“IT IS FOR GOD’S GLORY”

John 11:1–16

Key Verse: 11:4

“When he heard this, Jesus said, ‘This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.’”

Chapter 11 contains Jesus’ seventh and greatest miraculous sign in John’s Gospel. Usually, the event happens first and an explanation of its meaning follows. But chapter, before the actual event, the author tells us its meaning and how Jesus helped his disciples. Jesus’ time with his disciples was almost over. We see in this passage that he wanted them to see problems the way he did, and to learn to love people the way he did. Most of all, we learn in this passage what Jesus came to do, something that no one else ever could do. Jesus the Son of God came to defeat the power of death and give life to all who believe. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

**First**, Jesus developed deep love relationships with people. Many Christians think they should focus on holding to the truth or on working hard. While that’s partly true, we see that Jesus did more than that. In the midst of his demanding ministry he became a close, personal, loving friend with three siblings, Lazarus, Mary and Martha. These three had a home in Bethany, a village about two miles outside of Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Bethany was a residential village for wealthy people. Jesus and his disciples often traveled to Jerusalem, and it seems they would stop at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha for food and lodging (e.g. Mk11:11; Mt21:17). These siblings seemed well off because they could afford to live in such a home and host Jesus and his twelve hungry disciples. The Bible doesn’t tell us how the relationship started, but Luke tells us that Martha opened her home to Jesus and that Mary her sister would sit among the disciples, listening to what he said (Lk10:38–39). Jesus made friends with them by receiving their help and by sharing not only his teaching but also his life with them. They didn’t feel used, thinking, “Jesus comes only for the food and lodging.” No, he spent personal time with them. Jesus was their good shepherd who knew them by name and cared for them (10:13–14).

In verse 2 John tells us that this Mary was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. At that time many women were named Mary. For example, in the Gospels there are Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary the wife of Clopas, also known as “Mary the mother of James” or “the other Mary” (19:25; cf. Mk16:1; Mt28:1). But this was Mary the sister of Lazarus, who was from Bethany. She had become world-famous as a nameless woman. It was because wherever Jesus’ followers went, telling his story, they also told the moving story of how, while people were plotting to kill him, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard, broke the jar, poured the perfume on his head and wiped his feet with her hair (2; 12:3; Mk14:3,9; Mt26:7,13). This woman was none other than Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus. The author John tells us this surprising detail in advance, to highlight the deep love this family had for Jesus. In verse 5 he also says that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. This shows us that believing in Jesus is not only about knowing correct theology but also leads us to a close, personal love relationship with him. Jesus wanted his disciples to witness him building such genuine love relationships, so that they, in turn, would someday become good shepherds who truly cared for his sheep.

**Second**, Jesus saw problems from God’s point of view. In verse 3 the sisters send word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” He knew the message came from Martha and Mary, and he knew it was about his friend Lazarus. By the urgency of the message he also knew that the sickness wasn't just a cold or a stomach problem, it was serious. When we hear news that someone close to us has developed a serious illness, we naturally get emotional. We can even begin to think negative things, like, “How could God allow this to happen?” But Jesus saw this problem of his friend Lazarus’ sickness from God’s point of view. He said in verse 4, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Jesus could see this because he was full of the Holy Spirit and could discern what God his Father was doing. Without the Holy Spirit, the problems in life we encounter and our emotions dominate our thinking. But when we’re full of the Holy Spirit, we can be like Jesus; we can see that even in severe difficulties God is doing something great.

Jesus shared this with his disciples because this is how he wanted them to learn how to react to problems. Life in this fallen world is full of troubles (Mt6:34). The Bible says that the world we live in is groaning under the curse due to our sin (Ro8:22; cf. Ge3:17–19). Problems abound. All things are subject to decay—not just our teeth but also our cars, our houses, our health. What’s worse, people become sick with sin and do things that hurt others deeply. And then there’s the specter of death looming, making everybody feel meaningless and fearful. When we focus on these things, we feel defeated and helpless. But when he heard the bad news of his friend’s terminal illness, Jesus said it was for God’s glory so that God’s Son might be glorified through it. Here the word “glory” means, “to reveal.” Jesus had a bright view of the world because he had faith in God, that God is real, he’s there, he’s still the Almighty Creator God who made the heavens and the earth (Ge1:1). He’s still the God who is good, and even in this cursed world full of sin and death he uses all things to accomplish his own good purposes (Ro8:28). God would reveal his own glory, his own greatness as God, through Lazarus’ sickness. Jesus’ words here don’t just apply to Lazarus. Every problem in our lives, even every tragedy, becomes an opportunity for God to be glorified. God still reveals himself to us through our problems. This view of the world, based on faith in God, makes us different. It enables us not to be overwhelmed; it makes us “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro8:37). This view of the world would help the disciples after Jesus was gone not to be knocked down by problems, but would enable them to inspire people with faith in God.

**Third**, God wants to reveal his power and love to us. Read verse 4. As we read ahead, we find that Lazarus actually dies. But Jesus’ words are true because he would go to Bethany and raise Lazarus from the dead even after decaying in the tomb for four days. In this way Jesus would reveal his glory as God’s Son, the only One who defeated the power of death. Verse 4 also applies to Jesus’ own life. After he raised Lazarus, the Jews became even more determined to kill Jesus, and they would soon succeed. But God would raise Jesus from the dead and make him the source of resurrection and life for all who believe. The glory of the Father and of the Son are one and the same. The Father would glorify his Son, and the Son would glorify the Father (17:1). Through the raising of Lazarus, God would reveal his almighty power over death. And through it he would reveal his great love for us. He loves us so much that he doesn't want to abandon us to the grave; he wants us to live with him forever. And he loves us so much that he wants us to live in this world full of his glory and his hope in our hearts. It doesn't happen right away, but God eventually reveals his glory to us, his power and love, when we believe, when we put our trust in Jesus (40).

**Fourth**, Jesus loves us with spiritual love that helps us believe. Read verses 5–6. Jesus intentionally waited two days, until Lazarus was good and dead. If this is love, Jesus had a funny way of showing it. Most of us would say to him, “No, thanks for that kind of love.” We would have gone there right away to prevent the sisters from going through such a tragic, sorrowful death of their brother. Jesus seems heartless. How can the Bible say that he loved them? His love was deep, not superficially emotional. He wanted to give them something even better than the healing and life of their brother. He wanted to give them a deeper knowledge of who he is and what he came to do, a deeper faith in him, a faith that he came to raise the dead and give them life (5:21,24–25,28–29), a faith that would enable them to be victorious over death. Some people love others selfishly, with a love that spoils or that makes them addicted to themselves. But Jesus’ love makes people not weaker, but spiritually stronger. Jesus included his disciples closely in his ministry to this family. They witnessed firsthand how he loved these people in a deeper, spiritual way, to help them believe. After he was gone, he wanted his disciples to learn to love people like this as well.

In fact, Jesus was loving the disciples themselves with this same love. When he said, “Let us go back to Judea,” how did they react? Read verse 8. They still had in their mind’s eye how the angry Jews had picked up stones to stone Jesus (10:31). They thought the Jews needed more time to cool off. It sounded reasonable. But frankly, they were living in fear of death. How did Jesus help them? Read verses 9–10. Here, “this world’s light” is Jesus himself (8:12). “Twelve hours of daylight” refers to our brief lifespan. What are we doing with our lives? Are we wasting them in fear? From God’s point of view, it’s like we’ve got this one beautiful sunny day outside, the only one there’s going to be, but we’re staying inside, depressed, worried and anxious about a lot of trivial things. When we follow Jesus, we can see everything clearly. When we follow Jesus, we can live courageously for God’s glory. When we follow Jesus, we have nothing to be afraid of. But when we “walk by night,” when we try to live on our own, without Jesus, we stumble. So, are we going to walk by faith, following Jesus? Or are we going to waste our lives stumbling around in fear and unbelief?

There’s another way Jesus is trying to help us here. To all of us, death is horrible. It’s irreversible, and it leads to permanent separation and decay. But Jesus wants us to see death differently. Read verse 11. To Jesus, death isn’t something to be feared; it’s like a restful nap. No matter how horrific it may seem, one day Jesus will come and wake us up and take us to be with him forever.

Look at verses 12–13. Because they were caught by fear, the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was saying. They sounded like they were concerned for Lazarus’ well being, but actually they were looking for any excuse not to have to go back to Judea and face the threat of death. So Jesus went on to explain what he was really doing. Read verses 14–15. According to his words here, Jesus stayed away until Lazarus died so as to help his disciples believe. What did he want them to believe? He wanted them to believe who he really is, that he is God the Son who has power over death, power to give life, power to restore anyone ravaged by sin and death. The disciples were following Jesus, but they were not yet believing as they needed to believe. The devil was still holding them in slavery by their fear of death (Heb2:14–15). Perhaps we’re the same sometimes. In verse 16 Thomas totally misunderstands Jesus. He’s sure that Jesus is going to die, so he heroically calls the others to go and die with him. His problem was he wasn’t really listening to Jesus.

So in this passage we’ve learned some key points: Jesus developed deep love relationships with people; Jesus wants us to see problems from God’s point of view; God wants to reveal his power and love to us; and Jesus loves with deeper spiritual love that helps us believe. May God help us to believe in Jesus, follow him and see his greatest glory, his power over death and his great love that wants to set us free from fear.