

The Gospel of John

Text: John 11:1–12:11

Reading: *Daring Faith*, pp. 111–120

Summary of John 10

John 10:1-21 (The Shepherd Discourse) is Jesus' commentary on the miracle of chapter 9 and the people's varied responses to it. Even though there is a chapter division here, Jesus' words continue without any break from the previous discussion with the Pharisees. Now Jesus speaks metaphorically about his relationship to the people and about the Pharisee's relationship to the people. The section closes (vv. 19-21) with continued division among the people, pointing back to the earlier discussion of Jesus as one with a demon and his role in opening the blind man's eyes.

John 10:22-42 (Jesus at the Feast of Dedication) takes the reader abruptly to a later festival, the Dedication (Hanukkah). Verse 22 indicates that Jesus is still in Jerusalem, but the time of year has changed. The Feast of Tabernacles (Booths) was celebrated in late September/early October; the Feast of Dedication in December. The discussion in these verses continues to develop the language of the previous chapters. The testimony of Jesus' works, the identity of the people as sheep, and the continuous attempts to arrest Jesus are also found here, as are the divided responses of the people.

Altogether, 10:22-42 makes the point that Jesus' entire ministry has revealed God's presence to the world. God's presence, which resides in the temple, has been shown to reside in Jesus. The location and timing of this story (the Feast of Dedication) evoke the "rededication" of God's presence in Jesus.

The Prelude to Jesus' Hour (John 11:1–12:11)

Background: John 11 tells the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead and the aftermath of that event. From the opening verses, the author makes it clear that Lazarus' illness is instructive: what happens here reveals God's glory and the glory of God's Son. Even in the face of death, Jesus brings life. Jesus' raising of Lazarus is a metaphor for the kind of life that he offers all believers. That is not a life that is otherworldly, but one that abides in the grief and loss of this world. And yet it is a life that also overcomes death, against which the power of the grave does not have the final word.

John 11:1–12:11 consists of three interrelated sections:

- (1) 11:1-44, The raising of Lazarus
- (2) 11:45-54, The decision to kill Jesus
- (3) 11:55–12:11, Jesus' anointing at Bethany

The decision to kill Jesus (11:46-48, 53) is made in direct response to the raising of Lazarus, and Jesus' anointing at Bethany (12:7-11) occurs in the shadow of that decision. It is important that John 11:1-44 be read in this broader context, and not as an isolated story, because the story of the raising of Lazarus is incomplete without its aftermath.

Conversation Starter: Have you ever been frustrated by the feeling that something important needs to happen and yet nothing seems to be happening? How did the situation turn out?

A. The Situation of Need (11:1-16)

1. Like other miracle stories we have seen in John, the story begins with the situation of need. Lazarus is ill. Jesus' response to the sisters' message (v. 3) introduces the theological focus of the story. **The situation is not only one of a sick friend; Lazarus' illness is an occasion for the revelation of the presence and glory of God in Jesus** (v. 4). While this statement also anticipates the positive outcome of the story, the combination of Jesus' love for the family and his intentional delay is jarring.

Why did Jesus delay and wait so long before traveling to Bethany?

2. **Jesus' "hour" and his relationship to God govern his actions**, not human timelines and expectations. As we see in this chapter, John's Gospel does not negate the emotional cost of doing the works of God, but this cost does not move Jesus to abandon his chosen path.
3. The interaction with the disciples in verses 11-15 is another instance of Jesus' metaphorical language being met with misunderstanding. Their response to Jesus points to a lack of understanding and faith on their part, as they read Jesus' claims to "awaken" Lazarus as a reference to mere sleep.
4. Jesus' plain speech in verse 15 anticipates the outcome of the story. **Not only is Lazarus' death an occasion for revelation (v. 4), but it is also an occasion for the disciples to come to faith.** That the disciples do not fully believe is apparent from their continued lack of understanding (v. 16).

B. The Raising of Lazarus (11:17-44)

1. **Upon Jesus' arrival, Lazarus has been dead four days.** In Jewish thought, the soul of the dead person departed after three days. Jesus' delay has meant not only that Lazarus has died from his illness, but that his family and friends consider him to be well on the other side of death. What happens next is no mere resuscitation of a corpse, but the return of Lazarus from beyond the grave.

★ Upon hearing that Jesus was coming, Martha ran to confront him directly. Many of us are like that. We must tell Jesus what we think of him and his strange ways. What "if only" do you have that you need to take to Jesus, openly expressing your frustration with him, just as Martha did?

★ Have you ever wondered why God did not heal someone whom you loved? How do moments like this challenge our belief that Jesus is "the resurrection and the life"?

2. **Martha's words contain both complaint (v. 21) and confidence (v. 22).** Even in the face of death, Martha knows that God will listen to Jesus. Her words evoke another "I am" statement from Jesus: "*I am the resurrection and the life...*" (vv. 25-26).
3. **This statement names what is central in the Lazarus story.** Jesus announces that the promise of resurrection is not lodged in some distant event, but is available now in him. His words make plain what the reader already knows: **Jesus shares completely in God's ability to give life.** John draws on the notion of the future life lived in the presence of God, but he wants the reader to understand that this kind of life is exactly what Jesus makes available for believers in the present.

Does Martha believe? It's one thing to say you believe, but the real challenge is to live that way when tough moments come. How would you explain the gap between Martha's beliefs and her living faith? What is Jesus challenging her (and us) to do?

4. **Martha's confession** in verse 27 is one of the dramatic high points of the Gospel. The faith she has expressed in verse 22 is now stated directly as a claim about who Jesus is, "I believe." Her confidence should be understood as exemplary. **Her faith and confidence in Jesus give her reassurance even in the face of death.**
5. **Moments later, the mourners' weeping evokes a response from Jesus.** Translations commonly describe Jesus as "deeply moved" or "disturbed" (v. 33, 38). The Greek verbs here, however, usually communicate agitation, indignation, and even anger. Because of this, it is important not to over-sentimentalize Jesus' reaction and his tears (v. 35). **Jesus responds to the power of death he sees around him.** These verses highlight the bitter cost and power of death in human lives and so underscore the significance of Jesus' ultimate victory over death.

How does Jesus' reaction challenge the way people — including many Christians — often understand God and God's response to human pain and grief over death?

6. **Martha's protest about the stench** (v. 39) draws attention to the reality of death that Jesus confronts in the tomb. As the exemplary believer, Martha's words should stand out to us. Even Martha does not expect what will happen next. She expects only a future resurrection.
7. **Jesus' response to Martha**, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God*" (v. 40) reminds Martha of the ways in which the miracle that is about to take place reveals the power and presence of God. Jesus once again will surpass our conventional expectations.
8. **Jesus' prayer of thanksgiving** (vv. 41-42) implies that Jesus has already communicated with God, who has heard Jesus. In this case, the prayer directs attention to the real author of the miracle, God. As Jesus noted from the beginning, what follows is "for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4).

If Jesus needed to spend time praying, waiting, and thanking God, how much more will we. What areas of your life right now most require prayer and patient waiting on the Lord to demonstrate his power?

9. **Jesus then calls Lazarus by name and breaks the power of death. The power Jesus displays here is a promise for the life of the believer, not just the afterlife.** The visual image of Lazarus still wrapped in burial clothes makes concrete the hold that death has had on Lazarus. It also contrasts with the description of the burial clothes that Jesus will leave behind at his resurrection (20:6-7). Unlike Lazarus, Jesus will arise completely free of the bonds of death.

C. The Decision to Kill Jesus (11:45-57)

1. The miraculous raising of Lazarus is the catalyst for a **formal death sentence** against Jesus. **The Jews** have been present as fellow mourners. Many of them believe as a result of the miracle (v. 45), and some of them go to tell the **Pharisees** (v. 46). Their report of the miracle is the direct cause of the council meeting and the plan to put Jesus to death (vv. 47-53).
2. The signs that Jesus has done, rather than evoking faith among the leaders, are a cause for concern. **Jerusalem** was part of the **Roman Empire**, governed by Roman rulers. Were Jesus to attract more of a following and create a disturbance, the Romans might hold the Jewish religious leaders responsible and take away their power (vv. 47-48).

3. **Rome** did in the end destroy the **Jerusalem temple** in **70 AD**; from the perspective of the Gospel, written after that time, these words are tinged with irony. The authorities' attempts to stop this destruction will not succeed.
4. The words of **Caiaphas** (vv. 49-50) reflect the same kind of political self-interest as verses 47-48. They also heightened the irony of the situation, as the narrator's comments point out (vv. 52-53). **Caiaphas** unintentionally prophesies about the real meaning of Jesus' death. **Jesus does die "for the nation" and also "to gather into one the dispersed children of God."**
5. The closing of the story anticipates Jesus' death by linking **the decision to kill Jesus** (v. 53) to the **upcoming Passover** (v. 55). Jesus will go to the Passover festival, and his movements — along with the events that unfold at the Passover — will once again be determined not by those who seek his arrest (v. 57), but by **Jesus' hour**.

D. Jesus' Anointing at Bethany (12:1-11)

1. As the story opens, the setting is an important reminder of the proximity of Jesus' death; the relationship to the Passover setting is reiterated in verse 1. As we will see, the timing of Jesus' death at the Passover becomes an important part of John's interpretation of it.
2. Mary's anointing of Jesus is presented as a gift of abundance and love—and of great understanding. Judas's response reveals his motivations. Mary acts extravagantly toward Jesus in love and devotion, Judas acts out of greed.
3. The threat of death arises again in verses 9-11. Jesus' act of raising Lazarus attracts "the great crowd of Jews," who now want to see Lazarus, as well as Jesus. Many of them believed, which is viewed as a threat by the religious authorities. They now plan to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. Their response also stands in contrast with that of Mary, who believes and acts as a faithful disciple.

Points for Home

1. Jesus defeats the power of death because in him the world meets the power of the love of God incarnate. This promise is also an invitation. The way to experience the power of God's love for the world that defeats death is to believe in Jesus.
2. "Resurrection" isn't just a doctrine. It isn't just a future fact. It's a *person*, Jesus. He invites us to trust wholly in the one who is "the resurrection and the life." Jesus alone is the source of new life, and the eternal life that characterizes belief in Jesus begins now and extends beyond the grave.
3. Jesus' powerful announcement to Martha suggests that we need to embrace Jesus as the resurrection and the life, not only at times of death, but also in the daily moments of our lives, indeed in all moments of our lives.
4. John's question to us is this: When tough moments inevitably come, are we willing to act in faith? John 11 offers a promise about how those who believe in Jesus will live their lives, not just about how they will end them. These promises of God in Jesus offered in the face of death can equip us to understand, and act upon, the promises of God in Jesus offered in the midst of life.

Sources:

Gail O'Day, *The Gospel of John*

Gail O'Day and Susan Hulen, *John*

N.T. Wright, *The Gospel of John*