

April 29, 2012

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Death, Love, and the Glory of God

John 11:1 – 16

We ended last week with Jesus still in the temple, surrounded by a hostile crowd growing more and more hostile with every word He spoke. Verse 31 says that they were so incensed that they picked up stones to stone Him. Which actually presents a puzzling picture for us. They were in Solomons Portico according to verse 23, and we are pretty sure that there weren't just stones lying around in case someone got the urge to throw rocks. This was the temple, and like everywhere else in Jerusalem, it was certainly already paved with large stones no one could possibly just pick up to throw. This can only mean that they came prepared. They had to have been prepared – I'm sure no one sent out for delivery at that point. Every indication of the text is that they were waiting for Him to declare Himself and once He did they were going to let Him have it. So they must have brought rocks with them, intending to stone Him.

But Jesus, master of every situation, stops them with an exegetical argument. He turns to the Bible and stops them in their tracks with the text. He goes to Psalm 82:6 and essentially He tells them, 'If they called them gods, what about Me? I have come, sent from the Father – I represent God perfectly with unique authority not only to judge the people of Israel, but the whole world – if they called them gods - how much more should that apply to Me?' We may not understand perfectly the force of this argument because He was using a rabbinical argument they well understood, but they certainly did – and now they **really** wanted to kill Him. And then Jesus follows that up with an argument from His life.

"If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." John 10:37-38 Jesus was saying, **'If you won't believe My words, take a look at what I do and let My life be a witness to the truth of what I say.'** Jesus used both the word of God and the works of God as evidence that He was the Son of God. And what is true of Jesus must be true of His followers. The gospels is the good news of salvation to the world and **our witness of that good news must be in word and deed.** When we wrote our mission statement for API USA this is what we had in view. 'Bringing hope and healing to the people of Kenya in word and deed.' If our gospel is true then it is true in what it says and in what it does. If we preach a gospel that is not validated by our lives and our work, then our preaching is in vain.

Robert Murray McCheyne preached his last sermon on earth in a place outside Dundee called Broughty Ferry on a Sunday night. He preached from the text of Isaiah 60:1 -- 'Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.' He went home to go to bed, sick with the fever from which he was not to recover. He died just days after he had preached on that text, and after his death they found a letter under his pillow. It had come from a man who was listening to him preaching that last sermon, and the last thing he read before going to be with the Lord were these words: ***'Dear Mr. McCheyne, I heard you preach at Broughty Ferry last Sabbath evening, and your sermon brought me to Christ. It was not anything you said, but it was what you were as you preached. For as you preached, I thought that I had never seen the beauty of holiness as I saw it in you. You were talking about the glory of our God resting on the Saviour, and I saw the Saviour's glory rest on you. That brought me to Christ.'***

But unlike this man, they didn't believe His works or His words, and the text goes on to say: *Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp. And He went away again beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing, and He was staying there. Many came to Him and were saying, "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true." Many believed in Him there.* John 10:39-42 Again we are confronted with this stark contrast – those who heard His words and saw His works and chose not to believe – and those who heard His words and saw His works who did believe. And it is from this point on, the full open public ministry of Jesus is over and now He moves into the seclusion of His own circle – ministering to His disciples and those who loved Him, and from here on out we stand in the shadow of the cross. And it is interesting to note that John specifies back in verse 23 that it was winter. And the spiritual significance of that shouldn't be lost on anyone. From this point on, Jesus doesn't have any more conversations with the stubborn, rebellious leaders of Israel. It is as though the season of harvest was over for them, spring and summer had turned to winter, and Jesus' public ministry was nearly over. And the words of Jeremiah the prophet could be applied to them: *"Harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved."* Jeremiah 8:20

And so we come to chapter eleven and the setting for death, love and the glory of God. There is a lot in this chapter – and there is a lot in these first sixteen verses. But this morning I want us to see these three things because they are highlighted here – **death and love and the glory of God**. Jesus has much to say about these things and if we want to understand the relationship between them, we need to have our ears tuned to heaven's note. We need to let the word of God inform us of how we ought to think of these things – in spite of what our natural inclinations tell us. We will look at the text first and note a few things along the way and then spend some time pulling out some of the implications of this story of death and love and the glory of God.

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. John 11:1-2 What John is establishing here is the tremendous love that Jesus has, not only for Mary, but for this family. This incident of Mary anointing the Lord's feet with ointment and wiping them with her hair doesn't actually happen until chapter 12. But John is trying to set the scene here by showing the extraordinary relationship that exists between them, and particularly the love He had for Lazarus. So he goes on in verse 3: *So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick."* John 11:3 The sisters believed in Him – they had seen the miracles, they had heard Him speak. And they knew that sick people were His stock in trade as it were. So many times in the gospel accounts we read where Jesus went about healing the sick. He opened blind eyes, unstopped deaf ears, healed paralytics and lepers and epileptics. So when they sent that message, they were banking on Jesus rushing to the scene and healing their brother, because after all they had a special relationship. This wasn't some anonymous guy in the crowd – this was Lazarus, **'whom you love!'** John is making it very clear that first of all, this story is about love. He says it again in verse 5: *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* John 11:5

Three times John stresses the fact that Jesus loved them – He really loved them. And I think he makes this point three times because as this unfolds, we might not understand that underneath Jesus' actions runs this strong current of love. John knows that what Jesus is about to do might not look like love to most people. In fact it probably doesn't look like love to anyone who doesn't really know Jesus. People without Christ don't think of love in this way and apart from the Holy Spirit regenerating our dead hearts and renewing our fallen emotions and enlightening our thinking – we wouldn't understand how Jesus can do what He does and still say He loves them. Even His response is startling: *But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it."* John 11:4

The first thing Jesus does when he hears the news is to put it in the context, not of human experience but in relation to the glory of God and His own glory. This illness is about the glory of God and the glory of Jesus. It is not mainly about sickness and death and resurrection from the dead – although Lazarus does die and he does come back to life. The point of the story is the glory of God and the glory of the Son of God. Remember the man in chapter nine who was born blind? His blindness and his healing were meant to be the canvas on which the glory of God would be displayed. God chose to allow a man to be born blind, and live for years in his blindness so that His glory would be revealed one day when Jesus met this man at the temple. And here God ordains that Lazarus die so that His glory would be revealed. And Jesus knew this – in fact He allows it to happen as we'll see.

Verse six runs so counter to what the common understanding of love is that John has to emphasize that Jesus loved this family by linking Jesus' reaction to the news that Lazarus was really sick, to that love. Let's read it to get the full impact here: *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.* John 11:5-6 We wouldn't normally think that the reaction of love is to do nothing – but that is exactly what Jesus did. He loved Lazarus so much that He stayed where He was. His love for Lazarus compelled Him to wait an additional two days. This is even more remarkable when you realize that where Jesus was in relation to Lazarus was at least one day away, perhaps more. So from the time He got the message to actually showing up there, at best two days would have passed. But as it is, He waits an additional two days – which meant that by the time Jesus got there Lazarus would have died, and that is in fact what happens.

So a couple days later, Jesus calls the boys together: *Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"* John 11:7-8 Notice they don't say anything about Lazarus – they seem to be concerned for Jesus' safety. But I believe that in the back of their minds was the thought that 'Whew, we just made it out of Jerusalem last time with a lucky break – why in the world would He want to take the chance that this time those Pharisees will really get us?' The pattern of the disciples' thinking in the past had always been fairly self-serving and I don't see them changing at this point. I can see them thinking, 'Hey we've got a good gig going here – people are coming and believing and getting baptized. No sense in going back to Jerusalem and getting killed'.

So Jesus takes this opportunity to teach them a little: *Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. "But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."* John 11:9-10 At first this may seem rather strange and out of place. They talk about the real danger that He could die – Jesus answers with a lesson about time. What's He saying? If you go back to chapter nine, I think you will get the connection because He makes the same sort of statement there. In verse four Jesus says: *We must work the works of Him who sent Me as long as it is day; night is coming when no one can work.* John 9:4 In other words, day is the time for working and once night comes, work is done. Once the day is done – the work is over.

Jesus is saying, 'Don't you realize that there are twelve hours in the day when the sun shines and that is when the work gets done? Work doesn't go on at night – you can't see. And it is day right now – and the work goes on while it is still day. The day is not done till the night comes.' And so Jesus was saying, 'Don't you know that it won't be night until the day has run its course? Don't you know that I can't be killed before My time? You can't lengthen the time I am with you, and the Jews who hate Me can't shorten it by one hour because God has ordained the time of not only My living but My death. So don't be fearful'. Do you see what He is saying? What do I have to fear? What do you have to fear? God has set the calendar – we will live out the day. Night will come and work will be over, but right now it's day and no matter what the Jews threaten, In the words of David Livingstone, we are immortal until our work is accomplished and the day is done. John Paton summed it up like this: ***"This is strength; this is peace; to feel, in entering on every day, that all its duties and trials have been committed to the Lord Jesus — that, come what may, He will use us for His own glory and our real good!"***

And then the Lord told them it was time to work: *This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."* John 11:11 The disciples however, still a little slow to get it take His words at face value: *The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."* John 11:12 These guys were thinking no doubt, 'What's the big hurry? If Lazarus is only sleeping, we really don't have to risk our lives to wake him up!' But Jesus of course was speaking as He always did in terms of eternal realities. Paul described the death of believers in terms of sleep when he tells the Thessalonians that those believers who die are 'asleep in Jesus'. But even there sleep is not meant to convey the sense of unconscious resting, but rather a conscious communion with Christ after someone dies. To those who are still alive on earth it looks like sleep – but to those who die in Christ it is a sweet reunion with the Lord.

And so Jesus tells them plainly that Lazarus is dead. *Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."* John 11:13-15 When He said this, I'm sure the disciples were thinking, 'Lazarus is dead – the one whom you love – and You're glad? And now – when he's dead, now you want to go and see him?' It probably didn't make any sense to them. But here's the point. Jesus was glad that He hadn't been there to heal Lazarus – for their sakes. He wasn't at all happy about death, especially the death of one He loved. But what made Him happy was that in the bad that was death, God intended good. And the good here was going to be for His disciples good.

In just a little while, perhaps only two months in the future, their beloved Master was going to be tortured and crucified and killed and buried in a tomb. And they were going to need some huge reservoir of faith to believe that He did indeed have all power over death and would rise again, just like He'd been telling them. And so Jesus is glad that Lazarus' death was going to work for their faith. That is what He says: *so that you may believe.* And it wasn't as if they haven't had faith before, but their little faith was going to take a giant leap forward. And it always seems to be that as your faith increases another step up, the faith you had before that point always tends to look like unbelief. It isn't, but in light of the increased measure of faith, it looks like unbelief. So Jesus is telling them, 'Trust me boys, this is a faith-building exercise – lets go see a dead man'.

And I like Thomas here. You can say all you want about Doubting Thomas, but Thomas was with Jesus all the way: *Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him."* John 11:16 On the one hand his love for Jesus was so strong he was willing at that point to die with Him. And on the other hand his faith was so weak that he was certain he would. I think that says a lot about the value of commitment to Christ. We may not see a way out of this thing, but at least we'll die together. When I told you the story of Peter Cameron Scott and the beginning of the African Inland Mission, what I didn't tell you was that several of those seven missionaries who went to Kenya with him to begin their work brought their belongings with them, ***packed in a coffin.*** We don't know the level of their faith, but we cannot mistake the level of their commitment.

So what should we draw from this today? I think there are several things but we'll just mention three. First of all we need to understand that God's timing is not our timing. **God's timing is perfect.** And we could spend a lot of time here – several messages in fact. But we should learn something from the Lord's decision to wait two more days when the time to act seemed at hand. It reminds me of the sign I've seen before: 'Lack of prior planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part'. Jesus was never moved by emergencies – you never saw Him rushing around in a panic. Nothing took Him by surprise. He lived His life in communion with His Father who had planned everything before time began. If He had responded as most of us would have when He got the message – how much would that have built faith in the disciples? If Jesus would have rushed to Lazarus' bedside and performed a healing miracle – how would that have been any different from the hundreds of similar miracles He had already performed in their presence? But to raise a man from the dead – and one who had been dead for four days – in the words of Billy Crystal he was 'dead dead'? Now that was a faith builder.

And the point, is that God is always in control and for everything there is a time and a season. God is always acting – never reacting in the situation or circumstances in which we find ourselves. We must wait for Him to move before moving ourselves. We all want good things to happen in our lives, but usually we want it now...not later. When it doesn't happen that way, we are tempted to ask, "When, God, when? Or "Why God why?" We need to grow in our faith, we need to grow in trusting God instead of looking at the situation and focusing on 'Why God, when God?' . If you're missing out on joy and peace in your life, you're not trusting God. If your mind feels worn out all the time, you're not trusting God. If worry and anxiety are big in your life, you're not trusting God. And it is just those worrisome, anxiety-filled, panic-inducing situations that are meant to build a bigger faith in us.

Secondly, we need to understand that everything God plans and allows in our lives spring from a motive of His great love for us. **God's motive is love.** It was love that let Lazarus die. It was the love of Jesus for Mary and Martha and Lazarus and His disciples that caused Him to wait until Lazarus was really dead before He came. The text tells us that because He loved them – He waited. Love was not hurrying to his bedside. Love was not healing him of his sickness. Love was not even offering words of comfort and hope at that point – love was staying where He was two days longer.

So how is this love? As I have said many times – the best definition of love I have heard was from Dick Foth: **Love is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of another persons need.** Love means giving us what we need most. And what we need most is not healing but the eternal experience of the glory of God. John Piper wrote that **'Love means giving us what will bring us the fullest and longest joy. And what is that?...The answer of the text is clear: a revelation to your soul of the glory of God – seeing and admiring and marveling at and savoring the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Love is doing whatever you have to do to help people see and treasure the glory of God as their supreme joy—to help people see and be satisfied with the glory of God.**

When we are in the middle of trying circumstances, we may not feel the love. Jesus let Lazarus die, and waited to make sure that he was very dead, when he gets there. And if you have the KJV and you've skipped ahead a bit, you will have read that Lazarus by that time was not only dead but stinking. And if you say, "Well, death wasn't such a big deal. It wasn't really so bad because Jesus knew that He would resurrect him. It wasn't as bad as when my mom died or my dad died or my son or my daughter or my best friend died." If that is the way you are thinking, think again. Lazarus really died. His sisters probably watched him expire, and death is not an easy thing – ever. And as far as Lazarus knew, Jesus didn't come. And they wept for him and they buried him. And Mary and Martha wondered where Jesus was. This was real death. And real loss. And Jesus really didn't show up to stop it. And our problem is, we can't see through to the end – but Jesus can, and Jesus did. And everything He did, every moment He waited, was undergirded with love for Mary, for Martha, for Lazarus, for His disciples – and for you and me. Love let Lazarus die because his death would help them see and savor and marvel at the glory of God.

Finally, we need to understand that all that the end toward which everything on earth and in heaven is bent is to the end that God would be glorified. **Gods glory is the goal.** And when the revelation of His glory in Christ is embraced and treasured by us, God is glorified. Everything must be viewed through the lens of God's glory – every joy, every pain, every blessing and every woe. Again, I believe John Piper has it right when he says, **'God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him'.** So love led Jesus to let Lazarus die so that His glory would be embraced and treasured by His disciples and God would be glorified over all. And in treasuring and embracing His glory and not our needs or happiness or comfort, we find our highest joy and deepest satisfaction.

Our gracious and good Father above,

Have mercy on us who are weak, and frail and fallible and so very temporary. Grant us the grace to trust that You are good in all Your works and in all Your ways. Let us rejoice and take heart from the precious truth that nothing comes into our lives that does not first pass through Your hands. Grant us grace also to believe that Your timing in every situation is perfect and build patience and perseverance in our souls so that we will be patient – content to wait until You act. May we never doubt Your love for us even in the most painful times, and in our pain and in our pleasures, may we see and treasure Your glory as our highest joy and supreme satisfaction. Help us to delight in You, through Jesus Christ and spread His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.