

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
11:1-6

1. Now a certain *man* was sick, *named* Lazarus, of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. 2. It was *that* Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. 3. Therefore his sisters sent to him, saying, Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick. 4. When Jesus heard *that*, he said, This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified through it. 5. Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6. So, when he heard that he was sick, he stayed two more days in the same place where he was.

The raising of Lazarus, described in this chapter, is one of the most wonderful events recorded in the Gospels and demands more than ordinary attention. In no part of our Lord's history do we see Him so distinctly both man and God at the same time: man in sympathy, and God in power. Like each of the few incidents in our Lord's ministry related by St. John, it is placed before us with peculiar minuteness and particularity. The story is singularly rich in delicate, tender, and beautiful expressions. Before entering upon it, I venture to offer the following preliminary remarks.

(a) The raising of Lazarus was manifestly intended to supply the Jews with one more incontrovertible proof that Jesus was the Christ of God, the promised Messiah. In the tenth chapter, at the Feast of Dedication, our Lord had been asked, "If You are the Christ, tell us plainly" (John 10:24). In reply He had distinctly appealed to His "works" as the best evidence of His Messiahship. He had deliberately challenged attention to those works as witnesses to His commission. And now, after a short interval, we find Him for the last time within two miles of Jerusalem, before many eyewitnesses, doing such a stupendous work of Divine power that a man might have thought any skeptic would have been silenced forever. After the raising of Lazarus, the Jews of Jerusalem, at any rate, could never say that they were left destitute of proofs of Christ's Messiahship.

(b) The raising of Lazarus was meant to prepare the minds of the Jews for our Lord's own resurrection. It took place between Christmas and Easter, and probably within two months of His own crucifixion. It proved incontrovertibly that a person dead four days could be raised again by Divine power, and that the restoration to life of a corpse was not an impossibility with God. I think it impossible not to see in this a latent design to prepare the minds of the Jews for our Lord's own resurrection. At any rate, it paved the way for men believing the event to be not incredible. No one could say on Easter Sunday, when the grave of Jesus was found empty and the body of Jesus was gone, that His resurrection was an impossibility. The mere fact that between winter and Easter in that very year a man dead four days had been restored to life within two miles of Jerusalem, could silence such remarks. Though improbable, it could not be called impossible.

(c) The raising of Lazarus is of all our Lord's miracles the one which is

most thoroughly credible and supported by most incontrovertible evidence. The man who disbelieves it may as well say plainly that he does not believe anything in the New Testament and does not allow that a miracle is possible. Of course, there is no standing ground between denying the possibility of miracles and denying the existence of a creating God. If God made the world, He can surely change the course of nature at any time, if He thinks fit.

The famous skeptic, Spinoza, declared that if he could be persuaded of the truth of the miracle before us, he would forsake his own system and embrace Christianity. Yet it is extremely difficult to see what evidence of a fact a man can desire if he is not satisfied with the evidence that Lazarus really was raised from the dead. But, unhappily, none are so blind as those who will not see.

The following passage from Tittman, the German Commentator, is so sensible that I make no apology for giving it at length, though somewhat condensed. "The whole story," he says, "is of a nature calculated to exclude all suspicion of imposture and to confirm the truth of the miracle. A well-known person of Bethany, named Lazarus, falls sick in the absence of Jesus. His sisters send a message to Jesus announcing it; but while He is yet absent Lazarus dies, is buried, and kept in the tomb for four days, during which Jesus is still absent. Martha, Mary, and all his friends are convinced of his death. Our Lord, while yet remaining in the place where He had been staying, tells His disciples in plain terms that He means to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead, that the glory of God may be illustrated and their faith confirmed. At our Lord's approach, Martha goes to meet Him and announces her brother's death, laments the absence of Jesus before the event took place, and yet expresses a faint hope that by some means Jesus might yet render help. Our Lord declares that her brother shall be raised again and assures her that He has the power of granting life to the dead. Mary approaches, accompanied by weeping friends from Jerusalem. Our Lord Himself is moved, and weeps, and goes to the sepulchre attended by a crowd. The stone is removed. The stench of the corpse is perceived. Our Lord, after pouring forth audible prayer to His Father, calls forth Lazarus from the grave in the hearing of all. The dead man obeys the call, comes forth to public view in the same dress that he was buried in, alive and well, and returns home without assistance. All persons present agree that Lazarus is raised to life and that a great miracle has been worked, though not all believe the person who worked it to be the Messiah. Some go away and tell the rulers at Jerusalem what Jesus has done. Even these do not doubt the truth of the fact. On the contrary, they confess that our Lord by His works is becoming every day more famous, and that He would probably be soon received as Messiah by the whole nation. And *therefore* the rulers at once take counsel how they may put to death both Jesus and Lazarus. The people, in the mean time, hearing of this prodigious transaction, flock in multitudes to Bethany, partly to see Jesus and partly to view Lazarus. And the consequence is that, by and by, when our Lord comes to Jerusalem, the population goes forth in crowds to meet Him and show Him honor, and chiefly because of His work at Bethany. Now if all these circumstances do not establish the truth of the miracle, there is no truth in history." I only add the remark that when we consider the place, the time, the circumstances, and the singular publicity of the

raising of Lazarus, it really seems to require more credulity to deny it than to believe it. It is the unbeliever, and not the believer, of this miracle who seems to me the credulous man. The difficulties of disbelieving it are far greater than those of believing it.

(d) The raising of Lazarus is not mentioned by Matthew, Mark, or Luke. This has stumbled many persons. Yet the omission of the story is not hard to explain. Some have said that Matthew, Mark, and Luke purposely confine themselves to miracles done in Galilee. Some have said that when they wrote their Gospels Lazarus was yet alive, and the mention of his name would have endangered his safety. Some have said that it was thought better for the soul of Lazarus not to draw attention to him and surround him with an unhealthy celebrity till after he had left the world. In each and all of these reasons there is some weight. But the best and simplest explanation probably is that each Evangelist was inspired to record what God saw to be best and most suitable. No one, I suppose, imagines that the Evangelists record a tenth part of our Lord's miracles, or that there were not other dead persons raised to life of whom we know nothing at all. "The dead are raised up" was our Lord's own message, at an early period of His ministry, to John the Baptist (Matt. 11:5). "If the works that Jesus did should be written every one," says John, "the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" (John 21:25). Let it suffice us to believe that each Evangelist was inspired to record exactly those events which were most likely to be profitable for the Church in studying his Gospel. Our Lord's ministry and sayings at Jerusalem were specially assigned to John. What wonder, then, that he was appointed to record the mighty miracle which took place within two miles of Jerusalem and proved incontrovertibly the guilt of the Jerusalem Jews in not receiving Jesus as the Messiah?

Bucer remarks that there is a continually ascending greatness and splendor in those miracles which John was inspired to record in his Gospel, and that the raising of Lazarus was the most illustrious of all. He also observes that our Lord specially chose the great feasts at Jerusalem as occasions of working miracles.

Chemnitius remarks: "There is not in the whole Evangelical narrative a more delightful history, and one more abundant both in doctrine and consolation, than this of the raising of Lazarus. It therefore ought to be studied most closely and minutely by all pious minds.

1.--[*Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus.*] These simple words are the keynote to the whole chapter. All turns on the bodily illness of an obscure disciple of Christ. How much in the history of our lives hinges on little events, and especially on illnesses! Sickness is a sacred thing and one of God's great ordinances.

This illness took place between winter and Easter during the time that our Lord was at Bethabara, beyond Jordan. The nature of the disease we are not told, but from its rapid course, it is not unlikely that it was a fever, such as is common even now in Palestine.

This is the first time that Lazarus is mentioned in the New Testament, and

we know nothing certain of his history. Some have conjectured that he was the young ruler who came to our Lord asking what he must do to obtain eternal life, and went away sorrowful at the time but was afterwards converted. Some have conjectured that he is the young man who followed our Lord when he was taken prisoner, mentioned by St. Mark, and fled away naked. But these are mere guesses, and there is really no solid foundation for them. That he was not a poor man, but comparatively rich, seems highly probable from the "feast" in John 12, the number of friends who came to mourn him, the alabaster box of precious ointment used by his sister, and the sepulchre hewn out of rock. But even this is only a conjecture.

The name "Lazarus," no doubt, is a Greek form of the Hebrew name "Eleazar." It is worth noticing that it survives to this day in the modern name of Bethany: "El-Azarizeh." (See *Smith's Biblical Dictionary*.)

[*Of Bethany, etc.*] The word "town" in this sentence would have been better translated "village" as it is in sixteen other texts in the New Testament. Bethany, in truth, was only a small village a short two miles from Jerusalem on the east side, and its situation is perfectly known now. It lies on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, on the road to Jericho. It is not once mentioned in the Old Testament and owes its fame to its being the place where Lazarus was raised, the place where our Lord rested at night just before the passion, the place from which He commenced His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the place from which He finally ascended into heaven (Luke 24:10), and the dwelling-place of Mary and Martha.

Let it be noted that the presence of God's elect children is the one thing which makes towns and countries famous in God's sight. The village of Martha and Mary is noticed, while Memphis and Thebes are not named in the New Testament. A cottage where there is grace is more pleasant in God's sight than a cathedral town where there is none.

Let it be noted that this verse supplies internal evidence that St. John's Gospel was written long after the other historical parts of the New Testament. He speaks of Martha and Mary as persons whose names and history would be familiar to all Christian readers.

There is a peculiarity in the Greek of this verse which is hardly conveyed in our English translation. Literally it would be rendered, "Lazarus *from* Bethany, *out of* the town of Mary," etc. That "from" Bethany means exactly what we render it, is clear from Acts 17:13 and Heb. 13:24. But why "out of the village, or town of Mary" is said, is not quite so clear. It is open to the conjecture that it may mean "Lazarus was now a man of Bethany, but was originally out of the town of Mary and Martha:" viz., some other place. But this seems unlikely. Webster suggests that "out of" is added by way of emphasis to show that Lazarus not only lived there, but that it was also the place of his nativity. Greswell says much the same. It is noteworthy that John 1:44 contains exactly the same form of expression about Philip and Bethsaida.

It is noteworthy that Mary is named before Martha, though Martha was evidently the older sister and head of the house. The reason, I suppose, is that Mary's name and character were better known of the two.

Chemnitius thinks it possible that all Bethany belonged to Martha and Mary, and that this accounts for the consideration in which they were held and the number of mourners, etc. It is worth remembering that Bethany was a very small place. Yet Bethsaida was called the "town of Andrew and Peter" (John 1:44) and clearly did not belong to two poor fishermen.

2.--[*It was that Mary, etc.*] This verse is a parenthetical explanation inserted by St. John, after his manner, to make it certain what Mary he refers to as the sister of Lazarus. Christians knew there were in our Lord's time no less than four Maries: (1) The Virgin Mother of our Lord, (2) the wife of Cleophas, (3) Mary Magdalene, and (4) Mary the sister of Martha. To prevent, therefore, any mistake, John says "It was that Mary who anointed our Lord, whose brother Lazarus was dead."

Simple as these words seem, there is a singular diversity of opinion as to the question who Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus was, and how many times our Lord was anointed.

(a) Some, as Chrysostom, Origen, and Chemnitius, maintain that the anointing took place three times: once in Luke 7 at the house of Simon the Pharisee; once in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper; and once in Bethany at the house of Martha and Mary. Others, as Ferus, while agreeing with Chrysostom that our Lord was anointed three times, think Mary was the woman who twice did it.

(b) Some maintain that our Lord was anointed twice: once at the Pharisee's house (in Luke 7), and once in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, where Martha and Mary and Lazarus lived for some cause which we do not know.

(c) Some, as Augustine, Bede, Toletus, Lightfoot, Maldonatus, Cornelius à Lapide, and Hengstenberg, maintain that our Lord was only once anointed, concluding that the narrative in Luke 7 was inserted out of chronological order, Simon the Pharisee and Simon the leper were the same person, and the one anointing took place at Bethany. Hengstenberg supports his theory very ingeniously, and boldly suggests: (1) that Simon the Pharisee was also called Simon the leper, (2) that he was the husband of Martha and not friendly to Christ, (3) that this accounts for Martha being more "careful and troubled" than Mary, (4) that this explains the presence of unfriendly Pharisees at the raising of Lazarus, (5) that Mary Magdalene was the same as Mary of Bethany, and (6) that Mary of Bethany was the "sinner" in Luke chapter 7.

Toletus frankly admits that the Romish Church holds that there was only one anointing by one person, as it is plainly declared in one of her formularies: viz., the Breviary.

My own opinion is decidedly against the last of these views. I hold that there were *at least* two anointings: one at a comparatively early period of our Lord's ministry and another at the close of it; one in the house of an unfriendly Pharisee named Simon and another at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany; one by a woman who had been pre-eminently a sinner and another by Mary the sister of Martha, against whose moral character we know

nothing. Why the house of Martha and Mary at Bethany is called the house of Simon the leper, I admit I cannot explain. I can only surmise that there was some relationship of which we know nothing. But this difficulty is nothing, in my eyes, compared to that of supposing (with Augustine and his followers) that the event described in Luke 7 took place just at the end of our Lord's ministry. There is strong internal evidence, to my mind, that it did not. Surely at the end of our Lord's ministry people would not have said with wonder, "Who is this who forgives sins?" Surely Mary would not be spoken of as a notorious "sinner."

On the other hand, if we hold the view that our Lord was only anointed twice--once at the house of Simon the Pharisee and once at Bethany, it must be frankly admitted that there is a very grave difficulty to be got over. That difficulty is that St. Mark says that a woman anointed our Lord "two days" before the Passover and poured the ointment on His "head," while John says He was anointed "six days before the passover" and the ointment poured on His "feet." I do not see how this difficulty can be got over. If, however, we hold that our Lord was anointed twice in the last week before He was crucified--once "six days" before and once "two days" before, and on each occasion by a woman--the whole thing is clear. That such a thing should be done more than once in those days does not strike me as any objection, considering the customs of the age. That our Lord's language in defense of the woman should on each occasion be the same is somewhat remarkable; but it is only a minor difficulty. On the whole, therefore, if I must give an opinion, I incline to agree with Chrysostom that there were three anointings. I also think there is something in the view of Ferus that Mary, sister of Lazarus, anointed our Lord twice--once six days before the passover and once again two days before.

The use of the past participle in the verse before us seems to me no difficulty at all. It is, of course, true that at this time Mary had not anointed our Lord. But it is no less true that John evidently mentions it by anticipation, as a historical fact long past and well known in the Church when he wrote his Gospel, which his readers would understand. "It was that Mary who afterwards anointed Christ's feet."

Let us note in this verse that the good deeds of all Christ's saints are carefully recorded in God's book of remembrance. Men are forgetful and ungrateful. Nothing done for Christ is ever forgotten.

Let us note that sickness comes to Christ's people as well as to the wicked and worldly. Grace does not exempt us from trial. Sickness, on the contrary, is one of God's most useful instruments for sanctifying His saints and making them bear fruit of patience, and for showing the world that His people do not serve Him merely for what they got of bodily ease and comfort in this life. "Job does not serve God for nothing," was the devil's sneer in the days when Job prospered. "Lazarus and his sisters make a good thing of their religion" might have been said if they had had no trials.

Brentius remarks, "God does not go away when bodily health goes away. Christ does not depart when life departs."

3.--[*Therefore his sisters...saying.*] This is an example of what all Christians should do in trouble. Like Mary and Martha, we should first send a message to Christ. By prayer we can do it as really as they did. This is what Job did in his trouble; he first of all "worshipped" and said, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." This is what Asa did not do; "He sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians." (Job 1:20 and 2 Chr. 15:12.)

Let it be noted that the Greek would be more literally rendered "the sisters" and not "his." This message, from the expression "heard" in the next verse, would seem to have been a verbal and not a written one.

[*Lord...love is sick.*] This is a very touching and beautiful message. Its humble and respectful confidence is noteworthy: "He whom You love is sick." They do not say, "Do something," or "Heal him," or "Come at once." They simply spread the case before the Lord and leave Him to do what He thinks wisest and best. It is like Hezekiah spreading Sennacherib's letter before God (2 Kings 19:14). The name given to Lazarus is noteworthy. They do not say "our brother" or "Your disciple," or even "one who loves You," but simply "he whom You love," one whom You have been pleased to treat graciously and kindly as a beloved friend. Christ's love to us and not our love to Christ is the blessed truth which we ought continually to keep before our minds. His love never changes; ours is wavering and uncertain.

The idea of some, that sending a message to Christ was a mark of weak faith in the two sisters, as if it showed doubt of Christ's omniscience, is absurd. At this rate we might never pray, and might say there is no need because God knows all!

The word "behold" seems either to indicate something "sudden" in the illness of Lazarus, like Mark 2:21, and to be used adverbially, or else we must take it as an imperative verb. "Behold a case of great affliction; look upon it and see. He whom You love is sick." This would be like Hezekiah's prayer, "Open Your eyes and see" (2 Kings 19:16). We can hardly suppose that such disciples as Martha and Mary would think it a strange or surprising thing that a disciple of Christ should be ill; yet it is possible they did. However, Theophylact and Ferus suppose that "Behold" implies a degree of wonder and surprise.

Rupertus remarks on the message containing no request: "To a loving friend it was quite enough to announce the fact that Lazarus was sick." Affectionate friends are not verbose or lengthy in descriptions.

Brentius remarks that the message is like all true prayer: it does not consist in much speaking and fine long sentences.

Musculus and Chemnitius both remark that when a man's child falls into a well or pit, it is enough to tell a loving father the simple fact in the shortest manner possible, without dwelling on it verbosely and rhetorically.

Rollock observes how useful it is to have praying sisters.

Let us note that Christ's friends may be sick and ill just like other

people. It is no proof that they are not beloved and specially preserved and cared for by God. "Whom the Lord loves He chastens." The purest gold is most in the fire; the most useful tools are oftenest ground. Epaphroditus and Timothy were both of weak health, and Paul could not prevent it.

4.--[*When Jesus heard that, he said.*] This verse seems to contain the reply which our Lord gave to the messenger. It was to him probably, though in the hearing of all His disciples, that He addressed the words which follow. It is as though He said, "Go, return to your mistress, and say as follows."

[*This sickness is not unto death, etc.*] The meaning of this sentence must evidently be taken with qualification. Our Lord did not mean that Lazarus would not in any sense die. It is as though He said, "The end of this sickness is not Lazarus' death and entire removal from this world, but generally the glory of God, and specially the glorifying of Me, His Son, which will be effected by my raising him again." Death's temporary victory over us is not complete till our bodies perish and return to dust. This was not allowed in the case of Lazarus, and hence death had not full dominion over him though he ceased to breathe and became unconscious.

It is undeniable that there was something dark and mysterious about our Lord's message. He might, of course, have said plainly "Lazarus will die, and then I will raise him again." Yet there is a wonderful likeness between the style of His message and many an unfulfilled prophecy. He said enough to excite hope and encourage faith and patience and prayer, but not enough to make Mary and Martha leave off praying and seeking God. And is not this exactly what we should feel about many an unfulfilled prediction of things to come? Men complain that prophecies are not so literally fulfilled as to exclude doubt and uncertainty. But they forget that God wisely permits a degree of uncertainty in order to keep us watching and praying. It is just what He did with Martha and Mary here.

Let us remember that the final result of Lazarus' sickness is what we should desire as the result of any sickness that comes on us and our families--that God and Christ may be glorified in us. We cannot say, "It shall not end in death," but we can say "By God's help, it shall be for God's glory."

Chrysostom observes: "The expression *that* in this passage denotes not cause but consequence. The sickness happened from other causes. Christ used it for the glory of God."

Calvin remarks that God wishes to be honored by Christ being glorified. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father" (John 5:23.)

5.--[*Now Jesus loved Martha, etc.*] This verse is meant to show that all the members of the family at Bethany were disciples of Jesus and beloved by Him, the brother as well as the sisters, and one sister as well as the other. "A happy family," Lampe remarks, "in which all the members were objects of Christ's special love!"

We do not know where Lazarus was at the time when Jesus stopped at Martha's house in Luke 10. Perhaps he was not converted at that time. But this is only conjecture.

We are generally apt to undervalue the grace of Martha and overvalue that of Mary because of what happened when Jesus was at Martha's house before. Many foolish things are sometimes lightly said against mothers and mistresses as being Marthas--"careful and troubled about many things." Yet people should remember that different positions call out different phases of character. Mary certainly shines more brightly than Martha in the 10th of Luke; but it is a grave question whether Martha did not outshine her in the 11th of John. Active-minded Christians come out better under some circumstances; quiet-minded Christians in others. Our Lord teaches us here that He loves all who have grace, though their temperaments differ. Let us learn not to judge others rashly and not to form hasty estimates of Christians, until we have seen them under every sort of circumstances--in winter as well as summer, in dark days as well as bright.

Let it be noted that the Greek word here rendered "loved" is not the same that is rendered "loves" in the third verse. The word describing the love of Jesus to the three in this verse is a word expressing a high, deep, excellent, and noble affection. It is the same as Mark 10:21 and John 3:16. The word used in the message of the sisters is a lower word, such as is used to describe the affection between a parent and child or husband and wife. It is the word used for "kiss" in Matt. 26:48, Mark 14:44, and Luke 22:47. It is very noticeable that this word is carefully avoided here, when the two sisters are mentioned. The Holy Ghost inspired John to abstain even from the appearance of evil. What a lesson this ought to be to us!

Let it be noted that we see here an example of the broad distinction that ought to be drawn between Christ's general love of compassion which He feels towards all mankind, and His special love of election which He feels towards His own members. He loved all sinners to whom He came to preach the Gospel, and He wept over unbelieving Jerusalem. But He specially loved those who believed on Him.

6.--[*So, when He had heard, etc.*] It is impossible not to remark an intentional and most instructive connection between this verse and the preceding one. Our Lord loved the family of Bethany, all three of them; and yet when He heard Lazarus was sick, instead of hastening at once to Bethany to heal him, He quietly remained at Bethabara for two days, without moving.

We cannot doubt that this delay was intentional and of purpose, and it throws immense light on many of God's providential dealings with His people. We know that the delay caused immense mental pain and suffering to Martha and Mary, and obliged Lazarus to go through all the agony of death and the sorrow of parting. We can easily imagine the grief and suspense and perplexity in which the household at Bethany must have been kept for four days, when their loving Master did not appear; and we know that our Lord could have prevented it all, but did not. But we know also that if He had at once hurried to Bethany and healed Lazarus, or spoken a word from a

distance at Bethabara and commanded his healing (as in John 4:50), the mighty miracle of raising him would never have been wrought, and the wonderful sayings of Bethany would never have been spoken. In short, the pain of a few was permitted for the benefit of the whole Church of Christ.

We have here the simplest and best account of the permission of evil and suffering. God could prevent it. God does not love to make His creatures suffer, but God sees there are lessons which mankind could not learn unless evil was permitted. Therefore, God permits it. The suffering of some tends to the good of many. "He who believes shall not make haste." We shall see at the last day that all was well done. Even the delays and long intervals which puzzle us in God's dealings are wisely ordered and are working for good. Like children, we are poor judges of half-finished work.

Chrysostom says: "Christ tarried that none might be able to assert that He restored Lazarus when not yet dead, saying it was a lethargy, a fainting, a fit, but not death. He therefore tarried so long that corruption began."

Calvin observes: "Let believers learn to suspend their desires if God does not stretch out His hand to help as soon as they think necessity requires. Whatever may be His delays, He never sleeps and never forgets His people."

Quesnel remarks: "God permits evil, that He may make the power of His grace and the might of His love more conspicuous in the conversion of a sinner."

Poole remarks: "We must not judge of Christ's love to us by His mere external dispensations of providence, nor judge that He does not love us because He does not presently come to our help at our time, and in such ways and methods as we think reasonable."