

John: A Bad Odor

John 11:1-57

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Turn with me to John 11. We have a lengthy portion of Scripture to read and perhaps one of the most exciting narratives in the Scriptures, let alone the gospel of John. It would be wonderful if we could pretend to read passages like this as if it we'd never heard them before because the climax comes right at the end of the passage. Hear with me the Word of God.

John 11:1-57

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask now for Your blessing as we turn to Your Word. Open it up before our eyes we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

You all know Matthew Henry's famous statement in his commentary on John's gospel, that Jesus *had* to say, "Lazarus, come forth!" because if He had just said, "Come forth," *all* the dead would have come forth. We come to another one of Jesus' signs; this is number seven. Perhaps it is the most spectacular of them all. Jesus had gone east of the Jordan River. He's left Jerusalem, and has gone to that place that John has already described for us in chapter 1 and verse 28, where John the Baptist did his preaching and baptizing in the River Jordan, and Jesus has left because they had tried to stone Him. In the end of chapter 10, He has left and gone to this place. When He gets there, the memories of John the Baptist who has, by this time has been beheaded, but the memories of his preaching which was full of Christ and the Messiah, those memories have now returned as Jesus comes there and a great many people seemed to have believed. That's what we discover at the end of John chapter 10. Something like a revival has broken out. Perhaps it is one of the most fruitful episodes that the disciples had witnessed thus far.

In this story now in chapter 11, Jesus comes back to within a few miles of Jerusalem again to Bethany, which is east of Jerusalem on the road that leads down to Jericho, and He comes to the home of His dearest friends, Mary and Martha, and now the deceased brother, Lazarus.

There is a good bit of debate as to exactly where Jesus is just now. Most commonly it is believed that He was about 50 kilometers directly east of Jerusalem and just across the River Jordan—about a day's journey from Bethany. But there still persists a view that Jesus was actually much further north and about four days journey from Bethany and, as we see in verse 17, if Lazarus has been dead for four days and he's four days away, that may have some significance and we will see that in a minute.

Now in the interest of full disclosure, I'm using an outline, a three point outline, which I had scribbled in my study Bible. I've no idea where I got this from. All that my study Bible had was: an unusual love, an unusual joy, and an unusual sympathy. Once I saw that outline I couldn't get away from it. I have no idea whose it is, but I'm grateful. Let's try this evening to fill that outline out a little bit.

I. An unusual Love.

First of all, here's an unusual love. The chapter opens with an announcement that Lazarus is sick. We are given a little glimpse of something that will occur in chapter 12, that Lazarus lives with his two sisters Mary and Martha, and there is a beautiful story at the beginning of chapter 12 which we'll come to next week. Their home is in Bethany near to Jerusalem within walking distance, a couple of miles, from Jerusalem. You remember the story in Luke 10. The one where Mary is sitting at Jesus' feet listening to this Bible study that Jesus is giving and Martha, well, "Managerial Martha," as she is sometimes called, is in the kitchen. Her hair is all over the place, there's flour everywhere, she's got her hands on her hips and she comes out and says to Mary, "Well, really Mary, you could have at least helped." You remember that story. That is probably two years in the past now. And in the interval of time Jesus has developed a rapport, a friendship with this home in Bethany. Perhaps this is where He stayed when He came down for the feast days in Jerusalem. They were close friends. Look at verse 3: "The one you love" which is speaking of Lazarus. Look at verse 5: "Jesus loved Martha and Mary and Lazarus."

Let me pause here. The one you love is sick. Some of you have heard those words this week. Someone you love, someone you know, someone close to you, and they're sick. See what that says? Let me pause right here and make the point. It is obvious, isn't it? It says that Jesus knows that heart-stopping feeling you get when someone you love is sick--the questions that fly around your head in moments like that. There's nothing that happens to you that our blessed Lord and Savior Jesus Christ hasn't been there before you.

Now Jesus says something in verse 4 that I think the disciples heard as good news. He says, "This sickness is not unto death." Lazarus' sickness wasn't serious, and he wouldn't die from it. Now, that is not what He said, but that is

what they heard Him saying. Now, even that is astonishing, isn't it? You know, He's a day's journey away or perhaps 150 kilometers away, and He is able to say—just like that—“This sickness is not unto death.” Jesus meant by that something different; that even though he was going to die he was going to live again. But the disciples heard him saying, “This sickness is not unto death.” I'm sure there are medics who get a phone call and you say, “You'll be fine.” But it's more than that. That's not what Jesus actually meant here. What He meant was that Lazarus' death would not be the ultimate result of his sickness.

Then in verses 5 and 6, something really unusual happens. When He hears that Lazarus is sick, and how He hears that, we don't know, it must have been by a supernatural knowledge imparted to Him. When He hears that; He stays an extra two days. In the Greek there is a word *therefore*. He hears that Lazarus is sick and therefore He stays an extra two days. That is an unusual thing, isn't it? That's an incredible thing. That doesn't make sense, does it? The one that you love is sick; therefore, you go to him straight away. You call him on the telephone, you write a note, you do whatever is necessary. You drop everything and you go if someone you love is sick. The one he loves is sick; therefore He stays an extra two days.

Now that traditional interpretation goes like this. Jesus' delay for two days was an act of love because it glorified Jesus in a greater way, if He waited two days, because Lazarus would have been dead four days by the time He got there. There was a superstition amongst the Jews that the soul or the spirit hung around for three days after you die. I can remember as a little boy, being terrified of going near a graveyard if a funeral had taken place there in the last couple of days. It was just superstition; it was nonsense. The soul goes immediately into the presence of Christ, if you are a Christian, that is. But there was this superstition, so perhaps four days would certainly dispel all of that. He was genuinely dead; the soul, the spirit had gone. Even in their superstitious belief the four days is counted this way. There was a day's journey from Bethany to Jesus by the messengers to tell them that he was sick. There was an extra two days that He waited, and then there was another day when Jesus would come from east of the Jordan back to Bethany. In other words, Lazarus would have died almost immediately after the messengers left Bethany. Of course, if He's much further north, the four days has to be interpreted a little differently, but either the way, the two days is problematic. If Jesus had set out immediately, no matter where He was, Lazarus would have been dead by the time He got there.

But why wait two days? Do you know what this says? It says that the love of Jesus will always test you. And that is what I want us to see. It is not difficult to understand that intellectually, it's difficult to keep before us. Look at verse 4. “This sickness is not unto death,” He says initially, “but for the glory of God.” And the love of Jesus has as its paramount and supreme goal the glory of God. That's the most ultimate thing in all the universe; the glory of God. That's the most important thing. It wasn't even the comfort of this family that He loved. That wasn't the most

important thing, the paramount thing. It would be so easy to come in here and interpret what Jesus does here as harsh and uncaring and unsympathetic, but the most ultimate thing for Jesus is the glory of God. Do you know the difference it would make if we actually believed that? It would stop us whining, wouldn't it? It would stop us complaining. It would stop us from misinterpreting the providence of God because we would always be saying, "The glory of God must be bound up in this." Whatever is happening, whatever the circumstances, the glory of God is bound up in this. This issue—fill in the blank for me--that thing that's on your mind tonight. Maybe it is a sickness like this family in Bethany. Maybe that's just where you are tonight, and there is someone in your family and they are sick and this too is for the glory of God. An unusual love.

II. An unusual Joy.

Secondly, an unusual joy. Look at what He says in verse 15. After He had said in verse 14, "Lazarus is dead," He says to the disciples, "I was glad, for your sakes, that I wasn't there." Is that strange, or what? From one level we can understand it that if somebody dies you sort of secretly think that "I'm glad I wasn't there," especially if you love that person. But there is an overwhelming sense that we want to be there, that we should have been there. Don't you expect Jesus to say to the disciples, "How I wished I'd been there to put my arms around those two women friends of mine to console them, to say a word of comfort and encouragement in their ears?" And He says, "I'm glad I wasn't there."

Let's go back a little. When Jesus says in verse 7, "Let's go to Judea again" after He's waited for two days, the disciples are horrified because they were trying to kill him back in Judea in Jerusalem, and Bethany is only two miles from Jerusalem. And He says, "Are there not twelve hours in daylight?" In other words, there was no need for Jesus to skulk about like a common criminal. He was going to do His work in the daylight no matter what. His own death was in the hands of God, in the providence of God, and He was going to do something in Bethany that His disciples hadn't even begun to dream about. And that is why He says, "I'm glad I wasn't there so that you may believe." Actually, the tense is so *that you may come to believe*, but they were believers already, they were Jesus' disciples, but He wanted them to believe more than they believed. He wanted them to grow in their belief; He wanted them to grow from weak faith to strong faith.

And there is always an Eeyore, isn't there? There's always a Puddleglum, and it's Thomas, Didymus, the twin. Thomas has a twin but we know nothing about his twin. And Thomas gets bad press because he's called *doubting Thomas* because he's the one that says after the resurrection that he won't believe "until he has thrust his finger into the side of Jesus." Look at what he says in verse 16. "Let's go that we may die with Him." And Thomas may mean, "Let's go that we may die with Lazarus because of the persecution from Jerusalem," but more than likely,

because the disciples were still confused as to whether Lazarus was dead or asleep, Thomas probably means, "Let's go that we may die with Jesus." You understand if I stop for a minute and defend Thomas. You understand if I have this longing and desire to bring Thomas out of this gloom and pessimism and Eeyore mentality that we have about Thomas. Well, he is an Eeyore. You know, my favorite Eeyore comment is on the wall in my study. "And how are you?" says Winnie the Pooh. And Eeyore shook his head from side to side, "Not very how," he said. "I don't seem to have felt at all 'how' for a long time." Let's get back to Thomas. It's easy to see his pessimism. Jerusalem was ablaze with resentment and anger against Jesus. And don't you see something of Thomas' bravery? Don't you see something of Thomas' courage and commitment to discipleship? He is saying to his brothers, "Suck it up. Let's go with Him, and if He's going to die, let's go out in a blaze of glory." Don't you love that? Tradition has it that Thomas went all the way to India, and there is a little hill just outside the airport in Madras to this day that you can go to where it is said that the grave of Thomas can be found. He was martyred. A spear thrust through his side for the cause of the gospel.

When Jesus gets to Bethany, He finds a scene of great sadness. Lazarus has been dead for four days. Folk have come from Jerusalem. Some of them may be professional mourners. Martha, Managerial Martha, always in control, comes out to meet Jesus and says to Him, "If you had been here, he would not have died. Why didn't you come? Where have you been?" True, she goes on to say that even now you could do something. "Even now," she says in verse 22, "God will give You whatever You ask." Is she really thinking that Jesus could raise the dead? Perhaps. Just for a fleeting moment she allows herself to think that but she doesn't pursue it, and when Jesus engages her in conversation and says, "Your brother will rise," she launches forth into a vibrant confession of the resurrection at the end of the age. And remember, she is basing all of this on the Old Testament. Yes, they believed in the resurrection. All that is apart from the Sadducees. It would be easy to conclude that there is something about this that is quite astonishing. The way Jesus engages now in this conversation with her about the resurrection, and Jesus draws out of her in verse 27 this marvelous confession, "Yes, Lord, I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world," because He has just said, "I am the resurrection and the life and he who believes in me even though he dies yet shall he live." There ought to be a vocal hallelujah, I suppose, even from Presbyterians, that belief in Jesus Christ guarantees eternal life, that we shall be with Christ forever. "In My Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself that where I am there you may be also."

So what did Jesus mean when he said to the disciples before he came to Bethany, "I'm glad I wasn't there." And what He means and what he meant was this will give me an opportunity to speak to Mary and Martha and others about

what I'm really here for, about ultimate issues. It's and unusual joy, isn't it? Can I put it like this? That Jesus' joy is the sort that knows what is better for us. I'm perfectly certain that Martha and Mary asked the question, "Does Jesus really care?" As each day passed and He didn't come, does Jesus really care?" And the only answer that can be given to that question is "He knows what's best for me." Joni Eareckson Tada's favorite verse, she tells us, is Philippians 3:10. "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection." You can understand why Joni likes that verse, because in the resurrection she won't have that disabled body anymore. She will have a glorious body. She will be able to run again and dive again and swim again. "I want to know Christ and the power of the resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings." "In suffering we also die to worry, we die to fear, we die to grumbling about the inconvenience of the weight of our cross, we die to thinking that Jesus doesn't care," she says. "I'm glad I wasn't there," Jesus says to the disciples, "because now this gives Me an opportunity to do something and say something that is so much better." I wonder if you can believe that about the circumstances that you are in tonight. That God has so ordered circumstances, that God has so put them together because it is better for you that way.

III. An unusual Sympathy.

This borrowed outline of mine had a third point: an unusual sympathy. It would be easy to conclude that there is something heartless about the way Jesus does things here until you come to verse 33: "When Jesus saw her weeping." And this is Mary, now, who has finally come out of the house followed by a train of mourners, and she's weeping and she's shedding tears. And "when Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled." Again in verse 38: "Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within..." and then verse 35: "Jesus wept." The Son of God Incarnate shed tears. The Lord of glory, the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth and we're beholding here something of His immense power. And here is this sight, and you understand that in the Sixteenth Century when they came to put the Bible into verses, they stopped at verse 35 with just those two words "Jesus wept," because they contain more than we could ever fathom--that the Lord of Glory is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. The sight of this pathetic scene of Mary, in perhaps convulsive weeping before Him; it angers Him. He is angry at death. He's angered by what sin has brought into the world. "It brought home," says Warfield, "to His consciousness the evil of death."

This is a beautiful portrayal of the emotional life of our Lord. There is something about death and what it does to families that angers Him greatly, disturbs Him inside. That the 'king of terrors,' as the Book of Job refers to death, has come in with its destructive forces. And Jesus is deeply moved by it and troubled by it and begins to shed his own tears and He cries, "Where have you laid him?" And they point to the rock tomb and the stone that is laid against it, and He asks for it to be

removed. And again Martha says, and I love the King James, "Behold, he stinketh." And that says it all, doesn't it? He's been dead for four days and decomposition has taken place. And you understand how important those words are for us to understand what is happening here. This isn't just a resuscitation in the ER at the Baptist Hospital. This isn't what some of you doctors do on a weekly basis, when you pump that chest and insure that the blood is flowing to the brain. How long do you do that for? Twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and then someone is going to call time and you pronounce death and you announce the time of it and that is the end of it. This is four days. This man's brain is dead; this man's body is decomposing. And Jesus bows His head in prayer, lifts it up to His Father in heaven and then makes that glorious call as Matthew Henry says, naming Lazarus by name, otherwise, all the dead would come forth. "Lazarus, come forth."

We don't have the categories to process this. Of all the great claims to signs and wonders and miracles, nobody claims this: that someone rises from the dead from a tomb after they've been buried there for four days. "Did I not tell you," Jesus says, "that you would see the glory of God?" I believe in Jesus Christ His only son our Lord. And here He is standing as King, standing as Lord before a tomb, before a grave, before the ugliness and ravages of death, and He says to death itself, "I triumph over you, I defy you. And Lazarus comes forth. It's a sign. In verse 47 it's a portent of what Jesus will do at the end of the age when those in their tombs will rise to meet Him in the air.

Every week a million people in the world die; fifty-six million people die every year. A new book was published a couple of months ago by an American surgeon, and it is called *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*. It suggests a new covenant between patient and doctor based on three things: fallibility, mystery, and uncertainty. And what this American physician refreshingly says to his readers is that what we doctors have to offer our patients is just that: fallibility, mystery, and uncertainty. And if we can relieve a little bit of pain as we go along, that's a bonus, he says.

How different the Great Physician, how different the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And do you see the importance of Martha's statement? "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who has come into the world." Here alone is infallibility; here alone is authority; here alone is certainty. It is in the Son of God; it's in Jesus. You want to read this story and ask, "What did Lazarus say when he came back? Where were the CNN reporters? Where were the doctors with encephalographs doing the brain waves, near death-experiences, post-death experiences?" And there's none of that; there's absolutely none of it because John wants you to see one person. It's not Lazarus; it's Jesus. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word. We ask your blessing upon it. Help us to see Jesus and to see Him only. For Christ's sake, Amen.

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