

RUF Bible Study – John
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John 11 – The Resurrection

We have come to the last part of the first section of John's gospel. Things turn at chapter 12 because we begin Jesus' last week of life before the crucifixion. John 11 contains Jesus' last public teaching as well as his last miracle. And what a doozy! Merely raising a man back to life. This is an important text for us and for the history of the church.

Let me ask you – what hope do you have? What do you think will happen when you die? How do you make sense of bad things that happen to you and those around you? What is your answer for what motivation we have in this life now?

I started reading a book I can't put down – *Ultramarathon Man* by Dean Karnazes. It's inspiring, though the man is crazy. He's running in 100+ mile races, which takes around 20 hours of straight running at a time. The true change in this man came when he'd been working for years in a corporate job. He had it all, but was empty inside. He met a woman at a bar, had a few drinks, and she invited him home. It didn't matter that they were both married. He was going to go, but decided not to. He drove home, put on some work tennis shoes, stripped down and started running. He ran 30 miles that night, and he was transformed. He was resurrected. Something inside him came to life.

We love stories like that, and all good stories point to some resurrection. Let's look at where those stories come from.

The delay of Jesus

Let's set the story of the chapter. "Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany." John tells us about a family consisting of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, three siblings. It would make sense that Lazarus was the youngest, Martha the oldest and Mary in the middle; we could assume all three were married adults, and were friends with Jesus.

A messenger comes to tell Jesus his friend Lazarus is dying. Jesus makes a few comments about death as sleeping, so no one is concerned. We then read in verse 6: *So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* During that time, Lazarus died, and Jesus knows it. He wants to return to see him, and he takes his disciples there.

On the way up to the funeral, Martha comes to Jesus and very upset. She says, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." (verse 21). Martha is processing what she knows about Jesus, including his amazing, life-giving powers. She had wanted Jesus to show up and save her brother.

This is right and good and common for us. We all have a "If only" aspect of our faith. Many of us trust in God, or want to, and we want him to set things right for us. We get terribly disappointed when things go wrongly.

If only he hadn't flunked the test.

If only I hadn't said that to her.

If only I hadn't looked at that website.

If only I hadn't gone there that night.

If only we had elected a different president.

If only I had had different parents.

If only she hadn't been in the car that night at that time...

We "if only" quite a bit if we're honest. Back behind our "if only" is the contention that God could have changed things if he had wanted to. If we believe in the sovereignty of God, then why didn't he intervene? Why did he allow this?

Although I cannot answer that question, I can look at this passage and tell you what Jesus did here. In verses 8-9 we read: *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.*

These verses imply that it is *because* of his love for this family *that* he delayed his return. Lazarus didn't die because he was a bad person, or because God didn't care about him. He died because of Jesus' love for him. Something greater was going to come out of it, and to make that happen, Lazarus died.

This may not always sit well with you, but it's important to process it together. God allows evil, but he subsumes it with his good. What other explanation do you have? Either God is too weak and evil defeats him, or else we are at the mercy of random, naturalistic forces of chance – that shouldn't give you hope.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2008, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries on John from Boice, Skip Ryan, Gary Burge, D.A. Carson, Hughes, Wright, Calvin and Leon Morris and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Ricky Jones, Fred Harrell and Scott Sherman. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Jesus' delay may not make sense, but it is the delay of love. He doesn't always intervene right away. We must trust he is a loving father and good friend, and that his ways are best, even if we don't understand them all.

And we should learn to think this way about God. James Montgomery Boice gives great advice and application in his commentary on John: "Learn to interpret circumstances by the love of Christ and not Christ's love by circumstances... Say, 'I know that Christ loves me. He died for me. Therefore, I will do my best to see his purpose in the things that are happening.' If you do that, you will begin to see how he is using them to perfect your will, strengthen your faith, and bring glory to his own wonderful name."²

The truth of Jesus

Jesus goes to Jerusalem, to the site of Lazarus' burial place, and enters into the funeral mourning. Someone must have given Martha advanced notice that he was coming, because she runs out to him and says, as we have read already, "*Lord, if only 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.*"

We mentioned the "if only" aspect of Martha's comment. In one sense, it's a slight rebuke or at least a push back to Jesus. He has disappointed her. She thought that he had loved Lazarus, and he didn't do anything to save or help her brother. She knows he could have. She does pull that back and reign it in by giving a general blanket statement in regards to his sufficiency and adequacy to address the situation. It sounds familiar to what Mary the mother of Jesus said in John 2 – "Do whatever it is he tells you."

Jesus tells her, "*Your brother will rise again.*" Mary agrees. She is thinking about her conception of resurrection, which would have been the normal Jewish thought. This was in a general resurrection on the last day. They believed that some day, the last day, all would be made right and things would be reset to their former glory.

The Greeks and Gentiles would have had a different conception. They didn't like or appreciate the body at all; they thought it was evil and corrupted. So a resurrection would be leaving your body and having your soul finally separate from that prison and be able to live in a glorious, non-body existence.

Mary is thinking of the general resurrection. But Jesus is speaking of a particular one, and we'll look at the actual raising of Lazarus in a minute.

It's important to realize that no one present, not the Jews nor the Gentiles, would have expected what Jesus was about to say or do, or agree with him in any way. This would have not come to mind.

Jesus says, "*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.*" (vv. 25-26)

Remember that this is before he raises Lazarus, so he's teaching and showing what it is he's about to do. His words and his actions go together (unusually since he normally explains *afterwards*).

In response to Martha's pushback, he says what I would contend is the greatest of his "I Am" claims. "I am the resurrection and the life."

This is astounding. He doesn't just give resurrection and life. He *is* it. We'll talk more about what that might mean, but for now understand he is again claiming to be God. Only God gives life, which we talked about in John 3. Certainly only God could raise people from the dead.

Jesus takes the chance to explain to Martha just really who he is. God. Fully God. In charge. Powerful over the very things of the essence of life and death. Can you hear the teaching and truth of Jesus? Do you see how he challenges Martha here?

The emotions of Jesus

Many of us really enjoy the truth of Jesus. This would tend to be the conservative position. Whenever we see a problem, we hit it with truth and judgment, fixing the problem along the way.

Jesus, however, doesn't only do this. He does something else, something the liberal position more often appreciates. He weeps.

After Jesus talks with Martha, Mary gets her turn. Mary goes out to Jesus, falls at his feet and says to him, "*Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" That is practically the same exact thing that her sister said. So we should get ready for the "I am the resurrection and the life" truth speech, for the judgment on her position.

Mary doesn't get it. She gets something else instead. *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, 'Come, Lord, and see.'* Jesus wept. (vv. 33-35)

Martha got Jesus' truth, of which we're very glad. Mary got Jesus' tears, of which we're very glad. Jesus has both and is both. He isn't conservative and judgmental; nor is he a liberal bleeding heart. He is truth and tears.³

What emotions do we get from Jesus here?

² Boice, 828

³ Some of this thought and language is from Keller's sermon on this.

First we see his anger. The words for “deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled” are difficult for translators. One that I trust to “get” the Bible and what it means is Eugene Peterson. He translates this as “a deep anger welled up within him.” That’s pretty good. In classical Greek, this term was used for snorting in rage. Jesus was really upset, really angry, really troubled, really mad.

Then you have the shortest verse in the New Testament, one easy to memorize. John 11:35 – *Jesus wept*. In the midst of the funeral procession and the mourning process, Jesus stood outside the tomb, and he cried and cried.

Why is this interesting and why does this matter?

It’s important in regards to Jesus because it shows many things about him.

It shows us Jesus isn’t just God, but he’s also man. This text pushes us to understand both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. Jesus was fully in charge of the situation, and yet he entered into it and wept about it. He wasn’t a stoic, and he wasn’t a crying baby. He was and is, God and man, two natures in one person forever. That is a new thing in the world, to be sure. Many conservative churches really care most about the divinity of Jesus, stressing his divine attributes. Many liberal churches stress the humanity of Jesus, eschewing much talk or emphasis (if any) on his claim to be God. Jesus is both. He needs to be both. He must be explained and taught as both.

It shows us that Jesus understands the interplay between truth and tears. If you go to a counselor or a good friend, and you hear truth, truth, truth. Here is what is wrong with you and how you can fix your problems. Like what Jesus said to Martha. He gave her truth.

But others of us have friends and counselors who sit and cry with us. They don’t offer solutions, they offer a presence, like what Jesus gave to Mary. He gave her tears. But if you only have tears, you have no real answers. And we’d have to ask – why do you even have tears if there is no truth? Are your tears even genuine after all?

We need both truth and tears, and Jesus is the perfect counselor, always doing the right thing at the right time. We may veer one way or another, but Jesus gives us what we need.

Think about this question: If Jesus is about to heal and raise Lazarus from the dead, why is he so upset? In the next five or ten minutes Jesus will undo all of this, and yet he still enters into the pain and sadness of his people.

That is truly remarkable. There is no other God like that. Jesus knows the pain of his people. He’s angry about death, sin, suffering and unbelief. He grieves the effects of sin. He grieves and weeps with his people in a way unlike any other God ever been discussed or thought of.

That means your grief is okay. We don’t need to be stoic in the face of death and suffering. Your anger over sin and suffering is not only warranted, but it is shared by Jesus.

If you have a naturalistic approach to life, then why do you get so angry about suffering? Isn’t suffering just a part of the evolutionary tale of the survival of the fittest? Just be good for goodness sake? Why should people be good if it isn’t advantageous to them and their survival?

Other religions have a God who is against evil, but he doesn’t ever enter into do anything about it. These gods say, “Do good. Love people.”

But Jesus enters into the pain and suffering of his people. God enters in. There is no other god like that. There is no God who bears the burdens of his people in this way.

Go ahead and grieve. You should be mad at sin, death and evil. When you truly love and walk with people like Jesus did, there will be many, many tears. You should be crying more – in fact, that’s an assignment. Get in touch with the true, mourning heart of Jesus by weeping over your sin and the sin of others. When you face death and judgment, feel the true weight. Don’t skirt this issue.

The power of Jesus

Many people have wept over sin and raged against death and evil. Jesus did something about it.

Standing there, amidst his anger and his tears, identifying with his people in profound way, Jesus spoke. He didn’t walk away, shaking his head to write a book about the ravages of sin.

He came to the tomb, and he asked them to take away the stone. The tomb would have been cut into the side of a hill, and the body would have been wrapped and laid in there for a year or so. After that time, the bones would be removed and put into another box, called an ossuary, in another location.

In Jewish tradition it was thought that the soul hovered over the body for three days before it took off. Jesus has waited four days now, and wants the people to understand that Lazarus is really, really dead. He is not merely being revived from an “almost-dead” condition.

When Jesus asks for the stone to be taken away, Martha balks. “It’s going to smell!” she says, a practical concern, and a true one. He’s been dead four days, and that’s going to stink.

They roll away the stone, and Jesus prays, thanking God for answering his prayer. Then he says with a loud, commanding voice, “Lazarus, come out.”

We read: *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.’* (v. 44).

Wow. How amazing and dramatic must that have been! Commentators have written that Jesus had to specify Lazarus, because if he hadn't, all the dead people in the sound of his voice would have raised from the dead at that moment. He had and has such authority and power.

Do you believe Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead? If you don't believe in God and don't believe in miracles, then you probably think this is a big mistake or a legend told, or maybe it's wishful thinking.

Remember what I said, no one thought this could happen. Not the Jews and not the Gentiles. This is not in their brains, this type of specific resurrection of one person. How can you make up something you cannot conceive of?

Remember too that this could have been verified, and if found untrue, repudiated. Lazarus would have been a known person living in a known city at a known location. It would be easy to prove this as a falsification.

Maybe, just maybe this really happened. If Jesus really was God, then why couldn't it have? If he really is who he says he is, and who we've been reading about in the book of John, then surely it's possible for Jesus to raise someone from the dead, the greatest miracle of all, the one that would astound the world and prove his power and claims.

Jesus calls Lazarus forth as a prophet. He prays to God as a priest. And he wars against death, the great enemy, as king. Do you see and believe in Jesus' resurrection power?

Jesus overturns death here, and he will do so at his own resurrection in even greater power.

The path of Jesus

Most of us would like to tap into this power. None of us like weakness or death, so we'd love to get our hands on life.

But Jesus throws us a curveball before we can access his raw power. He shows us that his power and his life comes from death and suffering.

Remember what is happening in the context of this chapter. Jesus has been clashing with the Jewish authorities. They've been getting more and more upset at him, feeling more and more like he has to go away somehow. Several times they've taken out stones to kill him for blasphemy.

When Jesus decides to go to Jerusalem again to see Lazarus, Thomas, one of the disciples says, "*Let's also go, that we may die with him.*" (v. 16). Thomas knows what we're thinking – This is going to bad, real bad, for Jesus.

Jesus knows it too. When he goes to Jerusalem, he begins the process that will end with his death. That's precisely what happens. Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus is the miracle sign that finally pushes the Pharisees over the edge. It attracts so much attention and has so much power that they have to kill him and fast. This is the discussion at the end of the chapter in verses 47-57. Jesus has to die, and ironically, Caiaphas the high priest says it will be for the good of the people. He doesn't know how right his words truly are.

Here's what I'm trying to say. Lazarus' resurrection points to Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus knew that by coming to Jerusalem to raise Lazarus from the dead, he would have to die himself. It is Jesus' death that makes Lazarus' life. Death brings life. This miracle points to the great miracle, the greatest miracle of all – Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He is showing here how he has power over death, more power than you would even think. He rules over death. Death will be conquered soon.

Jesus is upset, angry and weeping because he is thinking of his own funeral. In John 2, Jesus attended a wedding and couldn't help but think of his own wedding in the future, one that would only come to be because of his death. This is similar. He's thinking of all the funerals he would not attend, where he wouldn't be able to call people from their tombs and coffins. And he's thinking of his own death and burial, the thing that had to happen in order for him to give Lazarus life. He's looking ahead and thinking of others.

So, if that's true, then we see that following Jesus is to believe in the gospel. Following Jesus isn't believing in raw life power, but in gospel, resurrection power. His life for your life. His death for your life. He must die so you can be raised.

This resurrection is a picture and type of the gospel itself then. It matters for you as you see the substitutionary aspect of it.

And it matters to you because if you walk with Jesus, you can expect to experience pain, suffering and death. Thomas was right to say, Let's go die with Jesus. That didn't happen quite like he thought, but it did happen. They were asked to give up their very lives for the gospel.

Some of think that walking with Jesus is going to be awesome. We're going to get what we want, never be sick, have this resurrection power, make tons of money, have beautiful well-behaved children and retire at a lake house, growing old with our spouse.

Jesus doesn't promise that at all. He says to walk with him is to go through death. That's how you get resurrection after all, and that's the part we don't like. We often want the life at the end, but don't want to go through the death it takes to get there.

Have you walked on the path of Jesus? Have you experienced deaths in your life? Can you recognize that these were allowed and even brought to you by the hand of Jesus? Have you thought about the bigger, broader purpose of these, how they might be able to fit into a bigger, gospel context?

This was Jesus' mission, the deepest core of his identity. He was the suffering servant. The man of sorrows. The bearer of iniquity. He conquered death by going through it for his people.

The call of Jesus

What do you think? John is pressing you for a reaction to this teaching, story and truth. Can you put yourself inside this story and relate to it? Can you see how this story is a broader narrative for thinking about your life, and life even in general?

What do you think is the end for death?

Death is a dreadful thing, for it is the end. – Aristotle

I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark. – Thomas Hobbes

He who pretends to face death without fear is a liar. – Rousseau

The one who dies with the most toys wins. – Bumper Sticker

One person who thought long and hard about this was Leo Tolstoy. He writes: So I lived, but then something strange began to happen to me. I began to experience moments of perplexity where life “froze,” as though I did not know what to do or how to live, and I felt lost and became dejected. But this passed, and I went on living as before. Then these moments of perplexity began to reoccur more and more frequently, and invariably took the same form. When they came, the same questions kept coming to my mind: “Why? What is it for? What does it lead to?” . . . While thinking about the management of my household and estate, which greatly preoccupied me at that time, the question would suddenly occur: “Well, you have five thousands [sic] acres of land, and three hundred horses—What then? So what?” I was absolutely muddled up inside, and did not know what to think. When thinking about how best to educate my children, I would ask myself: “What for?” Or when thinking about how best to promote the welfare of the peasants, I would suddenly say to myself: “But what does it matter to me?” And when I thought about the fame that all my literary works would bring to me, I would say to myself: “Very well, I will become famous. So what? What then?” . . . My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, a question lying in the soul of every person. It was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: “What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my life? What is life for?” Differently expressed, the question is: “Why should I live, why hope for anything, or do anything?” It can also be expressed thus: “Does my life have any meaning that death cannot destroy?”⁴

Does my life have any meaning that death cannot destroy? What a question. Jesus gives an answer. He says,

That might make a difference when you are deeply depressed. There have been two students commit suicide at OU over the last month. Why didn't they live in hope? I have a friend who has had everything taken away from him. He told me he would have tried to kill himself if he thought it would be easier. I don't know if that's true or not. Why is he hanging on?

I offer to you my own suffering and doubts. I do not believe perfectly or obediently. I am not a good person. I am not walking with Jesus as I should. What hope do I have?

What type of death will you have? Have you ever thought about how you'll die? Will it be trembling in bed or could it be confident in what lies ahead? What would make the difference?

I think the difference and the hope is in the resurrection. This life matters. It won't all be wiped away and be shown to be a huge illusion. Your body matters. Your experiences matter. Jesus gives validity to this world when he shows his emotional connection to it. He will make things right. That is your hope. That is something to cling to.

What are the possible responses? Martha gives one. When Jesus asks, “*Do you believe this?*” she says, “*Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.*” (27).

Martha hadn't experienced this miracle yet, and she believed Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. How much more would she believe once this happened?!

The text says in verse 45 that many of the Jews who had seen what he did believed in him. Do you?

It's a valid question because others who were there and who heard about it didn't believe in him. They had alternative explanations, and some of them just didn't want to believe it could be true. As with all of Jesus' miracles, this one too had a limited success. Not everyone believed.

Is this you? Are you rejecting Jesus' claims, miracles and person? Can you hear Jesus' call? Are you one of his sheep?

If so, if you are a Christian, then are you working with him in his resurrection projects? We should be involved with people who need Jesus, asking him to work in their lives, bringing his power to bear as he releases them from death and bondage to set them into glorious life and freedom.

We should be involved in reclamation projects of transformation and resurrection in our cities, universities and everywhere we go. Wouldn't it be amazing if God used our lives to transform and give hope in these needy places. He can do it. Nothing else really has the power to bear up under the weight. It is through the work of the gospel through his people who need it and understand it that we have the power to do this important work.

Over the summer I read a book appropriately entitled, *A Thousand Resurrections* by Maria Garriott. She and her husband moved to the inner city in Baltimore, where he started a church in the 80s. She tells story after story of the hardship of living in such a profoundly broken place. She and her family were there in the midst of it all, tempted often to leave the city for

⁴ From Leo Tolstoy, “A Confession” in *Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 46-48, 51

safer grounds. But God prevailed time and time again. Her stories really aren't about death, but are about life, the transforming life of resurrection from the power of the gospel. We have that power in Christ alone.

Jesus, I Come

1. Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come; Jesus I come.
 Into Thy freedom, gladness and light, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of my sickness into Thy health, Out of my wanting and into Thy wealth,
 Out of my sin and into Thyself, Jesus, I come to Thee.

2. Out of my shameful failure and loss, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.
 Into the glorious gain of Thy cross, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of earth's sorrows into Thy balm, Out of life's storms and into Thy calm,
 Out of distress into jubilant psalm, Jesus, I come to Thee.

3. Out of unrest and arrogant pride, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.
 Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of myself to dwell in Thy love, Out of despair into raptures above,
 Upward forever on wings like a dove, Jesus, I come to Thee.

4. Out of the fear and dread of the tomb, Jesus, I come;
 Jesus, I come. Into the joy and light of Thy home,
 Jesus, I come to Thee. Out of the depths of ruin untold,
 Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
 Ever Thy glorious face to behold, Jesus, I come to Thee.