

A STUDY OF FAITH IN JOHN 11

INTRODUCTION

Faith is more than just believing in God and His power. If it were that simple, being a Christian would be easy. It sounds like I'm getting into the "Faith and Works" argument, but I'm not. What I mean is that our faith isn't black and white.

- To illustrate, compare faith to knowledge. It is fairly simple to know something. I know $2 + 2 = 4$. I learned that fact years ago. I don't go back and study mathematic theories to make sure it is still true. Is faith this simple? Unfortunately not.
- Faith has highs and lows. It is strong one week and weak the next. It can grow and fade. Our faith can be treated like a living being that needs to be fed and nurtured. It can thrive with proper care, or disintegrate from neglect.
- Sometimes this constant treading of water can become tiresome and confusing. It can feel like we are trying to reach an impossible destination. These daunting truths can discourage us from soldiering on.
- Let's look at a story from the Gospel of John to comfort and encourage us in this matter.

JOHN 11: THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS

John 11 tells about one of the most significant and inspiring miracles of Jesus. After reading this chapter, we will take a closer look at certain elements and hopefully walk away with a better understanding of our faith.

1-5: Jesus hears that Lazarus is sick.

- Lazarus is sick. He is the brother of Mary and Martha.
- Jesus met Mary for the first time when she anointed him with oil and washed His feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-38)
 - This was quite a first impression. She clearly showed her faith and love of Jesus with this dramatic display of affection.
 - Jesus knows Lazarus through her.
- Jesus declares that the end result of the sickness isn't death. It will result in the glorification of God.
- Jesus loved Mary and Martha, but decided to stay where he was for 2 days.
 - Later, we'll see why Jesus lingered.

7-16: Jesus decides to go to Bethany.

- After two days, Jesus decides to go to Bethany. They wanted to kill Him in Judea.
- Jesus tells a short parable about doing what needs to be done in the given time.
- Jesus gives the reason He wants to return: Lazarus is "asleep".
- The disciples don't understand, and Jesus has to further explain.
 - This shows that the disciples don't know or understand what Jesus is intending to do.
- Jesus is glad for the sakes of the Apostles that He wasn't there. This was done so that they may believe.
- Thomas faithfully exclaims his faith and willingness to follow Jesus, even into death.

17-27: Jesus comforts Martha.

- Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.
- Martha went out to meet Jesus. Mary stays behind.
- She proclaims that Jesus could've healed Lazarus if He had been there. She also adds that she knows God will give Him anything He asks.
 - This could be her unassuming way of hinting that Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead.
- Jesus tells her that He will be raised. Jesus claims to be the resurrection. If anyone believes in Him, they will have eternal life.
- She confesses to believe in His words, and His existence as the Son of God and the Messiah.

28-37: Mary goes to Jesus.

- Jesus calls for Mary, and she goes to Him.
- She immediately falls at His feet and exclaims that He could've healed Lazarus if He had been there.
 - This is only an inference, but we might be able to sense some frustration and anger in Mary's voice. In her mind, Jesus could've unquestionably healed her brother. She might be confused about why Jesus purposely postponed His coming. Although she is discouraged, it is a clear display of her faith and trust in Jesus' ability.
- Jesus was saddened by her statement. He begins to weep when they take Him to the tomb.
 - Amidst all the mourning and distress, Jesus weeps understanding their pain. He might be feeling guilt knowing he could have prevented their grief. If Jesus had been there, He would have healed Lazarus to save everyone the grief of Lazarus's death, but Jesus had a bigger more important agenda.
- People were impressed with Jesus' love for Lazarus, but others were confused wondering why He didn't heal him.

38-44: Jesus raises Lazarus.

- Jesus commands that the stone be removed. Martha advises against it because of the stench, but Jesus tells her to believe.
- They remove the stone, and Jesus makes a public prayer to emphasize to the spectators that He was sent by God.
- Jesus commands Lazarus to come out, and he does, bound like a mummy.
 - The call attention to the fact that Lazarus really was dead. This wasn't staged.

This is clearly an amazing work by Jesus. Now we will examine (1) the purpose of miracles and (2) the audience this miracle was performed for to better understand its significance.

UNDERSTANDING MIRACLES:

Luke 5:17-24: Jesus heals the paralytic.

- This is the most classic miracle. It is the best for explaining the primary function of why Jesus did miracles.
- Some men went to great lengths to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus knowing he could be healed. Jesus was impressed with their faith.
- Before Jesus heals the man, He forgives his sins.
- Naturally, and reasonably, some Jews accuse Jesus of blasphemy and ask what gives Him the authority to forgive sins.
- Answering their question, Jesus heals the man proving "that the Son of man has the authority to forgive sins." (24)

The purpose of miracles:

Miracles are for the purpose of showing Jesus' authority. He shows His authority over earthly elements to prove His heavenly authority. Let's apply this same principle to John 11.

The purpose of Lazarus' resurrection:

- 11:4: the miracle is for God's glory so God's son may be glorified.
- 11:15: the miracle was for the sake of the disciples so they could believe.
- 41-42: Jesus makes a public prayer for the sole purpose of telling the audience that He was sent by God.

- It is obvious this isn't just about Jesus doing a nice deed for His friends. If Jesus just wanted to do something nice, He would've healed Lazarus immediately. Instead he lingers and lets Lazarus die making all His loved ones sad. Jesus has a greater agenda.
- These verses make it clear that Jesus is doing this miracle to prove His authority. John records this miracle in this fashion so we can know the true purpose of His miracle.

Now that we know why Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, let's take a closer look at the audience Jesus performed this miracle for.

THE AUDIENCE:

To understand Jesus' parables, it helps to consider the audience He is teaching. Since miracles are another form of teaching, it is equally important to consider the audience witnessing the miracle.

The Apostles: His most entrusted disciples.

1. They knew Jesus could heal the sick (they've witnessed it several times).
2. They've confessed Him to be the Christ.
3. Willing to die with Him (16).
4. They were confused about Jesus' actions. They didn't suspect that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead (11-15).

Mary: A faithful disciple.

1. She was loved by Jesus (5).
2. Clearly loved believed in Jesus by her washing of His feet (2).
3. Knew that Jesus could heal the sick (32).
4. Yet, not convinced Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Martha: A faithful disciple.

1. She was loved by Jesus (5).
2. Knew Jesus could heal the sick (21).
3. Possibly considered the Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead if willing (22).
4. Confessed Him to be the Son of God and the Messiah (27).
5. Yet, not convinced that He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead (39).

What do all these characters have in common? They are all faithful devout followers of Christ.

THE REASON JESUS PERFORMED THIS MIRACLE

We know that Jesus does miracles to prove His power and authority. Typically (as in Lk 5) Jesus does miracles for audiences that aren't fully convicted in Him yet. It is interesting to see that this climactic miracle is performed for His most faithful followers. Why did Jesus make a point to let Lazarus die so He can perform this grand miracle for people that already believe? Though their faith is strong, there are hints of room for growth throughout the entire chapter. Even till the very end (11:39) no one suspected that Jesus was going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus performed this miracle to increase the faith of His disciples. He wanted them to see the glory of God (11:40).

Was Jesus mad at their need for more faith?

- I don't think so. There are times when Jesus expresses frustration and anger at His disciples doubt (Mat 8:26, Mat 14:31, Mat 16:18, Mat 17:20), but this John 11 has no hint of it. Jesus is calm and compassionate through the entire chapter.
- Statements like Thomas' willingness to die with Him and Martha's confession of His deity and Christhood are enough to please Him.
- **Jesus doesn't perform this miracle to compensate for their lack of faith. He performs it to reward them for the faith they already possess.**

THE APPLICATION

John 11 shows us that Jesus was personally interested and involved in the growth of His disciple's faith.

Whoever has, more shall be given (Mat 13:10-12).

Jesus had just finished teaching a rather confusing parable. The disciples didn't understand what it meant, and they were curious to know its meaning (as well as why Jesus taught with parables).

- Jesus tells them that they've been given the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. That would be highly coveted material. What made the disciples so special?
- The disciples had faith and interest in Jesus (13:16). Because they had little faith, Jesus was willing to give them more.
- Because of their interest, they were blessed enough to hear six more parables about the kingdom of God.

What we lessons we can apply to our own faith.

1. Jesus rewards His faithful with more faith. Since the beginning Jesus lived by the principle that He would reward His disciples faith with more faith. This is no different than today.
2. Jesus Christ is alive and active everyday in the growth of our faith when given the opportunity. Jesus rewards those who seek Him:

And without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him (Heb 11:6)

3. He has given us proof. Let us dwell on that proof when we are weak.
4. He is willing to give us more reason to believe if we seek Him. If we are weak, we need to seek Him.
5. If we don't seek Him, we won't have reason to believe.

CONCLUSION

We should be encouraged that God is going to help us when our faith is weak. Weak faith is treatable, and the diagnosis is consistent. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you (James 4:8). That might be the only consistent aspect of our faith. When our faith is troubled remember that God has given us reason to believe, and He will give us more reason to believe. I encourage you to read the rest of John 11 and see what happens when we don't seek God.