 2— The messenger returns to Bethany.

Day 3— Jesus waits another day, then departs.

Day 4— Jesus arrives in Bethany.

When the messenger arrived back home, Lazarus would have already died. What would his message convey to the grieving sisters now that their brother was already dead and buried? Jesus urged them to believe His word no matter how discouraging the circumstances might appear.

No doubt the disciples were perplexed about several matters. First, if Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did He permit him to get sick? Even more, why would He delay to go to the sisters? For that matter, could He not have healed Lazarus at a distance, as He did the nobleman’s son (John 4:43–54)? Obviously, there was a strong love

¹ [*Legacy Standard Bible*](#) (Jn 11:1–16). (2022). Three Sixteen Publishing.

relationship between Jesus and this family (John 11:3, 5, 36); yet Jesus' behavior seems to contradict this love.

God's love for His own is not a pampering love; it is a perfecting love. The fact that He loves us and we love Him is no guarantee that we will be sheltered from the problems and pains of life. After all, the Father loves His Son: and yet the Father permitted His beloved Son to drink the cup of sorrow and experience the shame and pain of the Cross. We must never think that love and suffering are incompatible—obviously, they unite in Jesus Christ.

Jesus could have prevented Lazarus' sickness or even healed it from where He was; but that was not His decision. He saw in this sickness an opportunity to glorify the Father. Our comfort and our ability to understand everything are not the most important issues; what matters is that God is glorified through our lives.

In their "prayer" to Jesus, the two sisters did not tell Him what to do. They simply informed Him that there was a need, and they reminded Him of His love for Lazarus. They knew that it was dangerous for Jesus to return to Judea because the Jewish leaders were out to destroy Him. Perhaps, they hoped that He would "*speak the word*" and their brother would be restored to health.

Our Lord's message to the sisters did not say that their brother would not die. Rather, He promised only that the ultimate result would be the glory of God. (Note that once again, Jesus called Himself "*the Son of God*.") He wanted them to lay hold of this promise. In fact, He reminded Martha of this message when she hesitated in opening the tomb (John 11:40).

When we find ourselves confronted by disease, disappointment, delay, and even death, our only encouragement is the Word of God. We must live by faith and not by sight. Their situation seemed hopeless, yet the sisters knew that Jesus was the Master of every situation. The promise in Psalm 50:15 finds a parallel here: "*And call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.*"

What about our Lord's delay? He was not waiting for Lazarus to die, for he was already dead. Jesus lived on a divine timetable (John 11:9), and He was waiting for the Father to tell Him when to go to Bethany. The fact that the man had been dead four days gave greater authenticity to the miracle and greater opportunity for people to believe, including His own disciples (see John 11:15).

When our Lord announced that He was returning to Judea, His disciples were alarmed, because they knew how dangerous it would be. (Bethany is only about two miles from Jerusalem.) But Jesus was willing to lay down His life for His friends (John 15:13). He knew that His return to Judea and the miracle of raising Lazarus would result in His own arrest and death.

The Lord calmed their fears by reminding them that He was on the Father's schedule, and that nothing could harm them. As we have seen, this is an important theme in the Gospel of John (John 2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). The disciples not only misunderstood the schedule, but they also misunderstood the reason for the visit. They thought that, if Lazarus was sleeping, he was getting better! It was another example of their inability to grasp spiritual truth: *"If he is sleeping, he must be improving—so let's not bother to go to Bethany!"*

Then He told them openly that Lazarus was dead. (Death for the believer is compared to sleep. See Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thes. 4:13–18.) He did not say He was glad that His friend died, but that He was glad He had not been there; for then He could reveal to His disciples His mighty power. The result would be glory to God and the strengthening of their faith.

If Thomas' attitude was any indication, the faith of the disciples certainly needed strengthening! The name Thomas means "twin" in the Aramaic language; the Greek equivalent is Didymus. We do not know whose twin he was, but there are times when all of us seem to be his twin when we consider our own unbelief and discouragement. It was Thomas who demanded evidence before he would accept the truth of our Lord's resurrection (John 20:24–28).

Thomas certainly struggled with doubt, but he was also deeply devoted to Jesus: he was willing to go with Him into danger and risk his own life. We may not admire his faith, but we can certainly applaud his loyalty and courage.

II. **The Sisters (John 11:17–40)** ¹⁷ *So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days.* ¹⁸ *Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about fifteen stadia away;* ¹⁹ *and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them about their brother.* ²⁰ *Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary was sitting in the house.* ²¹ *Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.* ²² *But even now I know that whatever You ask from 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.”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—ever. Do you believe this?”²⁷ She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, the One who comes into the world.”²⁸ And 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 rose up quickly and went out, they followed her, thinking that she was going to the tomb to cry 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.”³³ When Jesus therefore saw her crying, and the Jews who came with her also crying, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled,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?”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 he smells, 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?”

Jesus was concerned not only about the faith of His own disciples, but also about the faith of Mary and Martha (John 11:26, 40). Every experience of suffering and trial ought to increase our faith, but spiritual growth is not automatic. We must respond positively to the ministry of the Word and the Spirit of God. Jesus had sent a promise to the two sisters (John 11:4), and now He would discover how they had received it.

The event recorded in Luke 10:38–42 makes it clear that Mary and Martha were quite different in their personalities. Martha was the worker, the active one, while Mary was the contemplative one who sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to His word. Jesus did not condemn Martha’s service, but He did rebuke her for being “torn apart” by so many things. She needed to have priorities and center her activities on the things that God would approve. We should seek a balanced life!

We would expect Martha to rush out to meet Jesus while Mary sat in the house, weeping with her friends. Since Mary later echoed Martha’s words of greeting (John

11:32), it is likely that the sisters had repeatedly said these words to each other as they waited for Jesus to arrive. While there may have been a tinge of disappointment in the statement, there was also evidence of faith, for nobody ever died in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Martha was quick to affirm her faith in Jesus Christ (John 11:22), and Jesus responded to that faith by promising her that her brother would rise again. He was thinking of the immediate situation, but she interpreted His words to mean the future resurrection in the last day (Daniel 12:2–3; John 5:28–29). This is another instance in John’s Gospel of people lacking spiritual perception and being unable to understand the words of Jesus.

Our Lord’s reply is the fifth of the *I AM* statements. It is important to note that Jesus did not deny what Martha said about the future resurrection. The resurrection of the human body is a cardinal doctrine in the orthodox Jewish faith. But in His great *I AM* statement, our Lord completely transformed the doctrine of the resurrection and, in so doing, brought great comfort to Martha’s heart.

To begin with, He brought the doctrine of the resurrection out of the shadows and into the light. The Old Testament revelation about death and resurrection is not clear or complete; it is, as it were, “*in the shadows.*” In fact, there are some passages in Psalms and Ecclesiastes that almost make one believe that death is the end and there is no hope beyond the grave. False teachers like to use these passages to support their heretical teachings, but they ignore (or misinterpret) the clear teachings found in the New Testament. After all, it was not David or Solomon who “*brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel*” (2 Timothy 1:10), but Jesus Christ!

By His teaching, His miracles, and His own resurrection, Jesus clearly taught the resurrection of the human body. He has declared once for all that death is real, that there is life after death, and that the body will one day be raised by the power of God.

Jesus moved Martha beyond merely believing a doctrine about resurrection and centered that hope in Himself. “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25)! While we thank God for what the Bible teaches (and all Martha had was the Old Testament), we realize that we are saved by the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and not by a doctrine written in a book. When we know Him by faith, we need not fear the shadow of death.

When you are sick, you want a doctor and not a medical book or a formula. When you are being sued, you want a lawyer and not a law book. Likewise, when you face

your last enemy, death, you want the Savior and not a doctrine drawn from a book. In Jesus Christ, every doctrine is made personal (1 Corinthians 1:30). When you belong to Jesus, you have all that you ever will need in life, death, time, or eternity!

Perhaps the most important thing Jesus did for Martha was to move her attention from a future resurrection to the One standing in front of her. Martha was looking to the future, knowing that Lazarus would rise again and she would see him. Her friends were looking to the past and saying, "*He could have prevented Lazarus from dying*" (John 11:37)! But Jesus centered their attention on the *present*: wherever He is, God's resurrection power is available *now* (Romans 6:4; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 3:10).

Jesus affirmed that believers would one day be raised from the dead (John 11:25). Then He immediately revealed the added truth that some believers would never die (it is a double negative, "never never die!") (John 11:26). How is this possible? The answer is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, 18. When Jesus Christ returns in the air to take His people home, those who are alive at His coming shall never die. They shall be changed and caught up to meet Him in the air!

Martha did not hesitate to affirm her faith. She used three different titles for Jesus: Lord, Christ (Messiah), and Son of God. The words "*I believe*" are in the perfect tense, indicating a fixed and settled faith: "*I have believed and I will continue to believe!*"

Our Lord dealt with Martha's faith; then He had to help Mary. Why did Martha call Mary "secretly"? Possibly because of the danger involved: they knew that the Jewish leaders were out to arrest Jesus. When Mary arose to go to meet Jesus, her friends misunderstood her actions and thought she was going to the tomb to weep. They wanted to weep with her, so they followed along. Imagine their surprise when they met Jesus!

Mary is found three times in the Gospel record, and each time she is at the feet of Jesus (Luke 10:39; John 11:32; 12:3). She sat at His feet and listened to His word; she fell at His feet and poured out her sorrow; and she came to His feet to give Him her praise and worship. Mary's only recorded words in the Gospels are given in John 11:32, and they echo what Martha had already said (John 11:21).

Mary did not say much because she was overcome with sorrow and began to weep. Her friends joined in the weeping, as Jewish people are accustomed to do. The word used means "*a loud weeping, a lamentation.*" Our Lord's response was to groan within and "*be moved with indignation.*" At what was He indignant? At the ravages of

sin in the world that He had created. Death is an enemy, and Satan uses the fear of death as a terrible weapon (Hebrews 2:14–18). No wonder Jesus was indignant!

The genuine humanity of Jesus is evident in John 11:34. Although He knew Lazarus had died (John 11:11), He asked those present where they had laid him.

“Jesus wept” is the shortest and yet the deepest verse in Scripture. His was a silent weeping (the Greek word is used nowhere else in the New Testament) and not the loud lamentation of the mourners. But why did He weep at all? After all, He knew that He would raise Lazarus from the dead (John 11:11).

Our Lord’s weeping reveals the humanity of the Savior. He has entered into all of our experiences and knows how we feel. In fact, being the perfect God-Man, Jesus experienced these things in a deeper way than we do. His tears also assure us of His sympathy; He is indeed *“a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”* (Isaiah 53:3). Today, He is our merciful and faithful High Priest, and we may come to the throne of grace and find all the gracious help that we need (Hebrews 4:14–16).

We see in His tears the tragedy of sin and the depth of His compassion. Some have suggested that Jesus may also have reflected upon what Lazarus was being called back to experience in this fallen world, but the text does not tell us this explicitly.

The spectators saw in His tears evidence of His love. But some of them said, “If Jesus loved Lazarus so much, why did He not prevent his death?” Perhaps they were thinking, “Jesus is weeping because He was unable to do anything. They are tears of deep regret.” In other words, *nobody present really expected a miracle!* For this reason, nobody could accuse Jesus of “plotting” this event and being in collusion with the two sisters and their friends. Even the disciples did not believe that Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead!

Martha had made a strong confession of faith (John 11:27), yet even she hesitated when Jesus commanded them to open the tomb. “Open the tomb? By now he smells!” Jesus gently reminded her of the message He had sent at least three days before (John 11:4), and He urged her to believe it. True faith rests upon God’s promises and trusts Him to accomplish His purposes. Martha relented, and the stone was rolled away.

III. **The Jews (John 11:41–57)** ⁴¹ *So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴² And I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the crowd standing around I said this, so that they*

may believe that You sent Me.”⁴³ And 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.”⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done.⁴⁷ Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Sanhedrin together, and were saying, “What are we doing? For this man is doing many signs.⁴⁸ If we let Him go on like this, all will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all,⁵⁰ nor do you take into account that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish.”⁵¹ Now he did not say this from himself, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation,⁵² and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.⁵³ So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk openly among the Jews but went away from there to the region near the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim; and there He stayed with the disciples.⁵⁵ Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up to Jerusalem from the region before the Passover to purify themselves.⁵⁶ So they were seeking Jesus, and were saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That He will not come to the feast at all?”⁵⁷ Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where He was, he was to report it, so that they might seize Him.”

From this point on, the emphasis is on the faith (or lack thereof) of the spectators, the people who had come to comfort Mary and Martha. Jesus paused to pray (John 11:41; also see 6:11) and thanked the Father that the prayer had already been heard. When had He prayed? John does not tell us when Jesus had prayed concerning Lazarus, but His words make clear that He was acting in complete harmony with the Father’s will. His prayer now was for the sake of the unbelieving spectators, that they might know that God had sent Him.

It has been said that if Jesus had not named Lazarus when He shouted, He would have emptied the whole cemetery! Jesus called *Lazarus* and raised him from the dead. John tells us that Lazarus came out still bound in the burial wrappings, although he

does not explain exactly how he moved from the tomb. It was an unquestioned miracle that even the most hostile spectator could not deny.

The experience of Lazarus is a good illustration of what happens to a sinner when he trusts the Savior (Ephesians 2:1–10). Lazarus was dead, and all sinners are dead. He was decayed, because death and decay go together. All people apart from Christ are spiritually dead, although the outward effects of sin may be more obvious in some lives than in others. Spiritually, however, dead is dead.

Lazarus was raised from the dead by the power of God, and all who trust Christ have been given new life and lifted out of the graveyard of sin (see John 5:24). Lazarus was set free from the graveclothes (see Colossians 3:1ff) and given new liberty. You find him seated with Christ at the table (John 12:2), and all believers are “seated with Christ” in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6), enjoying spiritual food and fellowship.

Because of the great change in Lazarus, many people desired to see him; and his “living witness” was used by God to bring people to salvation (John 12:9–11). There are no recorded words of Lazarus in the Gospels, yet his very presence became a powerful witness to the life-giving power of Jesus. Because of his effective witness, Lazarus was persecuted by the religious leaders who wanted to kill him and get rid of the evidence.

As with the previous miracles, the people were divided in their response. Some did believe and on “Palm Sunday” gave witness of the miracle Jesus had performed (John 12:17–18). But others immediately went to the religious leaders and reported what had happened in Bethany. These “informers” were so near the kingdom, yet there is no evidence that they believed. They stood face-to-face with compelling evidence, yet they refused to believe. A hardened heart can encounter the truth and still resist it. These people could have experienced a spiritual resurrection in their own lives!

It was necessary that the Jewish council (Sanhedrin) meet and discuss what to do with Jesus. They were not seeking the truth; they were seeking for ways to protect their own selfish interests. If He gathered too many followers, He might get the attention of the Roman authorities; and this could hurt the Jewish cause.

The high priest, Caiaphas, was a Sadducee, not a Pharisee (Acts 23:6–10); but the two factions could always get together to fight a common enemy. Unknown to himself and to the council, Caiaphas uttered a divine prophecy: Jesus would die for the nation so that the nation would not perish. *“For the transgression of My people was He*

stricken” (Isaiah 53:8). True to his vision of a worldwide family of God, John added his inspired explanation: Jesus would die not only for the Jews, but for all of God’s children who would be gathered together in one heavenly family (note John 4:42 and 10:16).

The official decision that day was that Jesus must die (see Matthew 12:14; Luke 19:47; John 5:18; 7:1, 19–20, 25). The leaders thought that *they* were in control of the situation, but it was God who was working out His predetermined plan (Acts 2:23). Originally, they wanted to wait until after the Passover, but God had decreed otherwise.

Jesus withdrew to Ephraim, about fifteen miles north of Jerusalem; and there He remained in quiet retirement with His disciples. The crowd was gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover feast, and the pilgrims were wondering if Jesus would attend the feast even though He was in danger. He was now on the “*wanted*” list, because the council had made it known that anyone who knew where Jesus was must report it to the officials.

John 11 reveals the deity of Jesus Christ and the utter depravity of the human heart. The rich man in hades had argued, “*If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent*” (Luke 16:30). Lazarus came back from the dead, and the officials wanted to kill him! Miracles certainly reveal the power of God, but of themselves they cannot communicate the grace of God.

The stage had been set for the greatest drama in history, during which man would do his worst and God would give His best.²

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion³

1. How have you reacted when someone you loved died?
2. What do you learn about Jesus from His decision to wait to go see Lazarus?
3. What did Jesus mean when He said, “I am the resurrection and the life”?
4. In what ways did John emphasize faith in this chapter?
5. How can you exercise faith in Jesus when something tragic happens, like the death of a friend or family member?

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 333–338). Victor Books.

³ Wiersbe, Warren W.. Be Alive (John 1-12): Get to Know the Living Savior (The BE Series Commentary) (p. 181). David C Cook. Kindle Edition