

“Lord! The one you love is sick.”

John 11:1-6

Introduction: (Read John 11:1-6) Suffering and death are the universal experience of mankind in every generation and culture. Christian doctrine traces the origin of suffering and death to the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. The apostle Paul makes explicit that which, in Genesis 3, is implicit when he writes in Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (NIV). The author of Hebrews declares in 9:27 that death is a certainty for all of man; “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (NIV). From beginning to end the Bible presents a clear understanding of the cause and the universal nature of the struggle, pain, and death which characterize the human condition.

Despite the clear statement of the Bible regarding the root of the human condition a theological tension, often resulting in a faith crisis, occurs when the Christian attempts to reconcile the harsh and pressing reality of death, suffering, or loss in the community of faith with the equally unambiguous biblical truth of the goodness and love of God. The questions which plague the human heart regarding the love of God in the face of such pain, sorrow, and loss – especially when the believer is crying out to God in struggle - resonate within the Christian community. Craig Keener recognizes that theological tension or faith crisis to be part of this text when he writes:

John’s community, like other early Christian communities (cf. 1 Thess 4:13), not unlike Christian communities today, undoubtedly experienced untimely deaths and suffering that on the level of human understanding seemed to conflict with the assurance of God’s love (cf. 11:21).¹

Transition: It is that very tension which is at the heart of the narrative of the raising of Lazarus recorded in John 11:1-44. In this narrative John addresses that universal tension and the crisis of faith it often creates in such a way as to be applicable universally – that is to say - across generations and cultures. Let me take a moment to remind you that John did not transcribe a record of these events as they happen. He wrote this gospel years later (decades later) including select events, teachings and discourses of Jesus from the many possible in order to present Jesus as the Son of God incarnate who is the Messiah (cf. 20:30-31; 21:25). So the structure John used to record these events was intentional and revealing.

Some Things to Note Before We Study the Text – John builds his gospel around several key elements – Sign Miracles; Explicating Discourses; “I Am” statements – both absolute and with predicate. This narrative contains all three of these key elements.

- I believe this narrative is the 7th and final miraculous “sign” which John chose and around which John builds his teaching on who Jesus is and what He has come to do (cf. John 20:30-31). Therefore it serves as a transition to the Book of Glory beginning in John 13.

- Each of the signs is Christological in its emphasis. The significance of each sign is seen in that it confirms what Jesus says about who He is and what He came to do. It is a display of His glory as the Incarnate Son of God (cf. 1:1-2, 14). Hence, the signs themselves are designed to encourage faith in Jesus – both to save the lost and to strengthen the saved.

- The discourses of Jesus which follow the miraculous signs (in this case precede the sign) are intended to clarify the meaning of the sign.

- John's gospel includes what has come to be known as the "I Am" statements of Jesus which attach to the covenant "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" which the Lord gave Moses in Exodus 3. There are those absolute "I Am's" (cf. 8:58) and those with predicate – as in this text. The key statement of Jesus contained within the discourse of John 11 – which gives clarity to the sign of the raising of Lazarus – is found in 11:25-26. The heart of that statement is one of the "I Am" declarations of Jesus key to John's gospel – "I am the resurrection and the life." The "I Am" with predicate tells us what it means to us, in our grave condition, that the Divine Son of God became man and entered so fully into our experiences with us– in this case with respect to the universal experience of death.

Transition: The narrative is divided up into 5 basic parts or movements. Our text is the first part and sets the basis or context what follows. There are 3 "dialogues" which follow – 11:7-16, 17-27, 28-37. The sign narrative closes with Jesus raising Lazarus to life (cf. 11:38-44). The passage before us breaks out in 3 two verse sections. Now let's look at the text itself.

John Provides the Necessary Details of the Setting for the Sign Miracle – 11:1-2 - In the first two verses John provides the setting for the mainline of his narrative.

- In these verses John identifies, by name, both the people, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the place, their hometown of Bethany, which play key roles in his narrative.

Lazarus' sister Mary is further identified as the one who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment and wiped them with her hair. Though this qualification seems to be unnecessary, or at the very least out of place, it recalls a story which would likely have been familiar to John's readers. It anticipates the account of 12:3 which takes place after the raising of Lazarus, in which Mary anoints the feet of the Lord. Mary's anointing of Jesus is anticipates his death. Thus, John has implicitly connected this final sign, the raising of Lazarus, to Jesus' own death, burial and resurrection.ⁱⁱ

- Furthermore, by identifying individuals, relationships, and locations by name, **1.)** John is giving every impression that what is about to be related is an historical account.ⁱⁱⁱ **2.)** More importantly, by naming the main characters in the narrative John puts a face, as it were, on the drama which is about to unfold, effectively drawing us into the narrative. This allows for him more easily, if only subliminally, to present Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, to you and me, as examples of us, the community of believers, whom Jesus loves.

- Finally, each of the sign narratives identifies a problem to be addressed by the work of Jesus.^{iv}
1.) In 11:1-2 John identifies the problem or circumstance to be addressed by the sign-work of Jesus. ***Lazarus, who is from Bethany, and who is the brother of Mary and Martha, is sick.*** 2.) Another implication of the imperfect tense (ἦς ὁ ἀδελφὸς Λάζαρος ἠσθένει.), which is true in this case, is that it, “. . . creates a certain expectation on the part of the reader/hearer: what else happened?”^v ***John, by this short clause, returns to the human need of Lazarus in such a way as to create anticipation in the readers that Jesus will indeed address his need.***

John, in the remaining verses of this introductory section (11:3-6) introduces the nature of the glory to be revealed in the sign miracle of the raising of Lazarus. Furthermore, these verses serve as a transition to the narrative leading up to, and including the miracle itself. It is within the three dialogues which comprise the bulk of the story, ***that John explains the implications of the sign, and reveals the nature of its glory.***

John Provides the Sequence of Events Which Present the Mainline Pursued in the Narrative – 11:3-4

- 11:3 – (ἀπέστειλαν οὖν αἱ ἀδελφαὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσαι· κύριε, ἴδε ὃν φιλεῖς ἀσθενεῖ) John introduces the sequence of events which make up the mainline of the narrative.^{vi} In this passage the sisters of Lazarus sent word to the Lord of Lazarus’ illness. ***Three important observations must be made about this sentence.***

1.) First, it is clear that John intends his readers to know that Jesus already has an intimate relationship with Lazarus and his sisters.^{vii} ***This overt statement of Jesus’ personal love for Lazarus and his sisters supports the assertion that John intends for his readers to see the Bethany family as examples of all those who belong to Jesus.***^{viii} ***Moreover, this is pastorally significant in John’s Gospel as seen when Jesus’ personal love for His own emerges again in 13:1 and continues through the Book of Glory, as Jesus prepares His disciples for His death (14:15-24; 15:9-17;17:23-26).***

2.) A second observation is that this message which Lazarus’ sisters sent to Jesus was intended to do much more than inform. ***It is clear, in light of the overall narrative, that this is an urgent request for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus.***^{ix} This is tantamount to prayer for Lazarus’ healing!!

Though the request is subtle in form, its assumptions are clear: Lazarus is gravely ill and, since Jesus loves Lazarus, and he is able to heal him, he will come and he will heal him. ***There was an assumed code, in the request of Lazarus’ sisters – an assumed code in our prayer for help or relief - by which love and friendship must operate.***^x

The expectation John intended to create in the mind of his readers by the use of the imperfect^{xi} in 1:2 (ἦς ὁ ἀδελφὸς Λάζαρος ἠσθένει), is given its full voice in the request of Lazarus’ sister. ***Thus***

the expectations placed on divine love, which would have resonated throughout the community of believers, are declared.

3.) A third observation comes from stepping back and viewing the narrative as a whole. *The request the sisters of Lazarus make in 1:3 is not an absolute statement of Jesus' love for Lazarus. Rather, it is a statement filled with the assumptions of both Martha and Mary about the nature of Jesus' love, and how He should act on behalf of the one whom He loves and who is facing such grave circumstances.* These very assumptions are openly expressed in 11:36-37 by the Jewish mourners who are witness to Jesus weeping on His way to the tomb of Lazarus. Their first response is to marvel at His love for Lazarus, ἴδε πῶς ἐφίλει αὐτόν (John 11:36). However, their affirmation of Jesus' love is immediately followed by a statement which both declares their expectations and expresses their confusion, (John 11:37).

The confusion voiced by the Jewish mourners reflects the theological tension and resultant crisis in faith experienced by Martha and Mary at the death of their brother. It is most certainly the confusion that John's readers will have experience by this point in the story. These two passages (11:3 and 36-37) form an *inclusio* which brackets the narrative and highlights what John will address by the sign of the raising of Lazarus. This *inclusio* indicates that Jesus' love for the Bethany family, and implied love for all who are His own, is central to John's message in this final sign.

More importantly, the obvious expectations placed on Jesus' love for Lazarus serve as a foil for declaring the glory of God, seen in the true nature of His love for those who are His own, as revealed in Jesus.

- 11:4 - Jesus' initial response to the sisters' request presents the perspective which moves us toward resolving the tension or solving the problem introduced in 11:3 (αὕτη ἡ ἀσθένεια οὐκ ἔστιν πρὸς θάνατον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα δοξασθῇ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ δι' αὐτῆς).

Though the central theological truth taught by this sign is recorded in 11:25-26, the ultimate purpose of this sign is declared in Jesus' response to the sisters recorded in this verse. *Jesus will raise Lazarus from the dead for the glory of God, in order that God might be glorified in Jesus.*

1.) Jesus' response takes the form of a contrast, which serves to emphasize the purpose or end result of Lazarus' illness. In the first phrase of this contrast Jesus makes a negative statement about the result of Lazarus' sickness (αὕτη ἡ ἀσθένεια οὐκ ἔστιν πρὸς θάνατον). The second part of the contrast (ἀλλά, "but" or "rather") creates the anticipation that something better follows the "rather/but" than what precedes it. That's the reason the NIV replaces the "rather" and replaces the contrasting elements with a simple "No..."

Jesus is purposefully shifting the focus or emphasis from the impending death of a man, to the glory of God. *Therefore the clause following the particle "rather" ἀλλά (ὑπὲρ τῆς δόξης τοῦ*

θεοῦ, ἵνα δοξασθῆ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ δι' αὐτῆς) is not only the point of emphasis in the sentence, it is “the signature statement here.”^{xii} Ridderbos rightly says that Jesus’ words in the second half of the sentence “are fundamental for the whole story.”^{xiii} ***The result of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, as well as the design of this narrative, is that the glory of God be revealed in the glory of His Son.***

2.) This emphasis is supported by the fact that, as noted earlier, 11:4 forms an *inclusio* of glory with 11:40 which implies that this narrative *serves the purpose of revealing God’s glory in Jesus. Though Lazarus will die, his death is not the final word; he will be raised again to life. Yet even the raising of Lazarus from the dead is not the final statement of glory. As is the case in each of the signs of John, the raising of Lazarus points beyond itself to a deeper meaning and a greater glory. The raising of Lazarus reveals the glory of the love of God in Jesus.*

**It is a love which is manifest first in the incarnation whereby Jesus, who is fully God and fully man, enters into complete solidarity with fallen humanity (cf. Hebrews 2:1-8; 4:14-16).

Jesus, compelled by love and in solidarity with fallen humanity, moves inexorably to the cross, where He accomplishes an ultimate work of healing, achieved in his own death and resurrection. Throughout John’s gospel, the glory of God in Jesus is realized in his cross (cf. 7:39; 12:27-33; 17:1-5). *It will be established that the account of the raising of Lazarus serves to manifest the glory of God’s love in Jesus as it foreshadows his cross. Indeed, it is in the incarnation of the Word that God mediates his presence among men and it is through the death of the incarnate Word that he finally destroys death and brings to light a life that is eternal, incorruptible (2 Timothy 1:10).***

John, in a Parenthetical Statement, Gives Substance to All That Follows – 11:5-6

- In 11:5 John breaks away from the mainline of the narrative with a parenthetical statement that, when understood rightly, informs all that follows.^{xiv} This understanding is implied by the context and supported by use of the imperfect tense ἡγάπα.^{xv} John interrupts the flow of the narrative when he breaks from the aorist tense used in 11:3-4, by using the imperfect in 11:5, and then returning to the use of the aorist when he resumes the narrative in 11:6.

* This understanding prevents one from inferring that Jesus’ two day delay was motivated by His love for Lazarus and his sisters.^{xvi} ***Therefore the οὖν of 11:6, which should be understood to be inferential in meaning (“therefore”),^{xvii} is taken to refer back, beyond the parenthesis, to 11:4.***^{xviii} The particle ὡς is used temporally in this passage, as is the case throughout much of the narrative (cf. 11:20, 29, 32 & 33), and can be translated “when.” In addition, the clause in 11:6b begins with τότε μὲν, and may be translated “then indeed he stayed” or, as Ridderbos translates it, “he [it is true] stayed.”^{xix} **So then** 11:6, speaking of Jesus, in apparent response to the news of Lazarus illness, reads, “Therefore when he heard that he was sick he [it is true] stayed.” **This structure accomplishes John’s desired effect of placing emphasis on the fact that Jesus, after hearing of Lazarus’ illness, remained where he was rather than, as expected, hurrying to him to

meet his need.^{xx} ***By all human standards Jesus' delay would appear to contradict, even deny the expectations of love. It is this enigmatic and very troubling response to the plea of Lazarus' sisters that prompted John to insert his parenthetical assurance of Jesus' love for the Bethany family.***

* The placement of this parenthetical statement in the flow of the narrative serves several purposes. **1.)** The most obvious purpose is to assure the readers that despite Jesus' delay, which would appear to be a denial of love, Jesus did love Lazarus and his sisters and, he was loving them even in the context of what appeared to be callous inactivity.^{xxi} **2.)** A second purpose is that, as Kostenberger noted, "the reference, in the wake of 11:4, adds Jesus' love to his desire for God's glory as the motivation for the ensuing miracle."^{xxii} **3.)** A third purpose, and the one most important to this thesis, is that it effectively sets up a contrast between the nature of love on display in the raising of Lazarus, and ultimately in the cross of Christ, and the nature of the love assumed by Lazarus' sisters and the Jewish mourners.^{xxiii} This conclusion accords well with how the narrative unfolds from this point forward. In addition, when examined against the understanding of God's love presented in the Gospel, in particular in the Book of Glory, this conclusion holds up well. It is important to pause at this time and consider the nature of this love.

Excursus on God's Love - As mentioned before, the love cited in 11:3 and 36-37 is a love characterized by human expectations. Human beings, unlike God, are changeable and passible in all that they are. Therefore they are imperfect in all that they are. This includes their passions, or more to the point, their love. Weinandy says of human beings, "They must actualize their latent and inert relational potential and so become positively related to one another," which, by its very nature effects growth and change in human beings.^{xxiv} Hence they can never be fully loving.^{xxv} He lays out the process of change within human beings, with respect to love, when he writes,

In human beings the knowledge of a thing as good arouses the sensitive appetite (pertaining to the senses) with its concomitant sensible emotion, which in turn motivates the will to desire and obtain the good as loved ... This knowledge arouses within me thoughts and feelings of love and affection and so my will desires to express this love in the hope of becoming friends with the person.^{xxvi}

This process reflects the nature of a love that is changeable and passible, which exists in potential until actualized, however imperfectly, in response to need or desire. This actualization is circumstantial and takes place in times such as when human love responds to the need of the one loved. A need is discerned by, or made known to, the one who loves and the love within them, which to this point exists only in potential, or is "latent or inert," is actualized in response to the need of the one loved. This was the expectation of Lazarus' sisters when they sent word to Jesus. This expectation of love is at the heart of the confusion and crisis of faith Martha and Mary experienced when Jesus did not come and Lazarus died. And it is this very same

expectation which was expressed in the words of the Jews who observed Jesus' grief over the death of His friend.

John, in his parenthetical statement of 11:5, is making an unqualified statement of Jesus' love for the Bethany family. It is the love of God in Jesus, the God who "as *ipsum esse* is pure act."^{xxvii} Hence, Weinandy writes of God,

Being fully in act his love is fully in act and therefore his passion is fully in act. God cannot become more passionate or loving by actualizing, as human beings do, some further potential and so become more passionate or loving. . . . This is why 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:16). God would not be simply love if he were not pure love in act, and thus absolute passion in act.^{xxviii}

And so the process for God acting in love is significantly different than the process for human beings. There is no need for God to be aroused in His will to act in love by some circumstance or petition. God's arousal to act in love is, as His love, eternally and perfectly in act.^{xxix} It is this love of God in Jesus for those who are His own, which is the true glory of the cross and the heart of the gospel (cf. 3:16). It is this love which is on display in this seventh and final sign of John.

At this point, the foundation is in place for a right perspective on the narrative. The human need that the "sign" work of Jesus will address has been introduced. The key personalities in the story have been identified. The purpose the sign will serve has been declared. John, in 11:6, transitions from the introductory material to the narrative proper. As already noted, it is best to understand the inferential οὖν ("therefore") to refer back to 11:3 effectively creating the theological tension and visceral dissonance which pervades the narrative and begs to be resolved. Yet, the affirmation of Jesus' love in 11:5 hovers over the events and the dialogues of the narrative as a hope against all hope, waiting to break in and bring clarity. In 11:6 the solitary μὲν has a prospective force creating the expectation that a related element is to follow. The μὲν anticipates and is answered by ἔπειτα μετὰ τοῦτο of 11:7a.^{xxx} The language of the text implies that the clarity longed for is indeed to be found in the events and dialogues to follow.

ⁱCraig S. Keener, *John, Volume 2*, 839. cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, "Death in the Community of Eternal Life: History, Theology, and Spirituality in John 11," *Interpretation 41: no 1* (1987), 46. ". . . the narrative so maintains the tension between the clarity of theology and the ambiguity of the human experience of death that it creates a horizon within which the reader of any time or place can integrate the human experience of death into his or her faith in Jesus as resurrection and life." cf. also Philip Francis Esler and Ronald A. Piper, *Lazarus, Mary and Martha: Social-Scientific Approaches to the Gospel of John*, Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 75ff. Esler/Piper make the point that Lazarus, Mary and Martha serve as "prototypical of Christ-followers, in the special sense of those whom Jesus loved (and loves)." The authors distinguish between what they refer to as "prototypes" and "exemplars," the former being fictitious characters and the latter historical, which serve as representatives. The position taken in this paper is that this account is not fictitious and the Bethany family did indeed exist. Lazarus and his sisters serve as "exemplars" of the community of believers.

ⁱⁱKöstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 326.; cf. also Schneiders, “Death in the Community of Eternal Life,” 45. Schneiders makes an interesting point when she writes, “The strange proleptic ‘recall’ in 11:2 that Mary was the same person who (in a story in chap. 12 which has not yet been recounted) anointed the Lord with ointment alerts the reader to the prolepsis of the paschal mystery constituted by chapters 11 and 12. In these two hinge chapters Jesus is symbolically executed by the decision of the authorities (11:47-53), symbolically buried in the anointing scene (12:1-8), and symbolically glorified by the triumphal entry into Jerusalem which is explicitly attributed to his victory over death in the raising of Lazarus (12:17-18).”

ⁱⁱⁱThis is despite the speculation/assertion of some that the story of the raising of Lazarus is not an historical event. For a discussion of the historicity of this account, see Schneiders, “Death in the Community of Eternal Life,” 46-47. Also Ridderbos, *John*, 383-385.

^{iv}Esler and Piper, *Lazarus, Mary and Martha*, 11. Esler/Piper note that each sign “(a) begins with a disclosure of human need; (b) involves Jesus remedying this need miraculously; and (c) reveals some dimension of the divine presence in Jesus.”

^vcf. also Albert Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek: an Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 11.

^{vi}This is clear by the shift in tense from the imperfect to the aorist. cf. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood and Narrative*, 91-95.

^{vii}Morris, *John*, 478.

^{viii}Brown, 431.

^{ix}Kostenberger, *John*, 327.; Ridderbos, *John*, 387.; Keener, *John, Volume 2*, 839.; contra Morris, *John*, 478.

^xWilhelm Wuellner, “Putting Life Back into the Lazarus Story and Its Reading: The Narrative Rhetoric of John 11 as the Narration of Faith,” *Semeia no. 53* (1991), p. 116.

^{xi}cf. note 23.

^{xii}Kostenberger, *John*, 327.

^{xiii}Ridderbos, *John*, 387.

^{xiv}Brown, *John I-XII*, 423.

^{xv}The use of the imperfect in narrative has as its normal function “to provide offline material,” which “is supplementary information, that describes, characterizes or explains . . .” Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 62.; Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek*, 11ff.

^{xvi}cf. Carson, *John*, 407.

^{xvii}K. L. McKay, *Studies in Biblical Greek*, vol. 5, *A Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 130.; Stanley E. Porter, *Biblical Languages: Greek*, vol. 2, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 214-15.

^{xviii}cf. Carson, *John*, 407-408. Though it is possible that the reference is back to 11:3, the announcement of Lazarus’ illness, it is better to see the statement of Jesus’ delay as tied to the glory to be revealed in the raising of Lazarus.

^{xix}Ridderbos, *John*, 388. It should be noted that μὲν has a prospective force and anticipates ἔπειτα of 11:7; For ἔπειτα cf. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and augm. throughout |bby Sir Henry Stuart Jones, with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie and with the co-operation of many scholars. with a supplement, 1968. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 615. For μὲν cf. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 75, 4.1.2.

^{xx}Kostenberger, *John*, 328.

^{xxi}Brown, *John*, 423.

^{xxii}Kostenberger, *John*, 327-28.

^{xxiii}Concerning the change in the text from φιλεῖν in 11:3 to ἀγαπᾶν in 11:5 – though the consensus is that John uses both interchangeably, it is a possibility that, in this instance, John purposefully chose ἀγαπᾶν in 11:5 to set it apart from the clearly faulty understanding of love conveyed by φιλεῖν in 11:3, 36-37.

^{xxiv}Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 128.

^{xxv}*Ibid.*, 126.

^{xxvi}*Ibid.*, 125.

^{xxvii}*Ibid.*, 127.

^{xxviii}*ibid.*, 127.

^{xxix}*Ibid.*, 126.

^{xxx}Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, 74-83; cf. Kostenberger, *John*, 328, note 28. Also, Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 615.