

BaptistWay Bible Series for January 7: Believing in Jesus as the Resurrection & the Life

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Believing in Jesus as the Resurrection & the Life

• John 11:1-13, 17-27, 38-44

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Believe, believe, believe. This is the key verb and central message of the Gospel of John. The universal invitation to believe in Jesus as the Son of God is extended repeatedly at two levels: to everyone in John's story who encounters Jesus during his ministry and simultaneously to everyone who encounters Jesus through reading or hearing John's written witness to the eternal truth.

The beat of "believe" pulses throughout chapter 11 in one of the most famous stories in the Gospels—the miraculous restoration to life of a dead man who also happened to be one of Jesus' closest friends.





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Central themes

In this story, the Gospel writer continues to employ the themes and literary devices we have seen in previous chapters. Among them:

- Jesus' words and actions that serve as "signs," pointing beyond themselves to the deeper truths of the message and mission of Jesus;
- Jesus' intimacy with and complete dependence on God as his Father;
- Jesus' inner sense of direction, purpose and timing that guide his ministry;
- Jesus' use of rich and varied metaphors to communicate his identity and mission (living water, bread of life, light of the world, the good shepherd, etc.); and
- the diverse responses to Jesus, ranging from wholehearted to incomplete or temporary belief, to confusion, unbelief, opposition and conflict, including hatred to the point of wanting to kill him.

In chapter 11, Jesus uses yet another metaphor in the series of "I am" sayings that appear in John's Gospel. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus tells the grieving Martha (v. 25). That declaration is followed by a paradoxical promise offered to Martha and anyone else who believes:

Though they will die they will live eternally (v 26). This is one strand in the theme of “belief” that threads its way throughout the chapter:

- In Jesus’ explanation to the disciples: “so that you may believe” (v. 15);
- in the disciples’ expression of commitment (v. 16);
- in Jesus’ words to Martha (vv. 25-26);
- in Martha’s confession to Jesus (v. 27);
- in Jesus’ words to Mary (v. 40);
- in Jesus’ prayer: So that the crowd “may believe” (v. 42);
- in the response of many who witnessed the miracle and believed (v. 45);
and
- in the contrasting response of others who did not believe (vv. 46).

The same power Jesus draws upon to bring Lazarus’ stone-cold corpse back to life is available to all who believe. Like the miracle itself, it is an astounding, mind-boggling promise that lies beyond human comprehension but always within the reach of a loving God.

Deeper direction

After introducing the central characters in the story—sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus—who were close friends of Jesus, the Gospel writer reminds us again that Jesus lived according to an inner purpose and time table guided by his sense of God’s will rather than any external influences. He refused to be influenced by external pressures, whether friendly or unfriendly, a point already made clear in comments to his mother (chapter 2), the crowd (chapter 6), his brothers (chapter 7) and

his disciples (chapter 9).

After getting a message that Lazarus is ill, he decides for reasons only he understands to stay put for two more days rather than going immediately to see his friends (vv. 3-6). Then he decides to go to Bethany despite the warning from the disciples that he would be returning to hostile territory. In response, Jesus announces Lazarus is dead, but that the trip serves a larger purpose—“that you may believe” (v. 15).

The miracle of bringing life to Lazarus serves as another sign. In this case, John refers not only to the sign’s purpose of glorifying God but also glorifying the Son of God (v. 4).

In this Gospel, the glorifying of the Son is a reference to the Son’s return to the Father. The means of the return is the cross and therefore to be lifted up on the cross is to be lifted up to God’s presence. “To glorify the Son” is, then, a way of speaking of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ (12:23-26, 32).

For the Gospel writer, the clear significance of the sign is to point beyond the raising of Lazarus to a truth about Jesus as expressed by Jesus to Martha (vv. 25-26).

Deeper emotions

The parallel exchanges between Jesus and Martha and then Jesus and Mary add to the deeply felt emotion in the story. The twice-repeated statement, “if only you had been here,” part lament and part implied petition, is spoken through the unfiltered pain of grief.

Jesus is described as “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved” (v. 33), weeping (v. 35) and “again greatly disturbed” (v. 38). Notably, Jesus begins

to weep immediately following the invitation to “come and see” (v. 34). The same words he had used to call his disciples are now spoken to him with a different twist: Come and see what death brings.

In these poignant descriptions, which stand in contrast to the Gospels’ dominant portrayal of Jesus as the all-knowing and all-powerful Son of God, the writer may be suggesting Jesus is feeling not only the grief of his dear friends but also a premonition of the agony that lies before him.

As Raymond Brown notes, the description of the miracle itself echoes Jesus’ earlier promise: “... for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life” (5:28-29).

Ultimately, the enduring message of this story lies in Jesus’ words to Martha. Initially, Martha expresses her faith in terms shared by others of her day (including the Pharisees), speaking of a resurrection at the last day (v. 24). Jesus, however, is the resurrection and the life (v. 25). Jesus is the point at which death ends and life begins; through him, eternity begins now. In response to these words, Martha’s confession of faith echoes the central confession the Gospel was written to evoke in its readers—that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of God (20:31).

Discussion questions

- What do you think Mary and Martha may have been feeling when they said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died”?
- Jesus’ promise to Mary—and to us —that “everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” communicates he is not only the agent of final resurrection but offers eternal life now. What difference does this make for your faith?

- In what ways have you experienced Jesus as “the resurrection and the life”?