

## **John on Jesus - How Christ Gets Glory Through Cancer and Death**

**April 21, 2013**

Turn to John 11. That is page 897 in your pew Bible.

While you are finding your place in the Bible, let me tell you about our text. In the Gospel of John, John gives seven miracles that he calls signs. Signs point to something. They give us direction. They label things so we know what they are. Like signs on the highway that tell us where we are and which way to turn, John chose seven of Jesus' miracles as signs that point us to the truth about Jesus. These signs lead us to the unmistakable conclusion that Jesus is God in the flesh who came and died for us.

While these signs are in chronological order, they are also in ascending order of greatness. The first miracle was smaller and hidden. It was the changing of water to wine at a wedding to keep the celebration rolling. Jesus' final miracle was public and significant. It involved raising a man named Lazarus from the dead. While all of Jesus' miracles were impressive events, the one we will look at this morning was extremely impressive. The only way to top this particular miracle would be Jesus himself dying and raising himself from the dead, which is exactly what will happen before we get to the end of the book.

### **Background --- Jesus' relationship with Martha, Mary and Lazarus**

Jesus was a traveling evangelist. While he had 12 disciples, he didn't have a home office, phone number or fax machine. He traveled. For whatever reason, when in and around the city of Jerusalem, Jesus hung out with this very ordinary family of two sisters named Mary and Martha, plus their brother,

Lazarus. They only lived two miles outside of Jerusalem. Jesus used their house as a bed and breakfast when staying in the area. As we learned in this Gospel, Jesus traveled to Jerusalem numerous times for the various feasts of the Jews. I can only assume he hung out at the M, M & L Bed n' Breakfast frequently.

There are a number of indications in the text that Martha, Mary and Lazarus were well-off financially. They loved using their resources, and their home, to show hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. Staying at their home, Jesus grew close with these women and their brother. He knew them well enough that I imagine he felt comfortable putting his feet on their coffee table.

Last week, when we finished John 10, Jesus was at the Feast of Dedication, also known as Hanukkah. It was the Jewish holiday where they remembered how God saved them through their heroes. During that feast, the Jews were pressing Jesus to say something public about his true identity. Jesus gave them a quote that left their ears ringing. "I and the Father are one." Jesus claimed to be one with God the Father. As a result, the Jews put him on their hit list and made plans to bump him off for blasphemy. They were blind to what the miracles were showing them about Jesus' true identity. They saw him as a mere man claiming to be God.

After that public statement, Jesus and his posse of disciples escaped to the other side of the Jordan River where they evaded the Jews who wanted to kill them. The opposite side of the Jordan, where Jesus was doing ministry, was a safe zone. Jesus and the disciples were popular and protected. While there,

Jesus received an ancient version of a text message from Mary and Martha. “Lord, the one you love is ill. “Come back to Jerusalem and save him.” That brings us to John 11, where we find ourselves this morning. In the beginning of this chapter, we find that life unfolded in many unexpected ways and Jesus did a number of unexpected things for those he loved. The unexpected things that happened then are still happening now. We should expect these strange twists of God’s love in our lives today. This morning, we will only look at two of them.

### **How does Jesus show love to us in ways we wouldn’t expect?**

#### **We get sick.**

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

I have been at the bedsides of people who are committed to Christ but the doctor told them they have a tumor. They have cancer. People Jesus loves get sick. We ask the question of God, “Why? God, if you loved me, why are you allowing me to get sick? I can think of plenty of people who deserve to get sick more than me. I always thought that if God loved me, he would keep me healthy and strong.” Why do people Jesus loves get sick? In these verses, we find part of the answer.

The reason Lazarus was sick was for the glory of God. This is similar to what we found in John 9 with the man born blind. People asked Jesus why he was born blind. Was it because of his parents’ sins or his sins that he was born without sight? Jesus said he was born blind not because of his or his parents

sins. He was born blind for God's glory. The blind man's blindness and Lazarus' sickness were both for the same reason. God planned to bring glory to himself through their sicknesses. That is why they suffered. As children of God, when we get sick, when we are diagnosed with cancer, many times, it may not be on account of our sins, rather, the sickness is allowed into our lives by God as the platform he has chosen for us to have for us to bring glory to him.

**The purposes of God for our sickness and suffering are more complex than we can understand.**

In John 9, the Jews had a very simplistic understanding of sickness that many of us still have today. When we see sickness and suffering, we associate it with sin. When we see blessing, we associate it with a God-honoring life. That may be generally true, but that isn't always true. Many times God's purposes and ways are far beyond our understanding. Many times Christians suffer for no apparent sin. As Christians, we do not know why God allows a particular adversity or sickness, such as cancer, into our lives. We cannot discern where God is going with our suffering. The one thing we can rest in is that God loves us and he promises he will use our sicknesses to bring glory to his name.

Pastor Leland and I were talking one morning about this. I love the way he articulated this principle. He said, "The purposes of God are as many and interweaving as the threads of our shirt." What a great picture! God uses things in ways we never anticipated. Many more things are happening for God's glory through our suffering than we could ever imagine. He will bring glory to himself though our sicknesses in ways we never expect.

## **We don't know how our story will end.**

One of the reasons we have such a hard time understanding how this works is because of the Bible. In the Bible, Bible stories always have a conclusion. For instance, in John 11, we can read the rest of his story and find how God planned to glorify his name through Lazarus' life. Our stories are different. God is still in the process of writing our story. We can't stay up late reading ahead to find our conclusion and read about the grand finish God planned for our lives. We need to live it. Until we live it, we can't know how the story ends.

When facing sickness or heartbreak or cancer, don't let yourself lose hope even though the situation looks hopeless. God allows sickness and tragedy into the lives of those he loves as a platform for him to display his glory through them. *God promises to bring glory to his name through our lives.* We know how our story will end, with Christ being glorified. Right now, in the middle of our story, many times it is hard to imagine how God can pull off a God-glorifying finish to our lives because many of the situations we face look so hopeless.

God is a good writer. He is like Aslan, when Aslan says to Lucy in the movie Prince Caspian, "Things never happen the same way twice." God always has new and unexpected way to redeem sickness and tragedy so that unexpectedly, God is glorified in the end. God will bring glory to himself through our sickness and suffering in unpredictable and unimaginable ways. That is guaranteed.

Let me give you an illustration.

## Cindy's story

Some of you know my wife's story. About seven years ago, before we came to Iowa, she began getting very tired and developing black streaks under her fingernails. Soon, the tips on two of her fingers began to darken. She spent most of her day exhausted in bed. She couldn't walk up a half flight of stairs without becoming exhausted. The blackness on her fingers turned to rot as the flesh on two of her fingers grew black. The constant pain was a source of agony as the flesh rotted to down to the bone. The black rot continued down her fingers and was bordering entering her hands. As a father with three little kids running around the house, it was a tough time to have Mom so sick. I kept asking God, "Why? Why our family? Why Cindy?" My kids need their mother. I am trying to serve God as a pastor and now tragedy."

After a number of trips to specialists, they determined she has an autoimmune disease called lupus. I still remember when the doctor talked about amputating two of Cindy's fingers and and discussed the possibility of the disease affecting her internal organs and the possibility of death. We shed plenty of tears. At church, we prayed for her and anointed her with oil during worship.

Then an amazing thing happened. A month later at the specialist, when the doctor was making final plans and setting the date for the amputation of two of her fingers, the doctor remeasured the depth of the black-rotten flesh on her fingers. She looked away, blinked her eyes, and rechecked her ruler. The flesh was growing back. She had us return two weeks later where she measured again to find more flesh regrew up Cindy's fingers. In the next few months the

flesh regrew on all of her fingers. I still remember the doctor looking at Cindy in disbelief. She has no explanation why the lupus went into remission. She had never seen the flesh regrow on fingers after it was rotted to the bone. We kept telling her that it was because God answered our prayers.

I can tell you that going through that sickness changed our lives. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't thank God for my wife and give him the glory. Cindy is a walking miracle and the doctors have no explanation for her healing. I know there isn't a day that goes by when Cindy doesn't thank God for the gift of life. Those kind of sicknesses change you. God uses them to soften you. He uses them to rest your internal compass so every morning you wake up giving God glory for another unexpected day of health and strength. God used that sickness to bring glory to himself by Cindy's unexplained healing. God also brought glory to his name by drawing us closer to him in those days so we came to know Christ in a way we had never experienced before.

I know, for some of you, God has used sickness to bring glory to himself because he used it to draw you to him and transform your life. Others of you lost a job, and God brought glory to himself through that loss. That job loss taught you to depend on God more than yourself. Others of you had a spouse leave you. God used that brokenness to soften your heart toward him, and in so doing, his name is now glorified through your life.

When we are going through sickness and suffering, we often can't imagine how God will write unexpected twists into the plots of our stories to bring glory to

his name, we just know we will bring glory to his name through our sickness and suffering. That, he promises.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

What about those who get sick and suffer but they don't have a story of being restored? What about those who die? How does God bring glory to himself through that? Stick with me, John 11 has an answer.

**He put us in seemingly hopeless situations.**

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. John 11:5-6 (ESV)

I underlined this verse in my Bible. I recommend you underline it in yours. Since Jesus loved them, he didn't come running to Lazarus' rescue. He intentionally delayed. After following Christ for a number of years, you discover this principle. While God's time is always perfect, on our clocks, he appears to be running late every time. Mary and Martha were telling Jesus to hurry and save Lazarus before he died. Jesus' perfect timing was different. He wanted to wait until Lazarus dead and all hope was gone. That is Jesus' perfect time to show up, when all hope is gone.

Think about this in Scripture. It is a common theme. How many years did God make Abraham and Sarah wait to have a child? Sixty? Seventy? The Bible says he made them wait until their bodies were as good as dead, almost 100 years old, before Sarah conceived.

This seems to be the way God works. He waits until all hope is gone, and we can relying on nothing but him before he comes to the rescue. Why does he do that?

Here is the deal. *God is not so much interested in answering our prayers as he is in building our faith.* He loves to wait until we are desperate for rescue. That way, there is no doubt in our mind when we are rescued that it was God who saved us, not our own ingenuity. That way, God gets all the glory instead of us. That way, our faith is built. We learn that no matter how overwhelming the circumstances, God can be trusted. God loves to give us overwhelming and hopeless circumstances. That way, when he comes to the rescue, he gets all the glory, and we get a great story to tell others about how much God loves us.

This means that as we move forward with the Spencer campus, I expect we will face financial and leadership challenges, some that might appear to be enough to sink us. Why will God let us go through them? To give us a story about how he saved us in our time of need. The story has to be that Jesus is the hero who planted a campus in Spencer. That story cannot be that we are so smart that we did this. God has to get the glory, not us.

Bank on this. *God's goal for your life is to not just answer your prayers but to build your faith.* To get there, we must face overwhelming opposition.

Because God loves us, he allows us to get sick. Because God loves us, he lets us continually face adversity until all hope is gone so we are forced to rely on him as the only hope for our rescue.

What about times when it appears, God failed? What about times when there is no miraculous recovery? What about times when God puts us in hopeless situations and he doesn't rescue but a child he loves dies? How does God bring glory to himself through that? Let's find out.

### **How does God bring glory to himself through death?**

In this next section we meet Mary and Martha. You need to know their temperaments to understand this part of the story. They were sisters, but they were opposites. Martha, probably the older sister, was cognitive. She was the thinker. She was pragmatic. She was tactile. She was the great organizer for the family vacation and made plenty of lists. We met Mary and Martha in Luke 10; Martha was acting like Martha Stewart, chopping vegetables in the kitchen, while Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, gazing into his eyes.

While Martha was cognitive and practical, Mary was the exact opposite. She was a very emotionally-driven woman. She wasn't one known to think about things as much as she felt things. She experienced the world on an emotional level. She cried a lot and loved passionately.

Jesus interacted with both of these woman about the death of Lazarus in a way that spoke the languages of their hearts. This is very important. This morning, some of us are more like Martha. We are the thinkers. We don't cry. We could organize an army for a march through the desert. Jesus teaches us what we need to know about death through Martha. Others of us are like Mary. We feel the world. Our hearts can be on top of a mountain one moment or down in the dumps the next. For the emotional among us, we see how Jesus feels

about death when we look at how Jesus interacted with Mary. Let's see how Jesus worked with these women.

### **Martha --- Jesus wants us to know he is our hope in the face of death.**

Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." John 11:17-27 (ESV)

When news came to town that Jesus was near, Martha, the action-orientated thinker, ran out to meet him. I love the way she began,. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died." Those were her emotions speaking. Then she followed it with her thoughts, because she was a thinker. "Even now, I know that whatever you ask from God he will give you." You can see the conflict between what she felt in her heart and what she knew in her head.

Then Jesus engaged her mind, "Your brother will rise again." She said, "I know he will rise again on the last day." In that day, there was a big debate over life after death. One group, called the Sadducees, were sad-you-see because they thought that when you died, you just died and ceased to exist. The other group, called the Pharisees, argued against that. They looked at clear texts, like Daniel 12:2, that don't just talk about life after death but a resurrection of the

body after it dies. They believed that at the end of history God would raise all the dead bodies from their graves and reunite them with their souls. In church, we bust on the Pharisees for being out of touch with Jesus, but in this debate, they were spot on. Martha, the girl with the big brain, was in their camp on this one. She obviously went to AWANA as a kid because she knew her Bible.

Then, it got intense. Jesus reframed her thinking, and ours, about life after death.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” John 11:25–26 (ESV)

Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Resurrection means people long dead will have their bodies come out of the grave and come back to life. Souls will be reunited with dead bodies. Jesus said “the resurrection, at the end of time, that you are thinking about for your brother, is all tied up in me.” Jesus is the one who can and will bring dead people back to life at the end of time.

Not only that, Jesus described himself as “the life.” “Everyone who lives, and believes in me, shall never die.” Jesus said that everyone who is alive and trusts in Christ, when they die, they don’t die. They stay very much alive forever. When their bodies die, their spirit passes right into God’s presence in heaven. Closing their eyes in this world means opening their eyes to see Jesus. At the end of time, Jesus will resurrect their bodies and reunite them with their spirit. Jesus is the source of all the life we see. If we believe in him, we will never die.

This also explains why Jesus is the only way to God. If Jesus is the source of all life on this planet, rejecting Jesus is rejecting life.

Martha, the cognitive one, said to Jesus, “Yes, I believe you are the Christ.” This was her confession of faith. Here was Martha becoming a Christian, or should we say, going public with Jesus.

**Mary --- Jesus feels the pain of death like I do.**

Now the scene shifts from the thinkers to the feelers. It looks at Mary.

When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” John 11:28–37 (ESV)

You can see Mary was an emotional woman. There’s nothing wrong with that. It was the way God made her. For instance, she rose, without explanation or communication, and ran out of the house leaving everybody clueless about what she was doing. They could only assume she was running to the grave to weep there. Apparently, four days after the funeral, she was still crying. This was an emotional woman.

When Mary got to Jesus, what did she do? She fell at his feet. She was heart-broken. The tears were flowing down her cheeks. We didn’t see that with Martha. How did Jesus respond to Mary? He didn’t quote theology to her like he did to Martha, he let Mary know how he felt about death. Jesus isn’t cold, clinical and informative. This is very important. It says Jesus was deeply moved in his

spirit and greatly troubled. The word for trouble here is irate. Jesus, the one who created the universe, was angry at death. He was not mildly annoyed, he was torqued. He was angry at how death tears the flesh out of people's hearts when they lose someone they love. He was livid at how death tears apart family.

The best way I can describe what Jesus was feeling is for you to imagine the emotions that go through a parents heart when they discover their child was abused and mistreated by another adult. Can you imagine the anger a parent must experience in that moment? That is the feeling Jesus had about what death has done to Lazarus and the sisters that loved him.

Jesus came to the grave and he wept. The word for weep here is interesting. It means tears ran down Jesus' face. Jesus wasn't just angry, he was heartbroken and cried.

### **Jesus gets glory by displaying his power.**

Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." John 11:38-44 (ESV)

Jesus headed to the tomb. He was irate at what death does to people. I like the way John Calvin said this. He said, "Jesus approaches the tomb like a wrestler approaches a match." He was angry at death, and he was going after it.

Of course, Martha, the pragmatic one, pointed out that Jesus shouldn't take away the stone because Lazarus' body was four days old. He was rotting and it would stink. That is very important, but we will get to that detail later. Jesus then reminded her, "I promised you that if you would just believe, you would see the glory of God."

Then, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus came out alive. This is amazing. As I studied this passage, what stuck out to me was Martha's comment about the smell of Lazarus. I went online and did a little study on human decomposition after death and learned about a place called The Body Farm. This is a place they put dead human bodies to study how they decompose in different environments. That way, when police find a dead body in a crime scene, they can match the decomposition on the crime scene to the body farm. They can discover when the murder took place. By the way, I don't recommend you do that online study before a meal. It is gross.

I learned that after a body dies, it gets stiff and goes into a state of rigor mortis. Soon the body softens. In human body decomposition, there is a big difference between day three and four. By day four, the digestive enzymes of internal organs have burst into the body cavity. By the fourth day, the body is green and swollen with gases as the internal organs are significantly decomposed into a protein soup. I could give you many more details, but they are not appropriate for this morning. What struck me was what Lazarus' body looked like in that tomb after four days. We often think of Lazarus like the scene on "The

Bible” movie where he looked like somebody asleep. That isn’t the picture. The body was a putrified, swollen, greenish mass.

When Jesus healed the man born blind, Jesus flexed his creative power and created retinal tissue and optic nerves where they never existed. With Lazarus, Jesus recreated an entire body. He transformed a bloated, green, putrified body into something good as new!

Think about this. What brought more glory to Jesus? Healing a sick man or raising a green, putrified, rotting dead man? The dead man. Earlier, we asked how in the world God could ever bring glory to himself by allowing one of his children to get sick and have them die.

First, those who believe in Jesus never die. That is what he said to Martha. When Christians close their eyes in this life, they open them in the presence of Jesus. In addition, just as Jesus brought more glory to himself by not healing a sick person but raising from the dead a putrefying rotten corpse, imagine the glory that will be brought to Christ when he takes bodies that are not dead only four days but bodies that are dead 4,000 years and he resurrects them to life. Even better is the news that the body Christ will resurrect is not human being 1.0, it is the next version, 2.0. Our resurrection bodies will not be known for weakness and fatigue, like our current bodies, but they will be bodies the Bible describes as full of power and life.

That is what is coming. Even when we face sickness that leads to death, Jesus will bring glory to himself through our lives because he will resurrect our bodies. The greater the adversity against us, the more glory Christ gets when he

overcomes it for us, especially when there is absolutely nothing we could do to overcome it ourselves, like death. Not just four-hour death or four-day death but 4,000-year death transformed to life. Not just a good, old-fashioned body but an incorruptible body.

My friends, because God loves us, he will bring glory to himself through our lives. That means we will face adversity. We will face sickness. We will face trials that are beyond our ability to bear. We will face situations where the only hope of rescue is God. He puts us in those circumstances so when he does rescue us, he gets all the glory. It also means that apart from Christ's return we will all face death. Death will not win. Christ will achieve our greatest victory over our greatest adversary when he raises our bodies from the dead and makes them fully of power and eternally indestructible, even if our bodies were in the grave for 4,000 years.



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