

John 11

Written by K B Napier
Tuesday, 24 March 2015 14:38

This chapter deals with the incredible account of the raising of Lazarus from the dead; I cannot describe how profound I find it. Only God can raise the dead! The Pharisees knew this, and this is why their hatred grew exponentially when Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. Very often ordinary things are used by God to bring about a miraculous result, but here God used no ordinary means. Instead, He used the sheer power of His command to defy an irreversible process (death).

This miracle is set-apart from all the others thus far, by Jesus Himself, because it was given a pivotal role in His ministry. It also gives good detail about WHY Jesus did what He did, and HOW He did it.

Verses 1-3

1.

Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha.

2.

(It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.)

3.

Therefore his sisters sent unto him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick.

Lazarus was a "certain man". He was a good friend of Jesus (the word 'certain' may suggest a known link). Lazarus ('whom God helps': in the Hebrew form, Eleazar) lived in the small village of Bethany, with his two sisters, Mary and Martha, also known to Jesus. Bethany was the home of Simon the leper, too. Bethany ('house of dates', or, 'house of misery') was sited just off the main road leading to Jerusalem, on the slopes of the Mount of Olives, just under two miles east of Jerusalem, now part of the West Bank.

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Mary/Maria's sister, Martha, is known for complaining to Jesus when He first visited their home, because Mary sat at His feet (after anointing them with oil and drying them with her hair), while Martha busied herself with unnecessary chores. She kept herself busy instead of listening to the vital teachings of Jesus. How many today do just this? They keep themselves busy in the local church, without sitting quietly listening to the Holy Spirit and meditating on God's word, which then makes spiritual life notional rather than experiential.

When Lazarus fell gravely ill, the two sisters sent for Jesus, knowing He could easily heal him. He was, at this time, quite a distance from Bethany, but the women relied on their close friendship.

Verses 4-7

1.

When Jesus heard that, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

2.

Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.

3.

When he had heard therefore that he was sick, he abode two days still in the same place where he was.

4.

Then after that saith he to his disciples, Let us go into Judaea again.

In this text we see possibly the first example of Jesus using what we might call a 'strategy'. He responded to the request by telling His disciples that Lazarus would not die of his sickness, because the sickness was going to glorify God. Obviously, Lazarus DID die, so did Jesus lie? No, He did not. Though He did not explain His use of the word, *thanatos*, He was referring to its secondary meaning – the power of death. That is, Lazarus would not be submitted to the absolute power of death, but would only die 'temporarily'.

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Jesus is said to have loved the family, yet He decided to wait two days before going to Bethany. I have called this part of His 'strategy', because Jesus had decided within Himself to make His visit to Bethany an opportunity to glorify the Father in a most remarkable way. Jesus knew that His delay would result in the death of Lazarus, yet He stayed where He was until He knew Lazarus was deceased. ([Also see A-498](#)).

Then, after two days had passed, Jesus called upon His disciples to follow Him to Bethany. To do this they had to pass over the Jordan at its southernmost end, and travel west towards Jerusalem, which was in Judaea, where the Pharisees were keen to stone Him to death. It was a dangerous visit, but necessary, so that the glory of God could be clearly witnessed by all. Thus, the glory of God took precedence over any danger to a person, in this case, Jesus. More specifically, it was to the glory of the Messiah, Son of God, because it would establish once and for all, His divinity.

Verses 8-13

1.

His disciples say unto him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone thee; and goest thou thither again?

2.

Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world.

3.

But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because there is no light in him.

4.

These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep.

5.

Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well.

6.

Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep.

Jesus' nervous disciples pointed out the dangers of going so close to Jerusalem. They reminded Him of the desire to stone Him and asked why on earth He wanted to go back there! Jesus replied with an odd saying: 'Aren't there 12 hours in a day? If a man walks in the day time he can see his path and not fall, but if he walks in the darkness of night, he will fall because of lack of light.'

This must have been a mystery to the disciples. What did He mean? The probable meaning was that He was saying He would go openly to the outskirts of Jerusalem, with the blessing of the Father, Who would keep Him from falling (into wicked hands inadvertently). He refused to do so secretly at night, because He had a specific purpose in going to Bethany... He wanted everyone to see what He did, so they could report to all of Israel that He was God and acted divinely. He would do so in the daylight, symbolic for the limited time left for Him to preach God's word to His people, the Jews. Though in the light of day (the earthly time of the Messiah), most were falling because they were spiritually blind.

After saying this, Jesus said they must go to Lazarus, who was only sleeping, and He had to go and awaken him. For Jesus this meant 'He has died but I must go and revive his body'. (The word 'sleepeth', *koimaō*, can mean sleep, but also to die).

The disciples, however, did not think of the reference to death, and said that if Lazarus only slept, he would soon be alright. They were unaware that Jesus was using the second meaning – death. Many Christians only see what they wish to see, and 'interpret' badly by doing so. I would suggest that the majority of Christians act this way, preferring their own bad interpretations (which 2 Peter 1:20 says is not allowed: "*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.*")

In this text 'prophecy' refers to both its meanings – future-telling and ordinary Bible teaching).

I come across this kind of sinful response time and again, because it is so prevalent; every person thinks, against the evidence, that he or she knows everything there is to know about scripture, so they remain stiff-necked, rejecting genuine teaching.

Verses 14-16

1.

Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.

2.

And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.

3.

Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

4.

Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.

Because of their inability to understand, Jesus plainly said "Lazarus is dead"! This time He used the word *apothnēskō*, meaning natural death. (There are other possible meanings, but they do not apply in this text). Jesus revealed that He was GLAD not to have come sooner, because it was now time for them to see something so tremendous, they would finally believe. Thomas Didymus, one of the twelve apostles, seems to have mistaken what Jesus was talking about, for he thought they would now die alongside Him.

The group carried on to Bethany and found that Lazarus had already been dead for four days, and was buried in his tomb (the hillside was full of tombs). No doubt the disciples thought that this was the end of the journey, because nothing could now be done. After all, someone who was dead four days would show the nasty signs of inevitable bodily decay (something Jesus would not suffer). These signs are irreversible in earthly terms. But, this was exactly the circumstance that Jesus required, because the corrupted body would prove His Lordship and power in the most astounding way.

Verses 18-23

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1.

Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off:

2.

And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.

3.

Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.

4.

Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

5.

But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.

6.

Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.

Bethany was very close to Jerusalem, and on the main route east from the city. It was therefore relatively easy to walk from Jerusalem to Bethany, taking perhaps three quarters of an hour. Thus, many Jews who knew Mary and Martha, and were friendly with Lazarus, came to pay their last respects, from Jerusalem, the neighbouring Olives' village of Bethphage, and other nearby villages. This is exactly what Jesus wanted... a large collection of Jews who would spread the news like wildfire, when Jesus had executed His plan.

[Notes on Jewish Funeral Rites

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As was custom, the mourners would wailing outside the home and outside the tomb. The aim of Jewish mourning practices is two-fold: to honour and respect the dead person (*kavod ha-met*) and to bring comfort to the living relatives (

nihum avelim

). By the time Jesus arrived, the

shomerim

, people who sat with the body night and day until burial, had gone. The shomerim neither ate nor drank whilst performing their duty, because it was considered mockery of the dead who could not do those things. This idea of mockery also made sure the body was covered by a casket or cloth, so as not to be seen.

When the person died, the close relatives tore their clothing over their hearts... on the right side if not a parent. The close relative then recites a blessing that accepts God's reason for taking their family member. The time of the relatives is then taken up solely with preparation for burial, the *aninut*. Visitors during this period, which lasts only a day or two, as Judaism requires prompt burial, are not encouraged. After the burial a neighbour or friend prepares the first meal (

se'udat havra'ah

) for the family, usually consisting of eggs and bread, symbolising life. Visitors are not fed. Only after this meal are visitors allowed.

After this is the period of *shiva*, a time of mourning for the family, which lasts seven days. The family sits on low stools, do not wear leather footwear, do not shave or cut their hair, do not work or do anything that is leisurely, including bathing and putting on fresh clothes. Instead, the family wear the same clothes they tore at the time of death. Mirrors are covered, and prayers are uttered with friends, neighbours and other relatives. Today there must be at least ten people to make up this prayer group, the *minyan*.

After the period of *shiva*, there is a thirty-day period of mourning known as *shloshim*. During this time there is no attendance at parties, etc. Then, for eleven months, including during the shloshim, any son of the deceased recites the

Kaddish

every day (the kaddish is a prayer thanking God, and so is not exclusive to mourning). This thirty day period ends the formal mourning of the dead, and is not allowed further public expression. In this way, people are not allowed to decline into excessive mourning and grief, which always leads one to depression.]

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From the precision and timing of the funerary arrangements, we can tell that Jesus must have arrived about two days after Lazarus had been buried, at the time of *shiva*, when the formal mourning period was still ongoing. Thus, many people sympathising with Mary and Martha were still in the village. Thus, the scene was set for one of Jesus' most magnificent miracles.

Martha heard that Jesus was close to the village after climbing the slopes of Mount Olives. While Mary sat in the house, Martha went to meet Jesus. In what appears to be an accusatory tone, Martha complained to Jesus that if only He had arrived a few days ago, when first called, her brother would not now be dead. Clearly, she believed that Jesus could have healed Lazarus. Even so, Martha still had a glimmer of hope. She added that even now Jesus could effect a miracle (verse 22). In this I see an emotional appeal, where grief and hope mingled.

In reply, Jesus told her "Thy brother shall rise again". Martha partly understood what He was saying – that Lazarus would be raised from the dead, *anistēmi*, at the last trump. Even though Jesus' words were plain, and Martha believed God could still bring about some kind of miracle, she did not really comprehend the amazing truth... that Jesus was saying Lazarus would soon become alive again!

Verses 24-30

1.

Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

2.

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

3.

And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

4.

She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

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5.

And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee.

6.

As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him.

7.

Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him.

Possibly because of her grief, Martha did not understand what Jesus said, though it was very plain. She thought He was speaking of the time all men would arise and be judged, many to hell and a few to Heaven. The word He used, *anistēmi*, can indeed include such a meaning, and Martha is commended for saying so. But, it was not what Jesus meant.

The same word can also mean, in many cases, raising up from laying down, or to raise from the dead. Though she said to Jesus that he could still perform a miracle, her mind was earth-bound, so she did not pick up on what Jesus really said. Her response was, really, 'second best'.

Jesus then spoke openly to her, to give a tremendous assurance. He said "I am the resurrection"! Not only could He give life on this earth, to those who were saved, but He will also cause them to be raised again, not only to spiritual life on earth, but also to life in Heaven forever. Even if someone died, Jesus can raise them up. The criterion was – to believe in Him.

Those who live and believe shall never die! This ties in with Jesus' words to His disciples, that Lazarus would not die – He was referring to eternal life, not human life. Thus, in a very real sense, though we die on this earth, it is only the death of our bodies... our spirits remain alive, and will join our newly given bodies, on the last day.

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Jesus must have looked Martha in the eye, when he then asked her “Believest thou this?” It is a question EVERY modern Christian should be asked, for most of the time we appear not to believe at all, and so live only for this moment, paying only scant regard to deeper spiritual truths.

Martha’s response was immediate; the Holy Spirit must have spoken to her heart and mind. ‘Yes, Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God prophesied to come to this world as a man’! She then hurried to her house to get Mary. Not wishing to tell everyone else, she said that Jesus (the Master) had arrived and was asking for her. He wanted both sisters to witness the most incredible miracle they would ever see, together with everyone who was there to mourn.

Jesus had not yet entered Bethany but was on the outskirts. Mary quickly joined Him and walked into the village with Him. Do we ever meet Jesus where He is, or do we wait until He comes to us? That is, are we willing to have faith in Him even when we are unsure or in despair? Or, do we expect Him to comply with our version of truth before we say we believe?

Verses 31&32

1.

The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there.

2.

Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.

It seems from the text that the writer now goes back a few minutes in time, to when Mary again met Jesus on the outskirts. Martha had probably whispered that Jesus had come, but the mourners who were with her decided to follow her – they thought she must have wanted to mourn at the tomb. As soon as she was in front of Jesus, Mary fell to the ground, repeating Martha’s initial woe – that if Jesus had come quicker, Lazarus would not have died.

We all want God’s answers immediately, but there are times when He wishes us to wait

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patiently, even when all odds seem to be against us. Jesus, as a man, understood the sisters' grief and regret. He understood, but His 'plan of action' had to be carried out, regardless of human emotions and grief.

Verses 33-36

1.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled,

2.

And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

3.

Jesus wept.

4.

Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!

As a man, Jesus also felt the emotions of His friends. He probably had a 'lump in the throat. As He saw the sisters and the mourners weeping. The sight and sounds caused His spirit to be troubled, for though His plan was far greater than the people envisaged, for now they suffered grief. He decided to end this scene and asked where Lazarus was buried.

The people asked Him to follow them, and as He walked He cried. This could not have been tears for His friend, Lazarus, or even for the sisters, because Jesus knew He was about to do something so magnificent, that all tears would immediately dry! So, His tears must have been for the sad state of the people, like sheep without a shepherd. Yet, everyone who saw Him cry thought His tears were for Lazarus, a sign of His love for a friend.

Verses 37-40

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1.

And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

2.

Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

3.

Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

4.

Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

As they walked some in the crowd commented that surely Jesus could have healed Lazarus; after all, He had healed others of blindness and diseases. Jesus could hear these comments and groaned within because of their grief and questions. But, He was about to dispel them all!

Lazarus was in a tomb/cave, with a stone against the entrance. Jesus commanded that someone should roll away the stone. Martha was credulous and said that Lazarus was dead for four days, and so his body would smell badly of decay. Then, Jesus reminded her of His words: did He not tell her that if she believed she would see the glory of God? by this He meant His true majesty as a king. In many ways this was Martha's 'weakest link'... would her faith rise to meet the promises of Jesus?

Verses 41-45

1.

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

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2.

And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

3.

And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

4.

And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

5.

Then many of the Jews which came to Mary, and had seen the things which Jesus did, believed on him.

The men who rolled away the stone must have done so with a mix of excitement and curiosity, tinged with trepidation! Then, Jesus openly and loudly thanked God for hearing His plea. He spoke loudly so that everyone could hear what He said and thereby associate what was about to happen with both the Father and with the Messiah. He said 'I know you always hear me, but I have spoken loudly so that others will hear and believe'. This was Jesus' entire reason for arriving late, so that Lazarus would be dead when He came. The coming miracle would prove Who He was and that the Father had sent Him.

He then shouted "Lazarus, come forth"! Almost straight away, Lazarus came to the opening of the cave, still hampered by his grave-clothes, with a piece of cloth over his face! I can only imagine the cries and gasps of awe amongst the crowd. Jesus commanded men to undo the burial bandages and the cloth on his face. At that very moment many of the Jews believed in the Messiah, no doubt falling prostrate on the ground in worship. This was the end Jesus wanted to see, and why He lingered after receiving the sisters' message. News of the miracle would have spread fast, firstly to the villages around, then to Jerusalem, and then to the rest of Judaea and beyond. Oh, to have been in that place at that time!

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Note: Do you realise just how amazing this miracle truly was? From the moment of death, a body deteriorates, right down to every single molecule. Every part is affected. When Jesus called to Lazarus, it meant that the man's entire body, every molecule, had to be renewed; every blood vessel had to be unclogged and filled with oxygenated blood; every muscle and sinew had to be 'unlocked' from rigor mortis by changing the chemical composition of blood; every brain neurone had to be renewed, and every organ re-made, and all in the time it took for Lazarus to 'wake up'! In short, it was a complete renewal of every part of Lazarus' body! I cannot adequately describe how phenomenal this was.

Verses 46-52

1.

But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done.

2.

Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles.

3.

If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.

4.

And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all,

5.

Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.

6.

And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation;

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7.

And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.

Though Jesus proved His Messiahship and therefore His divinity, and many believed, there were those with the spirit of Pharaoh, who refused to accept what they had seen. They could not deny what had happened, but their loyalty to Rome and to their false teachers was stronger; they wanted to be informers so that they could be regarded as 'friends' by the Pharisees and possibly rewarded. They were only too eager to run to the Sanhedrin to report what had happened.

Today there are many in our churches who do just that. They hear truth, but reject it, preferring to spread rumours and lies about those who speak God's word, thereby setting up a false castle from which they can defend their heresies and hatred.

The Sanhedrin met for an urgent discussion. They were afraid of Jesus, for His work could have ruined their comfortable living under the Romans. They feared that the whole population would follow Jesus, if He was allowed to stay free. The miracles were powerful incentives to follow the Lord. But, their minds were warped and they thought of Jesus' success as leading to His being crowned king of Judaea, thus bringing the wrath of the Romans down upon them. They feared losing everything – their status, offices, wealth, and even their country. They did not realise that they would lose them all very soon, as Jesus prophesied, not because of anything done by Jesus, but because of their refusal to repent and welcome the Messiah.

As they worriedly spoke of their fears, the High Priest at that time, Caiaphas, spoke out. He was appointed by the Roman governor, Valerius Gratus, in 18 AD, and had a lot to lose in worldly terms, if Jesus remained alive. Or, so he thought. At another time Jesus told His listeners that He was not interested in being a king in this world. But, people who are led by their lust, greed and wrath do not have time to listen to facts. Their minds and hearts are focused only on their own desires.

The High Priest said that it was surely better for one man to die than for the whole nation to be

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destroyed. And, even those Jews scattered abroad would be affected. Thus, he uttered prophecy about Jesus' coming death. Of course, the man had no love for others or even for the nation; he was only interested in keeping his job and income. Yet, God made him utter prophecy. In our day, too many false teachers pretend to be concerned for others, and are willing to ruin someone else to get their own way.

Verses 53-57

1.

Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.

2.

Jesus therefore walked no more openly among the Jews; but went thence unto a country near to the wilderness, into a city called Ephraim, and there continued with his disciples.

3.

And the Jews' passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves.

4.

Then sought they for Jesus, and spake among themselves, as they stood in the temple, What think ye, that he will not come to the feast?

5.

Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew it, that they might take him.

The Sanhedrin decided that enough was enough – Jesus had to die. From that time onwards they planned how to bring about Jesus' death, by fair means or foul. This became known to Jesus, who went away from Bethany to Ephraim, about a day's walk from Jerusalem in the desert. (The city of Ephraim was in the region called Ephraim). There He stayed for a while, with His closest disciples and apostles.

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When they were at Ephraim, the time of the Passover drew near, when every male at least attempted to travel to Jerusalem to celebrate in the Temple. Though not a command of God, many Jews travelled to Jerusalem before Passover began, to offer sacrifices and to cleanse themselves ceremonially. This took between one and six days. This was the last Passover Jesus would attend.

The Pharisees in the Temple queried whether or not Jesus would attend the Passover, or be too afraid to come. The current Chief Priest and the previous Chief Priests, plus the Pharisees, issued a decree, that if anyone saw Jesus in Jerusalem, they must inform them immediately, so He could be arrested. The time for Jesus' death was now imminent. Jesus knew it but did not run away. He came to die, and was determined to do so.

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