

Gospel of John Chapter 11 - John Karmelich

I realize for the most part "I'm preaching to the choir" for these lessons, and that is important to say as I start this lesson. This chapter is mainly about a man Jesus raised from the dead, four days after he died. I assume that is a true historical event. Besides reminding us Jesus is God and He can resurrect us, why should we care about this? After all, John's Gospel has, for the most part, been a book describing Jesus miraculously doing this and that. Isn't this pattern "old" by now? I'd argue this story's here to show that some people won't change their view on Jesus even if they've seen an obvious miracle! By this point in the Gospel we've had that situation over and over again. So I think there's more to it than that. Another reason this story's here is to remind us of the "end-game" and what really matters about life. I know the book (this one) was written to convince people Jesus is God. So if I'm "preaching to the choir" why do we need to study this book carefully? What's in it for us who believe Jesus is God?

To answer, let me give my favorite definition of salvation: I stated it on my lesson in Chapter 3, but it's worth repeating here. First salvation is what occurs when we first accept Jesus as God and Lord of our lives. Second, it's what happens when we die as we instantly go to be with Jesus. Most importantly, our salvation also describes our lives as we grow in our faith in Him and trust He's guiding us for His glory all through our relationship with Him. The reason I state all of that is it is the key to this chapter. Yes, we will learn stuff that affects our view of the other aspects of salvation, but it's our growth in our faith that I'd argue is what we're to get from this lesson in salvation. Bottom line, this story is a reminder to keep our focus on Him no matter what we're going through in life!

Let me share a joke that my best friend and I have had for decades. Whenever I worry about whatever is on my mind, my friend tells me, "Somewhere in Russia, there is a nuclear bomb that's aimed right at your head"! It still makes me chuckle, but the point is about putting our problems of the moment in the perspective of the big picture. I know this chapter centers around Jesus resurrecting a man who's been dead for four days. It reminds us Jesus is in charge of all things! He knows the number of our days! I also know our job is to use our time to glorify Him and be grateful for our lives because, well, "It is the only one we get." With that out of my system, let's discuss the chapter details and how they affect our lives as believers.

The chapter opens sometime after the events of the previous chapter, so it is a good place for a break in the chapter. It occurs shortly before "Passion Week", a term that describes the week leading up the day of the resurrection. In effect, the first eleven chapters demonstrate who Jesus is via miracles, as well as the testimony of others. The rest of the book focuses again on what we call, "Passion Week." I mention all of this because Chapter 11 takes place just before that key time-frame.

The text mentions a man named Lazarus. All we know is he was the brother of Mary and Martha. The two sisters are mentioned in other gospels. Mary's the one who wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. (She is not Jesus' mother by the way!) We assume Lazarus is a believer. Besides that, we don't know a whole lot about him, (e.g. why he was sick). His two sisters send a message for Jesus to come help as Lazarus was sick. Jesus at this time wasn't near Jerusalem. The last time He was there, the Jewish leaders tried to kill Him for claiming to be God. (Again it shows miracles are not enough to convince a person Jesus is God!) The sisters lived in a village about two miles from Jerusalem. It's implied that a message was sent to Jesus that Lazarus was sick.

The scene switches to Jesus and His disciples, obviously some distance away. Jesus stated that Lazarus is asleep. It is a Christian term for death, in the sense that the soul of a Christian believer lives forever,

as I stated in my salvation definition. Since the disciples didn't grasp that yet, Jesus then bluntly stated, "Lazarus is dead and we're going to the village near Jerusalem where he's buried." I'd bet the disciples were worried about that idea, given Jesus' brush with the leaders last time. One of the disciples gave a negative comment, "Let's go too so we can all die there"! (There's an "Eeyore" in every crowd! It is a reference to a Winnie the Pooh cartoon animal, if you didn't know!) Despite the pessimistic comment, they all followed Jesus there.

By the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. This occurred about two miles from Jerusalem, so some Jewish rabbis were there. Like today, a religious leader tries to comfort the living at such times. Don't think they knew that family were "Jesus fans"! We just know they were there as well. Both sisters told Jesus at different times, "If you were here, Lazarus wouldn't have died." Given Jesus' history of miracles they must have thought that! We also get a few comments that those sisters realized Jesus was the promised Messiah (same as the Greek word for "Christ"). They realized they'd be resurrected when the "last day" comes. Bottom line, lots of people believe in that aspect of eternity but it takes God working in our lives to realize how the "big picture works".

Obviously, Jesus knew what He was going to do. He waited four days after the death to show us He is in charge of all things. The text even said Jesus wept. Again, Jesus knew what He was going to do, so He is not weeping over the death. I'd argue He was weeping over the consequences of living in a sinful world, as He understood how sin corrupts our lives.

Then came "showtime." I always like to point out that Jesus ordered the stone that covered the entrance to the cave where Lazarus was buried to be moved. Let's be honest, if Jesus is God, He could have told Lazarus to appear outside the cave and that's that. A small but important point is God never does for us what we can do for ourselves, so somebody moved the stone. Jewish people didn't do fancy burials like the Egyptians did. They wrapped a body in linen cloths. It's also important to point out that Jesus said for Lazarus to come out. As an earlier chapter compared believers to sheep that recognized the voice of their shepherd, Lazarus came out when his name was called. The text says nothing about what Lazarus did for the four days he was dead. Just that he obeyed Jesus and walked out of the cave! Next we read that Jesus gave an order to unwrap Lazarus, and that's that! It leaves with unanswered questions about how or what happened to Lazarus, but the important point is Jesus is in charge of all things. Our role is to obey Him for He is God!

If all of this isn't strange enough, we then get 11 verses about reactions to what just happened. Some of the Jewish religious leaders who saw this believed! (Hard to deny it after that!) and some of them went to Jerusalem to report it! It's amazing how hard people's hearts are even when there's obvious evidence in front of them. The religious leaders feared that if Jesus grew in popularity, the Romans will destroy their country. The Romans' basic philosophy was "Pay your taxes and don't rebel against Rome"! They all knew that and the Jewish leaders feared if Jesus grew in popularity it would lead the Jewish people to revolt against Rome. Their unbelief led to their desire to kill Jesus. In this Gospel, John (the writer) used that prediction as a prophecy about what would happen.

Bottom line, this chapter is about an obvious major miracle and people's reaction to it. It is interesting that the evidence of what Jesus did comes after one believes and doesn't lead to it. Lazarus and his two sisters already believed Jesus was God. Some of the onlookers did believe, but it shows God works on people's hearts and either we grow closer or farther away from Jesus throughout our lives, depending on our desire to draw close to Him or not.

If you liked this little study, I wrote a more detailed account about twenty years ago! To read the other one, click on one of the two links on this page. Thanks again for reading this. John