

“Dealing with Death” (Jn. 11:1-16)

1. Avoiding Death (1-3)

- a. A ‘beloved’ friend is very ill. Though John identifies him as Lazarus, the message avoids names. Why?
- b. Could it be that the family underscored their loving relationship w/ Jesus so as to move Jesus to come heal Lazarus? Not unlike His mother Mary’s statement which serves as a not so cryptic request (2:3). *Mary is introduced by her famous act that of which John has yet to tell (12:1-8). Nevertheless, hers was an event that was destined to be retold (Mt. 26:13; Mk. 14:9). And provocative it was as N. T. Wright wrote, “Extravagance doesn’t go down well in a poor-house.”¹ Anyway, why not just name Lazarus rather than ‘beloved?’ It could be that they were not merely trying to avoid the death of their brother but also Jesus (cf. 8, 16). They surely were more concerned for safety than Jesus’ bros. in 7:1-13 where they urged Him to march straight way into the belly of the beast.
- c. Though these speculations are plausible, we can seemingly know for certain that they wanted their brother (who was very sick) to be healed thus avoid his death.
- d. They may have known about the distant healing of the nobleman’s son (4:46-51) thus hoping Jesus would safely heal their brother from a distance. However, Martha seemed to be expecting or requesting Jesus’ actual return (v. 21). Whether it was answering affirmatively by providing wine, going to Jerusalem at the Feast, or healing (raising) a dead friend; Jesus would affirm that such was the Father’s prerogative if (wine), when (Feast), or how (raise rather than heal) to answer such requests.
- e. It’s not that we should embrace death per se but we should let our request be made known to God and trust His judgment. Phil. 4:6-7.

2. Employing Death (4)

- a. Before any action or instruction, Jesus assured His disciples that this sickness is not toward death. It “**Is not unto death** (οὐκ ἔστιν πρὸς θανάτου [*ouk estin pros thanaton*]). Death in the final issue, to remain dead.”² In fact, Lazarus may have already physically died (11-14).
- b. Death is not the end (although the ‘second death’ is not a good everlasting existence). Death is a separation (a relocation not cessation).
- c. Jesus said that Lazarus’ sickness will end with the glory of God! We know he dies but God is never late and death is not the end of the sickness – though it may be a result.
- d. Jesus would employ even death for God’s glory and their sakes (15). In Matt Maher’s song, “Christ is Risen,” he sings: “Christ is risen from the dead, Trampling over death by death.” Emphasizing how Jesus employed death to defeat death. Paul put it this way: “He led captivity captive” (Eph, 4:8). Cf. Col. 2:14-15 Christ employed death – and overcame it so that we could be made alive in Christ!
- e. **OPTIONAL FURTHER STUDY OR CONSIDER** “Only the Gospel writer, in one narrative aside, has mentioned his “glorification” (see 7:39, “because Jesus was not yet glorified”), and only a few remarks in passing at the Tent festival (7:18; 8:50, 54) have even hinted at a mutual “glorification” of the Father and the Son. Jesus will make it all clearer later on (see 12:23, 28; 13:31–32; 17:1, 4–5), but for the time being it is a riddle even to the first-time reader of the Gospel, and much more so to Martha and Mary. The missing link is the

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 4). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

² Robertson, A. T. (1933). *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Jn 11:4). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

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thought that Jesus’ “glorification,” like his “exaltation” or “lifting up” (3:14; 8:28; 12:32–33), comes to realization paradoxically in his death on the cross (see 12:23–24).”¹⁰³

3. Allowing Death (5-6)

- a. Our love seeks to avoid pain, conflict, sorrow, loss, etc. They sent a message to Jesus that the one whom He loved “phileo” (brotherly love) was sick, hoping to prevent death. However, Jesus loved “agape” (sacrificial love) them so He allowed death.
- b. The principle that Jesus knew what He’d do (obviously in line with the Father’s will) is assumed (6:6).
- c. He loved them “so” *not*, He loved them “but.”
- d. God loved Adam and Eve and “so” He kept them from the tree of life so that they would die! Their sin had already incurred a spiritual death i.e. separation or break in the fellowship and to live evermore in that condition would prove tragic. Allowing a physical death due to natural consequences of sin also gave means for Christ to literally die for us.
- e. Many believers may not understand these logistics – but they are necessary for our substitutionary atonement!
- f. Studying and listening to biblical preaching is so important because in the Word of God we find answers to the most profound questions – we find redemption and eternal life in the living Word of God!
- g. Heb. 9:26b-28. “But as it is...” Graciously, we are appointed to death so that we can be resurrected. Spiritually, we die to self and sin and live unto Christ (Ro. 6:1-5; Phil. 1:21).
- h. On the immediate and practical side of Jesus’ waiting is that a resurrection is much more powerful than a healing.
- i. After four days (17), there was no mistake that Lazarus was dead! Even the superstitious would acknowledge the spirit of Lazarus had left and such was no resuscitation.
- j. Furthermore, delay ultimately strengthens our faith. Rather than the impatience of a microwave and 5G speed generation, the toil of waiting and labor in the meantime produces faith and maturity. Mr. Miyagi did not tell Daniel what he was up to by having Daniel paint, sand, and wax... the end results of God’s sanctifying us is spectacular and beneficial rather than lazy, spoiled, inefficient (good for noth’n) attitudes and weak faith that instant/superficial convenience produce.

4. Facing Death (7-15)

- a. It is clear that Jesus strategized (avoided) premature conflicts as his hour had not yet come. Nevertheless, he trusted God and, no doubt, prayed for guidance and affirmation before positioning Himself in a vulnerable position (not putting the LORD to the test). Jesus’ decision to go back to Judea was met with the obvious reminder of what had recently happened (e.g. vv. 8, 16; 5:18; 7:1; 8:37, 40, 59; 10:31, 39).
- b. Jesus relied on the Father’s will but He also knew that going to Judea would prove to be His ultimate death. Wright pointed out: “The chapter begins with the disciples warning Jesus not to go back to Judaea; it ends with the **high priest** declaring that one man must die for the people (verse 50).”⁴

¹⁰ In all the other instances which speak of the Jesus’ “glorification” or “exaltation,” the operative title is “Son of man” (3:14; 8:28; 12:23; 13:31), not “Son of God.” Jesus in fact rarely uses the full term, “Son of God,” for himself, preferring “the Son” or “the Son of man” (see only 3:18, 5:25, and 10:36). A likely reason for “Son of God” here is the wordplay between “the glory of God” (τοῦ θεοῦ) and “the Son of God” (τοῦ θεοῦ) being “glorified” (italics added).

³ Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 616). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁴ Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 3). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

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- c. Jesus tells them that they must walk in the light of day while it is provided. Interestingly, he used the preposition “in” not “by” (10). Again, I think Wright is right when he says that this means that following Jesus is walking in the daylight. Following Jesus assures that we will be most efficient in our growth, ministry, and overall kingdom participation. It is shameful to waste the light provided in Christ. We must walk circumspectly (wisely) and navigate with discernment (see Eph. 5:14-16), prayer (Matt. 6:33), and biblical wisdom (Ps. 119:105; Jn. 15:4). And if Jesus says, “Let’s go,” we need to follow w/o hesitation even when it’s counterintuitive.
 - d. See **Further Consideration** on the “daylight” euphemism.
 - e. After the daylight metaphor, Jesus used another euphemism viz. sleep. They should have caught on when He said He must go in order to wake him up (see also Mk. 5:39). But Jesus clarified and spoke plainly – affirming that Lazarus had already died (14).
 - f. Though an established euphemism, “The Old Testament often speaks of “going to rest with your fathers” (Deut. 31:16 NIV). Luke says that when the martyr Stephen died, “he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). Paul describes Christians who have died as those “who have fallen asleep in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:18). By the use of this term, the Bible distinguishes between the death that truly is death and the death that is not. Thus Jesus said, when a family summoned him to help their daughter who just had died, “The girl is not dead but sleeping” (Matt. 9:24).”⁵ →
 - g. I cannot help but wonder about the sleep from which Jesus awakened those who had died. Could it have been a unique experience? Would Lazarus complain about being brought back albeit temporarily? The renowned John Owen explained: “When, at death, the soul departs from the body, it is immediately freed from all weakness, disability, darkness, doubts and fears. The image of the first Adam will then be abolished. All physical weaknesses and infirmities will have gone for ever.... It is by virtue of the death of Christ alone that the souls of believers are freed by death from the presence of sin and all the effects that sin had wrought on their bodies, and being freed their souls flourish and expand to their fullest extent.”^{7 6}
 - h. Rev. 14:13 affirm the blessing of death in the LORD. However, 1 Cor. 15:43-44, 48-49 speaks of the life after afterlife i.e. the resurrection. And it is for the sake of this very glorified existence that Jesus rejoices over their delay in returning to Judea.
 - i. How wonderful to have a God who left glory – not to regain it – but to give it to us. Jesus is content to bear the body of a human for eternity future. Oh what an amazing God!
 - j. Therefore, facing death, walking in the light, grieving loss, waiting for relief, and disturbing Lazarus’ rest ends in glorious resurrection!
5. Acknowledging Death (16)
- a. Resigning to follow Jesus unto death is to be commended! Many pick on Thomas and certainly he didn’t have the “gift” of faith, but we cannot overlook his courage (or at least resolve to follow Jesus). I can relate to his sarcasm and pessimism. We all have room to grow. I know some of you say stuff like “It’s just my luck...” Or, “I never win anything.”

⁵ Phillips, R. D. (2014). *John*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 15–16). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

⁷ John Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, abr. R. J. K. Law (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1987), 124.

⁶ Phillips, R. D. (2014). *John*. (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (1st ed., Vol. 2, pp. 16–17). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

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- b. As far as Thomas is concerned, the sickness of Lazarus is “toward death,” both for Lazarus himself and for Jesus and the disciples—consequently *not* “for the glory of God.” His is a counsel not of faith but of unbelief and despair, for he has failed to grasp either the prospect that “the Son of God might be glorified” (v. 4), or the meaning of Jesus’ promise that “I am going that I might wake him up” (v. 11).^{53 7}
- c. Thomas may have expected the worst but He followed Jesus and was thus walking in the light! In my view, it’s better than looking at life with rose colored glasses and then being shocked when you are called to make a great sacrifice.
- d. Death is a reality we must face! It’s not that we have to “come to terms with death,” i.e. be on accepting terms of it as having the final say and that it’s just a natural part of life. Maybe fallen life but not eternal life. Jesus didn’t come to terms with death but faced it down and overcame it.
- e. Col. 1:24. What is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? Our part! Phil. 1:29.
- f. Is Jesus to do all the suffering and sacrificing? Matt. 16:24-26 = Dying to Live.
- g. Rev. 12:11. Jn. 8:51. Once you’re not afraid to die, you can truly live.

Further Consideration:

Daylight

9–10 In his longest speech so far here on the other side of the Jordan, Jesus replies, “Are there not twelve hours of the day?²² If someone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if someone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” On the face of it, this is simply a long and elaborate way of saying, “My hour has not yet come” (2:4; see also 7:30 and 8:20). At the same time it echoes what he said to these same disciples earlier in the presence of the man born blind, about the need to “work the works of the One who sent me as long as it is day. Night is coming when no one can work” (9:4). The point is the same here. The “hour” of Jesus’ death is drawing ever nearer. When it is finally announced (12:23, 27; 13:1), it will come as no surprise but as something signaled well in advance. But until then, Jesus is perfectly safe. Just as at the Cana wedding, there is still time to act (see 2:4), and just as in the case of the man born blind, there is still “work” to be done (see 9:4–5). Only when “night” comes (see 13:30) is Jesus in danger.⁸

PC:

Because all have sinned, death visits all of us (Ro. 5:12; 6:23). Death is not natural but rather a result of our fallen nature’s curse. Though 10 out of 10 people die, we don’t have to fear death. It has been defeated for us by the Savior. The key to living life is, however, to die to self. The fruit of peace can only be acquired with the death of the seed. As it is buried, the seed is no more; but from the soil rises a

⁵³ Although the reader is not yet aware of it, Thomas’s pronouncement (v. 16) is consistent with his character as revealed in later passages. His acknowledgment that “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5) renders suspect the notion that his willingness to travel with Jesus implied any real understanding of Jesus’ mission. And his determination not to believe the testimony of his fellow disciples to Jesus’ resurrection (20:24) confirms his failure to understand the necessity “that the Son of God might be glorified.” This rather consistent development of Thomas’s character makes his final confession, “My Lord and my God!” (20:28) all the more striking as a turning point.

⁷ Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (p. 625). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

²² “Twelve hours” because “the day” does not mean a twenty-four-hour period, but rather daylight or daytime, “the period between sunrise and sunset” (BDAG, 436).

⁸ Michaels, J. R. (2010). *The Gospel of John* (pp. 619–620). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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new life to bloom and ultimately bear fruit. This kind of birth in a human is no more natural than death. Death became natural to fallen man and the new birth can only come from the risen man! That risen Man not only gave us hope but demonstrated the power that affords us assurance of life after life. One who has received Christ has received such life and thus no longer needs to fear death.