

## The Glory of Christ's Kingdom

John 11:1-12

Let's do a little exercise this morning. I am going to say a word and you say to yourself the first thing that comes to mind. Ready... the word is... death. I don't imagine there were a lot of uplifting words or images that came to mind. When we think of death we imagine darkness, depression, and being down cast. Death is connected to the grim reaper or the skull and cross bones. Death is viewed by our cultural as that which should be avoided at all costs. There are billion dollar industries dedicated to holding off death as long as possible or at least making it look prettier. Death is the ultimate enemy.

And that is right, that is biblical. When the Bible talks about death it uses terms like bitterness, curse, pain, separation, fear, and enemy. It is only natural for us to view death this way. And yet this is where the gospel breaks in. In the gospel of Jesus we can view death differently. For the Christian death isn't our ultimate enemy because Jesus has overcome death through his resurrection. **In Christ, we are victorious over death.** (hear that again) And I think that is what God wants to teach us in John 11. In John 11:1-16 we see the death of Lazarus. And the author presents this death to us for a very specific purpose.

**The point of the passage:** God wants us, born again believers in Jesus, to view death differently. (slide) *God wants to change our perspective on death by showing us that death is not the pathway to defeat but to victory.*

This truth is important to impress upon the disciples hearts in John 11 because what is about to take place on Black Friday. All of their hopes and dreams are about to be shattered by the events of the cross. **But the cross was not the end, it was only the beginning.** Jesus defeats death and hell because he has life within himself. He is the resurrection and the life. And He proves this by raising Lazarus from the dead.

But **the natural man** does not see death through these spectacles. It looks upon death's frame in terror. **Jesus wants to reassure us that we no longer have to be freighted by death but we can view it, even anticipate it, as that which we must travel through in order to get to resurrection.**

Jesus seeks to transform our understanding of death in this passage by showing us three unexpected truths concerning death. Truths that somewhat startle us. They seem odd to us. I trust that as the passage was read this morning you were somewhat puzzled by the way Jesus responds in this interchange. Even his disciples are puzzled at times. His responses seem odd because of the way we are wired to view death.

We see death as the worst thing in the world. But Jesus doesn't want us to fear death, he wants us to embrace it. He wants us to accept that, unless a grain of wheat die it cannot bear fruit. Jesus wants to arrest us with the idea **that death is the beginning of true and eternal life.**

And he does this by teaching us three truths concerning death this morning.

### **1. Sometimes Death is Loving**

Even for me to say that seems so un-natural. It seems so contradictory to our senses. But I think that is what the passage here teaches and we see it in a couple places. The first is in verses 1-4;

**John 11:1–4 (ESV)** — **1** Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. **2** It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. **3** So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, *he whom you love is ill.*”

John begins this passage by setting the stage for us. He does this by indicating who exactly this Lazarus is. He is from Bethany but more importantly, he is the brother of Mary and Martha. And John intentionally points out that this is the same Mary who anointed the Lord’s feet with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair. This gesture on behalf of Mary shows a close relationship to and deep respect for Jesus. **Mary and her family loved Jesus very deeply and Jesus also loved them very much.**

I believe John inserts these qualifiers at the beginning of this story to show that the actions of Jesus, which are about to take place, **don’t come from a callous or apathetic spirit but from a spirit of deep love and concern.** We see it later in John 11:35 where we see Jesus deeply moved in his Spirit to the point of weeping for Lazarus and his family.

**Jesus actions are not characterized by neglect but by love.**

And we see this in verses 5-6;

**John 11:5–6 (ESV)** — **5** Now Jesus loved (John is explicit here about Jesus’ motivation) Martha and her sister and Lazarus. **6** So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

We learn in verses 5-6 that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus very much, **what unsettles us is how he shows it.** Verse 6 says he loved them, so or because he loved them he stays two days longer in the place where he was.

Now we can be certain that Jesus is not unaware of the results of his actions. He knows that by staying two days longer this is going to result in the death of Lazarus. And we see this in verses 11-14;

**John 11:11–14 (ESV)** — **11** After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” **12** The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” **13** Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. **14** Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died,

Jesus knew that his actions would result in Lazarus’s death, so why does he stay for two days longer? (hear this) **Because Jesus knew that Lazarus’ death was the most loving thing he could do for this family and the disciples.** Look at it in verse 15;

**John 11:15 (ESV)** — **15** and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

Jesus understood that the death of Lazarus was going to produce something so much greater than saving his life would produce. It would cause a greater degree of belief in the ability of Jesus the Son.

**Jesus knows that death is the most loving thing he can offer his followers.**

Which seems very bizarre to us, almost unsettling. If Jesus loves Lazarus so much then why does he let him continue to suffer and inevitably pass away. If Jesus loves him why doesn't he just heal him? This is the question we see posed in verse 37; "*But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"*" (John 11:37, ESV)

And isn't this where we all are? Doesn't this mindset pervade all of our thoughts and actions? **Don't we often put a premium on our comfort and deliverance and therefore question God when something bad happens to us?** Don't we also say with these Jews, if Jesus loves me so much why doesn't he just deliver me from my pain and suffering?

And it is here where we begin to see how God desires to change our minds and even our desires concerning death. What if death isn't ultimate? What if, and this going to sound strange, but what if suffering and death is the means to life? What if your very suffering was the thing that God was using to reveal his greatest glory to you?

**(slide) You see, sometimes death is loving because death is never ultimate.**

That is the second thing we learn about death in this passage; death is never ultimate, for any of us.

## **2. Never is Death Ultimate**

This is what Jesus tells us here in verse 4;

**John 11:4 (ESV) — 4** But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death..."

Jesus says this illness does not lead to death. That is an important statement and if we rush over it we may miss what it is telling us this morning. The "to" in, "does not lead to death", is a preposition of direction or end. Meaning that the illness does not end in death, or rather **that death is not the end goal of such an illness. What Jesus is saying here is that death is a means to an end.** Death is not an end in and of itself. Now, *the path may lead through death, but it does not lead to death.* Or to say it a different way, **death in this passage is a road to something greater.**

This is exactly what Jesus wants to teach us here in this passage. (read) *Your suffering is not an end, and if your thoughts and expectations terminate on your suffering then you will miss the whole point of your suffering. That is to say, (slide) if you obsess over what is happening to you, you won't see what God is doing for you. Your mind must travel beyond your suffering to the ultimate destination of God's glory. Your suffering, and even your death, is a pit stop to the ultimate destination, and the ultimate destination is finding your greatest joy and delight in God.*

Illustration: My family loves to go to the shore. We particularly like the Carolinas. Not only do they have beautiful beaches but they also have a ton of history. And so, from time to time we load up in the van and take a vacation to North or South Carolina. Because it is such a long trip we usually have to stop, at least once, to go to the bathroom. And every once in a while we are forced to stop at one of those rest areas.

Now I am sure you have all experienced a rest area. And I am not talking about one of those nice service plazas that has a Burger King and Starbucks in it. I am talking about those places that only have vending machines and bathrooms. (You know the place) Those places are never enjoyable. **They are often downright dismal.** The lights are always fluorescent and flickering. The toilets are never clean. **Often those pit stops are straight up scary.** Now, how silly would it be for us to camp out at the pit stop as if it were our final destination. **We endure the pit stop because we know we are headed for more glorious shores.**

This is what Jesus is telling us here, (listen carefully) (slide) **suffering does not lead to death, it leads through death to more glorious shores.**

**For the believer, death is always loving, because death is never ultimate.** If death isn't ultimate than what is?

What are the glorious shores we are anticipating? Where does the death of Lazarus find it's ultimate purpose and destination. It leads to the glory of Jesus Christ. **Christ is always glorified in our death.**

Third truth we learn this morning about death;

### **3. Always Christ is Glorified**

We see this at the end of verse 4;

**John 11:4 (ESV) — 4** But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Once again paying close attention to the grammar of this statement is important. What is Jesus saying here? Look at it again;

“...It (that is both the illness and the death) is for (preposition of advantage, which shows that we gain some advantage in death) the glory of God (suffering gains us the advantage of seeing the glory of God in some way that we wouldn't if we didn't have suffering), so that (purpose clause, the purpose or end goal of our suffering is) the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Now if you got lost in all that hear this; what Jesus is helping us see in this passage is **that (slide) suffering is to our advantage because in it we SEE and EXPERIENCE the glory of God in a way we can't without it.**

Let me see if I can break that statement down into two sub-points;

First sub-point; we see the glory of Christ in death.

#### **a. Death is loving because it leads us to Exalt in Christ.**

This is the point that John wants to impress upon us this morning, **suffering (death to self, which is what suffering is) is the means by which we attain the resurrection and come to infinitely see and appreciate God's glory in Jesus Christ.**

**In death Jesus Christ is glorified.**

What do I mean by that? What do I mean that in death Christ is glorified?

When Jesus says here, at the end of verse 4, that Lazarus' death is for the glory of God and so that the Son of God may be glorified I think he means the same thing by those terms, glory and glorify as he does when he uses it in John 1:14; **(turn there)**

**John 1:14 (ESV) — 14** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have **seen his glory, glory** as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John's desire in this gospel is that we *see* or *witness* the glory of God with our eyes but more importantly with our hearts. He wants us to behold the person and work of Christ in all of it's splendor and take our greatest delight in it. **And throughout this gospel we see Jesus' ability magnified in sin and suffering.**

What do I mean by that, I mean that *without the illness of the official's son, or the paralysis of the invalid, or the starvation of the multitude, or the darkness of the man born blind, Jesus would never be seen as gloriously able to overcome illness, or paralysis, or starvation, or darkness or in our passage death.* In the absence of suffering, there is no need for a Savior.

**God is glorified in our suffering by using our suffering to exalt the infinite ability of Jesus Christ in overcoming our suffering.**

Jesus' glory has been revealed through the miraculous acts that he has performed. It is not as if these acts give him glory but rather they reveal his glory. They reveal his infinite ability to overcome physical limitations. And he is able to overcome the physical because he is physically superior. He exercises all authority over the physical and he proves this by overcoming physical disability. **And that ability is put on display when he overcomes our suffering.**

And as we have seen his ability to overcome physical disability is pointing us to his ability to overcome spiritual disability. So we see **God's glorious nature** as it is **demonstrated in Jesus' ability** to do the miraculous, even overcome our spiritual death.

The purpose of our spiritual death is so that when we look back on the salvation experience we can glory in God's ability in a way that we wouldn't be able to if it wasn't for our spiritual death.

(read) This is nowhere greater seen than in the resurrection of Lazarus, where we see the glorious ability of Jesus Christ demonstrated in overcoming death. And so it is almost as if death is a necessary component, at least on man's part, to be able to experience and witness Jesus' ability because his glory is seen by a fallen creation, at least in part, by him overcoming death.

(read) And it is certainly the case that we have the greatest appreciation of Jesus' ability in overcoming death because death affects us so drastically and personally. **Death is our greatest enemies**, because it devastates us so thoroughly, and so when Jesus defeats death he becomes our greatest victor and we appreciate him all the more for it, or rather we glory in his ability with a greater degree of delight and satisfaction.

Let me ask you this, do you take more delight in the doctor that gives you medicine for a common cold, or one who cures you of stage 4 cancer. You love and appreciate the one who has delivered you from the greater prognosis. I think this is the same thing here. **Jesus is glorified, or seen as most glorious when he delivers us from death because death is our greatest defeat.**

But death does not defeat Jesus. Death is not the end in the gospel story, it is a means to an end, because Jesus overcomes death by resurrection. And so it is through death that we experience the power of Christ all the more.

Second sub-point; we **experience** the glory of Christ in death.

#### **b. Death is Loving because it leads us to Experience Christ**

We know that death is not the end of Lazarus' sickness because we know how the story ends. We know that Lazarus' death leads to his resurrection. That Lazarus, and the people who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus, **experienced** Jesus' glorious ability in a way that they wouldn't have if Lazarus would not have died. **Lazarus had the power of resurrection pulsing through his veins as he lie dead in the tomb.** And it was in death where he experienced Christ in a way he didn't in life.

That means, that just like Lazarus, death is the means by which we experience the power of Christ.

Listen to the Apostle Paul in Phil. 3:10-11;

**(slide) Philippians 3:10–11 (ESV) — 10** that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul is telling us that the means to the resurrection is always through death. Which is why he says in Phil. 1:21;

**Philippians 1:21 (ESV) — 21** For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

He knew that death brought about the experience of Jesus Christ in his resurrection therefore it was gain.

***For the believer, death is always loving because death leads us to experience the glory of Christ as he overcomes death on our behalf.*** His salvation becomes personal because Jesus does for us what we could never do for ourselves. He delivers us from our hopeless situation. He rescues us from our death and suffering. And this isn't just a future promise. It is available to you now!

How does he deliver us now?

First through belief. Unfortunately, when we are in the midst of suffering we do not have the benefit of hindsight. What I mean is that we don't often have the advantage of looking back on our suffering and seeing how much greater we understand God's glory through it. It is only till we look back that we can see that suffering was for our benefit. So, what God is calling us to here is to *experience* Christ by faith in the *midst* of suffering knowing that suffering and death is not our end but a means to the seeing and reveling in the glory that belongs only to God.

When you are in midst of pain, or when you are facing inevitable death, Jesus wants you to always remember, which is an experience of grace, that on the other side of this grueling hill is the beautiful vista of Christ's glory. So be confident of it, embrace it, submit to it, and live by it.

Secondly, he delivers us now by **reflecting** and **meditating** on our salvation experience. (all present active verbs are highlighted to show how we experience Christ in the present)

Remember I said, the purpose of our spiritual death is so that when we look back on the salvation experience we can **glory** (presently) in God's ability in a way that we wouldn't be able to if it wasn't for our spiritual death.

What do I mean by this? I mean that the gospels are written in hindsight. They are written for us to enjoy after God has done the miraculous in our own hearts and minds.<sup>1</sup> And so, John highlights the depths of our death and depravity so that we might celebrate even greater the work that Jesus did in order to save us. When we see, from John's gospel, that we were terminally ill (official's son), that we were languishing in our disability (man at the pool of Bethesda), that we were hungry beyond our means (feeding the 5,000) that we were blind from birth (the healing of the man born blind) and that we were completely dead (raising of Lazarus) then we see the ability of Christ as it is truly meant to be seen, as infinitely and eternally glorious. This should **feed** our faith not only in what Christ did but what he can continue to do.

We look back on our salvation experience and we declare that Christ is most glorious in his sovereign ability to save. And this **strengthens** (presently) our resolve to believe in Christ's ability in a fresh way this morning, and tomorrow and a week from now.

If Christ was able to deliver me from that impossible situation, he certainly can deliver me from my current circumstances. And he does. And even if that isn't physical relief, my spirit can soar because I know that physical suffering isn't my final destiny. Suffering and death **heightens** my **experience** of Jesus because it **always keeps my mind centered** (presently) on that which is ultimate, namely Jesus.

**Hebrews 12:2 (ESV)** — 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Joy in God's presence was Jesus' ultimate end and he knew to get to that end he must go down the road of suffering and death. Jesus arms us with the same mindset. And every time we **think** or **meditate** on our ultimate destination we experience the power of Christ's resurrection in the

present because our ultimate destiny is the resurrection life of Jesus. If my mind is thrust to **think** of heavenly things then my heart is **encouraged** (presently) by Christ because that is where Christ is, seated in the heavens (Col. 3:1-4). (slide) **Nothing forces me more to dwell on Christ than suffering.**

If you close your eyes and imagine that vacation at the sea, it is as if you experience that vacation all over again. The sounds of the waves crashing, the feeling of the ocean air on your face, the smell of salt water. **When suffering forces our eyes close, we think of heaven's shores, where Jesus is, and we experience the power of his resurrection over and over again.**

Paul helps us here again;

(slide) **Philippians 3:8 (ESV) — 8** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

It was in the loss of things that forced Paul to dwell, in contrast, on all that he had in Christ. When I lose money, I am forced to dwell on my heavenly riches in Christ. When my body fails me, I am forced to dwell on my resurrected body given by Christ. When my family turns on me, I am forced to dwell on my heavenly family in Christ. **In suffering, Christ becomes the center of my hopes and dreams and I experience him in the present as I will one day experience him for all eternity.**

The fight of faith is to embrace, not hate, the very things sent into our lives to drive us to him, namely suffering and death. It is only through our death and the loss of everything that we gain Christ--our great reward and the dearest One to our hearts.

So in closing,

John gives us this story to strengthen our reliance on Jesus in the present and the future. That we might exercise faith in grace now, and in every moment forward. John wants to strengthen the belief of those who have not witnessed these events first hand but are reading about them throughout his gospel.

He wants us to continue in our trust of Jesus by reading about the resurrection of Lazarus, today, tomorrow and the next day. Because it is in this story where our hope lies. This is our hope; death is loving because death is not our final destination, it leads us to where Christ is and in his presence, there is fullness of joy.

**May we boldly declare with Thomas at the end of this passage;**

**John 11:16 (ESV) — 16** ...“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

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<sup>i</sup> Remember this is the purpose of the whole book. John says in 20:30-31;

**John 20:30–31 (ESV) — 30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; **31** but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

John says these are written so that you may believe... Who is the “you” here. He identifies the you in the previous verse...

**John 20:28–29 (ESV) — 28** Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” **29** Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Both believe and believing are written in the present tense. John’s desire for this book is primarily to strengthen the faith of believers. To re-inforce their confidence in Jesus’ ability to save. And I think no where is our faith strengthened greater than in understanding that Jesus has the power over death. That he uses death in order to draw us into a greater appreciation of his ability, as we see again and again Jesus deliver us from its power.

In verse 31 there is a textual variant that has caused a little bit of confusion for scholars. The confusion has to do with the purpose for John writing, so I think it serves us here to speak about it in short detail. The textual variant is found in the word pistuete or to believe.

In some manuscripts this word is found in the present tense and in others it is found in the aorist. This may not seem like a significant difference for us but for the commentators it completely changes what John is trying to accomplish in writing his gospel. If we believe that the present tense is what was intended by the evangelist then his aim is more to strengthen believers then it is to bring them into initial saving faith. **A present tense subjunctive would show a belief that doesn’t stop at any point but that continues indefinitely. It is an ongoing process. John would be saying then I write these things so that you might continue in your belief or that your belief might be strengthened and confirmed.**

If the aorist is to be taken then it would seem like John is not looking at the belief as a continuing action but a point in time event. His desire would then be that they would come to a point in reading that the event of belief and conversion would happen. **In this view John’s purpose isn’t confirmatory but evangelistic.** John is trying to prove who Jesus is and in proving it those who read would accept and embrace it. D.A. Carson takes a firm stance that what John intended was the aorist and not the present. His belief is that John’s primary purpose in writing his gospel was to win people to faith.

In my opinion, not that I would ever try to argue with Don Carson concerning his position, John’s intention in the original autographs was for this subjunctive to be in the present, seeing that the oldest manuscripts tend to favor the present. But I don’t think this takes away from Carson’s position that John intends for his book to be evangelistic. **I think what John has in mind here is both a coming to faith and a strengthening in our faith.**

**Why do I believe this? Because it is the gospel which does both! The truth of Jesus doesn’t bring a person to faith and then cast him upon some other means to continue on in that faith. It does both! As we read the gospels we are convinced, either for the 100<sup>th</sup> time or afresh, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.**

And so although I think that John’s primary purpose is to prove and defend that the Messiah is Jesus, I am also convinced that the preaching of the content of this book can strengthen our faith as we consider Jesus and his ministry everyday as believers. **It is both evangelistic and encouraging.** I believe the present tense does this.