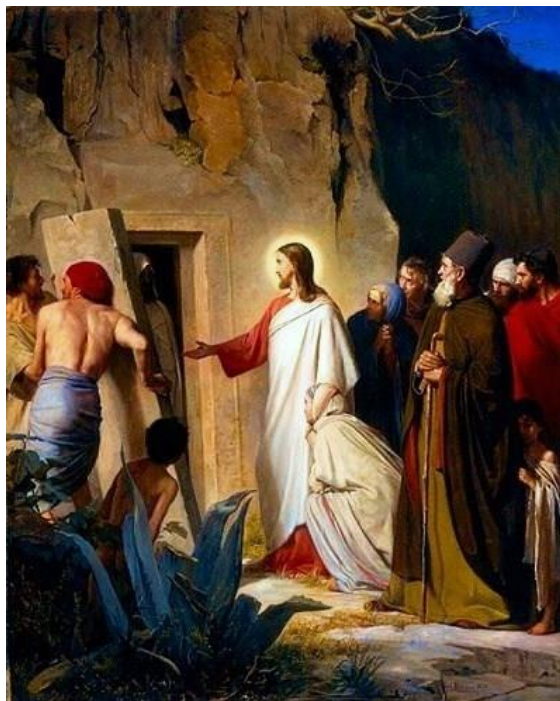


John 11: The Point of No Return

Probably two best known verses:

John 11:25-26 *Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?"*

John 11:35 *Jesus wept.*



Raising Lazarus, Oil on Copper Plate, 1875, [Carl Heinrich Bloch](#)



Let's look at this familiar story through the eyes of the participants who each had a slightly different vantage point:

The sisters, the disciples, Lazarus, the Jews, the Sanhedrin and Jesus

The schedule of events would look something like this, allowing one day for travel:

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.

Christ in the House of Martha and Mary', Jan Vermeer van Delft, 1654



The sisters: Mary and Martha

*11 Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of **Mary** and her sister **Martha**. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*

18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.²¹ Martha 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. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

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.

Jesus probably considered the house of Lazarus, Mary and Martha as a home away from home. Jesus loved "agape" these three, and Mary and Martha are mentioned throughout the Gospels. The sisters knew who Jesus was and what miracles He had performed. When their brother was ill, they knew to ask Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. Unfortunately, Lazarus was already dead before word got to Jesus. Jesus did respond by sending the message promising "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

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 (Dan. 12:2–3; John 5:28–29). Here is another instance in John’s Gospel of people lacking spiritual perception and being unable to understand the words of Jesus.

As for Mary, why did Martha call Mary “secretly”? Possibly because of the danger involved: they knew that the Jewish leaders were out to arrest Jesus. Mary also believed in Jesus’s power and stated that if He had come earlier then Lazarus would not have died.

Their hope was in a healing miracle because resurrection was so far beyond their comprehension (vv. 26–27). While Mary is overcome (v. 35; cf. 12:3; Luke 10:39), Martha pursues a conversation. “Even now” in 11:22 implies faith—even now in death Jesus may be able to do something. But is the only comfort in the future resurrection? For us, the resurrection life is a present experience! Eternal life begins now for the person who trusts in Christ (vv. 25–26). The horror of death is gone. When pressed Martha cannot affirm Jesus’ powers to this extent (v. 26); but still she holds on to what she does know (v. 27). Jesus is her Lord; knowledge of his powerful abilities will come with time.

The one person who declared her faith was Martha (John 11:27), and she failed at the last minute. “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 relies on God’s promises sometimes despite what we see (and smell?).

Summary: They knew who Jesus was and believed in Him. They knew He could do miracles and heal people. They also recognized He was the Son of God and that there was a final resurrection. They did not know of the full miraculous power of Jesus, who was able to raise the dead and give life.

The disciples

6 So, when he heard that Lazarus[a] was ill, he stayed two days longer 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 After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” 12 The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” 17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.

When our Lord announced that He was returning to Judea, His disciples were alarmed, because they knew how dangerous it would be. The Jewish leaders were on the lookout for Jesus. (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 precipitate 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. The Lord Jesus was walking in perfect obedience to the will of God. There was thus no danger of His being killed before the appointed time. He would be preserved until His work was done. In a sense this is true of every believer. If we are walking in fellowship with the Lord and doing His will, there is no power on earth that can kill us before God's appointed time.

But the disciples not only misunderstood the schedule, 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. He did not say He was glad that His friend died, but that He was glad He had not been there; for now He could reveal to His disciples His mighty power. The result would be glory to God and the strengthening of their faith. We sometimes think of the disciples as "super saints," but such 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.

Summary: The disciples knew that Jesus was in danger and traveling closer to Jerusalem was treacherous. They decided it was better to go with Him and die if need be. They, like the sisters, knew Jesus could do great miracles of healing but probably not so great as to raise the dead.

Lazarus

Not much is said about Lazarus's words, actions or reactions. Imagine though what he must have endured through all this. He was sick, to the point of agony and death.

He died, and we assume he was a believer who so was in the presence of God Almighty for four days. Then Jesus calls him back to his earthly decaying body. (Now that is some obedience.) Then he becomes the center of attention both good and bad. Turns out to be mostly bad (John 12:9-10).

John 12:9 When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, 11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

The experience of Lazarus is a good illustration of what happens to a sinner when he trusts the Savior. Lazarus was dead, and all sinners are dead. He was decayed, because death and decay go together. All lost people are spiritually dead, but some are more "decayed" than others. 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. Lazarus was set free from the graveclothes and given new liberty.

Summary: Lazarus did what God asked to him to do. To live, to die and then to come out of the grave.

The Jews

18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother.

Jewish mourning: Normally in Palestine, because of the climate, burial followed death as quickly as possible. There was a time when a funeral was an exceedingly costly thing. The finest spices and ointments were used to anoint the body; the body itself was clothed in the most magnificent robes; all kinds of valuables were buried along the body. By midway through the first century all this had become a ruinous expenditure, and no one wished to be outdone by his neighbor. Then a famous Rabbi called Gamaliel the Second, gave orders to be buried in the simplest possible linen robe which broke the extravagance of funeral customs. To this day at Jewish funerals, a cup is drunk to Rabbi Gamaliel.

As many as possible attended a funeral. Respect for the dead and sympathy for the mourner was an essential part of Jewish duty. Everyone who could was supposed to join the procession out of courtesy and respect. Deep mourning lasted for seven days, of which the first three were days of weeping. The week of deep mourning was followed by thirty days of lighter mourning. It would be to a household crowded with sympathizers that Jesus would arrive to that day.

30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there.



35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, 46 but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

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. But others immediately went to the religious leaders and reported what had happened in Bethany.

Summary: The Jews followed their customs and beliefs to support those around them in their sorrow. They saw Jesus weep. But they also were witness to one of the greatest miracles and needed to be able to discern the meaning and significance.

The Sanhedrin

47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

It was necessary that the Jewish council (Sanhedrin) meet and discuss what to do with Jesus. They were not seeking after 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.

49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. 50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, 52 and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

The high priest, Caiaphas, was a Sadducee, not a Pharisee; the Pharisees were interested more in the details of the Jewish law, the Sadducees were more politically oriented. They were the wealthy and aristocratic party. So long as they were allowed to retain their wealth, comfort and position of authority, they were well content to collaborate with Rome. All the priests were Sadducees. They were notoriously discourteous "You know nothing at all"; 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. As a high priest, Caiaphas was used by God to explain Jesus' death even though Caiaphas didn't realize what he was doing. Jesus would die not only for the Jews, but for all of God's children who would be gathered together in one heavenly family.



Ossuary of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

53 So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. 54 Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. 55 Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. 56 They were looking for [f] Jesus and 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 should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

The official decision that day was that Jesus must die. 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).

Summary: This was the point of no return. Jesus has performed a tremendous miracle, raising a man from the dead. There were more than the appropriate number of witnesses of the death of Lazarus and of his resurrection. Jesus was amassing a large following and was backing up his words with his actions (miracles). The Sanhedrin had to put an end to all this before the Romans saw Jesus as the new Jewish King and then Rome would destroy the Jewish ways of life (at least the Sanhedrin's way of life).

Jesus

4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus[a] was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

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. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"

33 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. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept.



James Tissot Jesus Wept, 1886-1896

He was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled – implies anger, indignation and outrage. Why?

- 1) Moral indignation at sin which causes death and the sorrow that follows
- 2) Sympathy for the sisters
- 3) Their unbelief, they had faith he could heal but not raise from the dead
- 4) Unreality of the Jewish expression of grief, hypocrisy
- 5) The knowledge that His own suffering and death was soon
- 6) For those that oppose Him even after witnessing the coming resurrection

It's all Greek to me: *embrimaomai*: to be moved with anger, to admonish sternly; snort (like a horse), express indignant displeasure. Used five times in NT: deeply moved-2, scolding-1, sternly warned-2

John was written in the Greek and read by those who understood Greek thinking. In ordinary classical Greek, it would mean that such deep emotion seized Jesus that an involuntary groan was wrung from his passion. For the Greeks this would be one of the most precious things in the gospel. So deeply did Jesus enter men's sorrows that his heart was wrung with anguish.

"this would be a staggering and incredible picture. John had written his whole gospel on the theme that in Jesus we see the mind of God. To the Greek the primary characteristic of God was what they called *apatheia*, which means total inability to feel any emotion whatsoever.

They argued like this. If we can feel sorrow or joy, gladness or grief, it means that someone can have an effect upon us. Now, if a person has an effect upon us, it means that for the moment that person has power over us. No one can have any power over God; and this must mean that God is essentially incapable of feeling any emotion whatsoever. The Greeks believed in an isolated, passionless and compassionless God."

To the Greek reader that little sentence “Jesus wept”, would be the most astonishing thing in an astonishing story. That the Son of God could weep would be almost beyond belief. Jesus’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.

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” 44 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.”

It is a tribute to John’s interest in historical detail that he mentions how long Lazarus has been dead (vv. 17, 39) and the exact location of Bethany. Because the ancient world did not have precise methods to monitor death or coma, most rabbis held theories about the impossibility of resuscitation after three or four days of death. The belief at that time was to roll the stone over the caves because the person’s spirit may try to reenter the body but after three to four days the decay would so severe that the spirit could no longer recognize the face and move on to Sheol. Our story is making one point: Lazarus was fully dead by Jewish standards and the miracle (vv. 43–44) involved resurrection, not resuscitation.

All that Jesus did was of one aim: to promote the glory of God (v. 40). His audible prayer heard here serves this purpose. He simply thanked His Father for granting His request. He knew He was doing the Father’s will in manifesting His love and power. His prayer of thanksgiving was public, not so that He would be honored as a Wonder-Worker but so He would be seen as the Father’s obedient Son. The granting of His request by the Father would be a witness to the people that He had been sent by the Father and would cause the people to believe.

Summary: Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to give Glory to God and to bear witness that he was the Son of God.

For the book of John, the raising of Lazarus was the point of the story that indicated there was no turning back. The Triumphal Entry will soon take place and it could be assumed that the crowds were present because of this preceding extraordinary event. This miracle was the essential cause which moved the Jewish authorities to have make plans to finally eliminate Jesus. For them, it was the direct reason for the Cross.

Summary of each vantage point in John 11:

The sisters: Pray to Jesus and believe. Both big and small prayers.

The disciples: Being in God's will, on His schedule, is safer than trying to stay away from danger.

Lazarus: The sacrifice of obedience.

Jews: What a different picture Jesus gave to the Greek readers of that day. He showed a God who has passion and compassion for his people.

The Sanhedrin: We are not in control. God can speak through the most unlikely people; sometimes through a man without the man being aware.

Jesus: This climactic miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was Jesus' public evidence of the truth of His great claim, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

How do we relate to each of these vantage points?