

Weekly Scripture and Sermon Study: History & Context Guide  
John 11:1-45

History, Culture, & Context

In this section of the Book of John, we read about the story of Lazarus who Jesus, being moved by grief, raises from the dead. The other Gospels share a story of Jesus raising someone from the dead, but John is the only one to recount the story of Lazarus. This story is the last miracle that the Gospel of John records and presents one of the most important aspects of Christ's divine nature...authority over death.



In verses 1-16, Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was very ill. When Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness will not end in death...". Jesus then stayed where He was for two more days before travelling to Bethany (near Jerusalem) to see Lazarus. The disciples were concerned about Jesus' welfare in Jerusalem, due to increasing threats to Jesus' life there, and urged Him to stay. In verse 16, Thomas (known as Didymus and "Doubting Thomas") remained committed to Jesus and told the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Verses 11-14 employ the word *sleep* as a misunderstanding for Lazarus' death from everyone there, however, Jesus is aware that he is dead. Sleep was also a common euphemism for death in antiquity.

Beginning with verse 17, we see a shift in location from the region of Bethany of Perea (in the final part of chapter 10) to the region of Bethany in Judea. In vv. 18-19, Bethany of Judea is about two miles from Jerusalem and "...many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother." It was customary in the ancient Near East for prolonged grieving and to have many family members and friends come and console those lost a loved one. In verse 20, Martha goes out to greet Jesus as he arrives, while Mary stays at home. It was customary for someone in the household to stay in the house with those that have come to visit them. Martha tells Jesus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus replies to her (v. 25) "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?". Martha affirms that she does in verse 27.

In verses 28-37, the emphasis is on Jesus' compassion from witnessing the pain and sorrow of Martha, Mary and the others that were there to console them in their grief. Verse 33 says, "When Jesus saw her [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" and in verse 35, Jesus began to weep. The New Interpreter's Study Bible NRSV commentary states, "...the Greek verb used here usually communicate agitation and indignation. It is important not to sentimentalize Jesus' reaction and his tears. These verses highlight the bitter cost and power of death in human lives and so underscore the significance of Jesus' ultimate victory over death."

In verses 38-45, Jesus commands the stone in Lazarus' tomb to be removed (he had already been dead for four days at this point). In vv. 41-42, Jesus prays to God and then calls out to Lazarus to "come out!". Still bound in burial cloth, Lazarus comes out of the tomb upon Jesus' command.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think is the significance of Jesus weeping in verse 35?
2. Reflect on each of the emotions and characteristics of Jesus in these verses. How does this help to better understand the nature of God?
3. Read Hebrews 2:14-15. What does this passage, along with John 11, teach us about life and our mortality?