

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
11:17-29

17. So when Jesus came, he found that he had already been in the grave four days. 18. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off. 19. And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary to comfort them concerning their brother. 20. Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him, but Mary sat *still* in the house. 21. Then Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22. But I know, that even now, whatever you ask of God, God will give you. 23. Jesus said to her, Your brother shall rise again. 24. Martha said to him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. 25. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. 26. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? 27. She said to him, Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who should come into the world. 28. And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, The Master has come and calls for you. 29. As soon as she heard *that*, she arose quickly and came to him.

17.--[*So when Jesus came.*] We are left entirely to conjecture as to the time spent by our Lord in His journey from Bethabara to Bethany. We do not know anything certain of the place where He was abiding, except that it was beyond Jordan. Probably it was between twenty and thirty miles from Bethany, and this distance, to those who traveled on foot, would be at least a day's journey.

[*He found...in the grave four days.*] The Greek form of language here is peculiar, and a literal translation would be impossible. It would be, "He found him being already four days in the grave." It is highly probable that Lazarus was buried the same day that he died. In a country like Palestine, with a hot climate, it is quite impossible to keep corpses long unburied without danger and discomfort to the living. A man may talk to his friend one day and find him buried the next day.

One thing is abundantly proved by this verse. Lazarus must certainly have been dead and not in a trance or swoon. A person lying in a grave for four days, all reasonable people would admit, must have been a dead man.

The various forms of death which our Lord is recorded to have triumphed over should not be forgotten. Jairus' daughter was just dead; the son of the widow of Nain was being carried to the grave; Lazarus, the most extraordinary case of all, had been four days in the tomb.

The expression "He found" in this verse must not be thought to imply any surprise. We know that our Lord began His journey from Bethabara with a full knowledge that Lazarus was dead. What "he found" applies to Lazarus therefore, and to the precise length of time that he had been in the grave.

He was not only dead, but buried.

We can well imagine what a sorrowful time those four days must have been to Martha and Mary, and how many thoughts must have crossed their minds as to the reason of our Lord's delay, as to the day He would come, and the like. Nothing so wears us down as suspense and uncertainty. Yet of all graces, there is none so glorifying to God and sanctifying to the heart as that of patience or quietly waiting. How long Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David were kept waiting. Jesus loves to show the world that His people can wait. Martha and Mary had to exemplify this. Well if we can do likewise!

Gomarus discusses at length the curious question, where the soul of Lazarus was during those four days. He dismisses as unscriptural the idea that it was yet in the body and seems to hold that it was in Paradise.

The "four days" are easily accounted for if we remember the time occupied by the messenger from Bethany, the two days' delay at Bethabara, and the journey to Bethany.

18.--[*Now Bethany...fifteen furlongs off.*] This verse shows that John wrote for readers who were not acquainted with Palestine. According to his manner, he gives a parenthetical description of the situation of Bethany, partly to show how very near to Jerusalem the wonderful miracle he relates was worked--within a walk of the temple and almost within view--and partly to account for the number of the Jews who came from Jerusalem to comfort Martha and Mary.

The distance, fifteen furlongs, is rather less than two miles. The use of the expression "about" shows that the Holy Ghost condescends to use man's common form of language in describing things, and that such expressions are not inconsistent with inspiration. (See John 2:6 and 6:19.)

19.--[*And many...came...Mary.*] This sentence would be more literally rendered, "Many from among the Jews had come to those around Martha and Mary." Who these Jews were it is impossible to say, except that they evidently came from Jerusalem. One can hardly suppose that they were the leaders and rulers of the Pharisees. Such men would not be likely to care for friends of Jesus and would hardly have condescended to visit Martha and Mary, who were doubtless known to be His disciples. Of course, it is possible that Simon the leper, in whose house Lazarus died, may have been a man of consideration, and that the Jews may have come out of respect to him. At any rate, it is clear that those who saw the stupendous miracle of this chapter were Jerusalem Jews and were "many" and not few. The expression, "Those around Martha and Mary," is a form of language not uncommon in Greek, and is probably rightly translated in our version. It can hardly mean "the women who had come to mourn with Martha and Mary," though it is well known that women were the chief mourners at funerals. It is, however, only fair to say that Beza decidedly holds that the women and female friends who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha are meant in this verse.

[*To comfort them concerning their brother.*] This appears to have been a common practice among the Jews. When anyone died, friends and neighbors

assembled for several days at the house of the deceased to mourn with and comfort the relatives. Lightfoot specially mentions it. The same custom prevails in many parts of the world at the present day; Hindostan and Ireland are instances.

We cannot doubt that many of these Jews came to Martha and Mary from form and custom and not from any genuine sympathy or kind feeling, much less from any unity of spiritual taste. Yet it is striking to observe how God blesses even the semblance of sympathy. By coming, they saw Christ's greatest miracle. If unbelief can sympathize, how much more should grace.

One thing, at any rate, seems very clearly proved by this verse. Whatever was the rank or position of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, they were well-known people, and anything that happened in their house at Bethany was soon public news in Jerusalem. Had they been strangers from Galilee, the thing named in this verse would not have been written.

Chrysostom thinks the Evangelist mentioned the Jews coming to comfort Martha and Mary as one of the many circumstances proving that Lazarus was really dead. They evidently thought him dead or they would not have come.

Lightfoot gives a long and curious account of the customs of the Jews about comforting mourners. He says that "thirty days were allotted for the time of mourning. The three first days were for weeping, seven days for lamentation, and thirty days for intermission from washing or shaving. The beds in the house of mourning were all taken down and laid on the ground as soon as the coffin left the house. The comforter sat on the floor, the bereaved sat chief. The comforter might not say a word till the chief mourner broke silence."

Poole observes that the mourning for Jacob was forty days, for Aaron and Moses thirty days. (Gen. 50:3, Num. 2:29, Deut. 34:8.)

20.--[*Then Martha...went and met him.*] The Greek word for "was coming" would have been more literally translated "is coming" or "comes" in the present tense. It then gives the idea that Martha received from some friend, servant, or watchman, who was on the lookout on the road from Jordan, the message long looked for--"Jesus is in sight," "He is coming." She then hurried out and met our Lord outside the village. The Greek is simply "met Him," and "went" is needless.

Bullinger thinks that Martha, with characteristic activity, was bustling after domestic duties, and heard from someone that Jesus was coming and ran to meet Him without going to tell Mary.

[*But Mary was sitting in the house.*] While Martha hurried out to meet Jesus, Mary continued sitting in the house. Martha's "met" is a perfect tense; Mary's "sat" is an imperfect. It is impossible not to see the characteristic temperament of each sister coming out here, and doubtless it is written for our learning. Martha--active, stirring, busy, demonstrative--cannot wait but runs impulsively to meet Jesus. Mary--quiet, gentle, pensive, meditative, contemplative, meek--sits passively at home. Yet I venture to think that of the two sisters, Martha here appears

to most advantage. There is such a thing as being so crushed and stunned by our affliction that we do not adorn our profession under it. Is there not something of this in Mary's conduct throughout this chapter? There is a time to stir as well as to sit still; and here, by not stirring, Mary certainly missed hearing our Lord's glorious declaration about Himself. I would not be mistaken in saying this. Both these holy women were true disciples, yet if Mary showed more grace on a former occasion than Martha, I think Martha here showed more than Mary.

Let us never forget that there are differences of temperament among believers, and let us make due allowance for others if they are not quite like ourselves. There are believers who are quiet, passive, silent, and meditative; there are believers who are active, stirring, and demonstrative. The well-ordered Church must find room, place, and work for all. We need Marys as well as Marthas, and Marthas as well as Marys.

Nothing brings out character so much as sickness and affliction. If we would know how much grace believers have, we should see them in trouble.

Let us remember that "sitting" was the attitude of a mourner among the Jews. Thus Job's friends "sat down with him on the ground" (Job 2:13).

Henry remarks: "In the day of affliction Mary's contemplative and reserved temper proved a snare to her, made her less able to grapple with grief, and disposed her to melancholy. It will be our wisdom to watch against the temptations, and improve the advantages of our natural temper."

21.--[*Then Martha said...not have died.*] This is the first account of Martha's feelings. It was the uppermost thought in her mind, and with honest impulsiveness she brings it out at once. It is easy to detect in it a strange mixture of emotions.

Here is passion, not unmixed with a tinge of reproach. "I wish you had been here. Why did you not come sooner? You might have prevented my brother's death."

Here is love, confidence, and devotion creeping out. "I wish you had been here. We loved you so much. We depended so entirely on your love. We felt if you had been here all would be ordered well."

Here is faith. "I wish you had been here. I believe you could have healed my brother and kept death from him."

Nevertheless, there is something of unbelief at bottom. Martha forgets that the bodily presence of Jesus was not necessary in order to cure her brother or to prevent his death. She must have known what our Lord did for the Centurion's servant and the ruler of Capernaum. He had but to speak the word anywhere and Lazarus would have recovered. But memories often fail in time of trouble.

Ferus remarks how apt we all are to say, as Martha, "If God had been here, if Christ had been present, this would not have happened; as if Christ was not always present and everywhere near His people!"

Henry remarks that in cases like Martha's "we are apt to add to our trouble by fancying what might have been. If such a method had been taken, such a physician employed, my friend had not died!--which is more than we know. And what good does it do? When God's will is done, our business is to submit."

22.--[*But I know...God will give you.*] In these words poor Martha's faith and hope shine clearly and unmistakably, though not without serious blemishes. "Even now," she says, "though my brother is dead and lying in the grave, I know and feel confident, from the many proofs I have seen of Your power, that whatever things You may ask of God, God will give them to You. I must therefore, even now, cling to the hope that in some way or other You will help us."

The faith of these words is plain and unmistakable. Martha hopes desperately against hope that somehow all will be right, though she knows not how. She has strong confidence in the efficacy of our Lord's prayers.

The presence of dim views and indistinct apprehensions of Christ in Martha's mind is as evident as her faith. She speaks as if our Lord was a human prophet only and had no independent power of His own, as God, to work a miracle, and as if He could not command a cure but must ask God for it, as Elisha did. She must have strangely forgotten the manner in which our Lord had often worked His miracles. Chrysostom remarks that she speaks as if Christ was only "some virtuous and approved mortal."

Let us note here that there may be true faith and love toward Christ in a person and yet much dimness and ignorance mixed up with it. Love to Christ, in Christian women especially, is often much clearer than faith and knowledge. Hence women are more easily led astray by false doctrine than men. It is of the utmost importance to remember that there are degrees of faith and knowledge. How small a degree of faith may save, and how much of ignorance may be found even in one who is on the way to heaven, are deep points which probably the last day alone will fully disclose.

Let us do Martha the justice to observe that she shows great confidence in the value and efficacy of prayer.

23.--[*Jesus said...rise again.*] These words, the first spoken by our Lord after arriving at Bethany, are very remarkable. They sound as if He saw the vague nature of Martha's faith and would gradually lead her on to clearer and more distinct views of Himself, His office, and Person. He therefore begins by the broad, general promise, "Your brother shall be raised up." He does not say when or how. If His disciples heard him say this, they might have some clue to His meaning, as He had said "I go that I may awake him out of sleep." But Martha had not heard that.

Let us note that our Lord loves to draw out the faith and knowledge of His people by degrees. If He told us everything at once, plainly and without any room for misunderstanding, it would not be good for us. Exercise is useful for all our graces.

Rollock sees in this verse a signal example of our Lord's unwillingness to

"break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax." He nourishes and encourages the little spark of faith which Martha had.

24.--[*Martha said...resurrection at the last day.*] Martha here reveals the extent of her faith and knowledge. She knows and feels sure that her brother will be raised again from the dead in the last day when the resurrection takes place. This, as a pious Jewess, she had learned from the old Testament Scriptures, and as a Christian believer, she had gathered even more distinctly from the teaching of Jesus. But she does not say "I know and feel confident" of anything more. She may perhaps have had some glimmering of hope that Jesus would do something, but she does not say "I know." General faith is easier than particular.

We see from this verse that the resurrection of the body formed part of the creed of the Jewish Church and of the faith of our Lord's disciples. Martha's "*I know*" sounds as if she remembered the words of Job, "I know that my Redeemer lives." What she did not understand, or had failed to remember, was our Lord's peculiar office as Lord of the resurrection. We cannot now understand how she can have failed to hear what our Lord had said before the Sanhedrim (John 5:25-29). If she had, she evidently had not comprehended it. Even our Lord's teaching was often not taken in by His people. How much less must His ministers expect all their sermons to be understood.

To my eyes there is an evident tone of disappointment about Martha's speech. It is as though she said, "I know, of course, that he will rise again at last; but that is cold comfort. It is a far distant event. I want nearer and better consolation."

Hutcheson remarks: "It is no uncommon thing to see men believing great things that are far off and about which they have no present exercise, when yet their faith proves weak in the matter of a present trial, though less difficult than that which they profess to believe."

25.--[*Jesus said...I am the resurrection and the life.*] In this and the following verses, our Lord corrects Martha's feeble and inadequate notions and sets before her more exalted views of Himself. As Chrysostom says, "He shows her that He needed none to help Him." He tells her that He is not merely a human teacher of the resurrection, but the Divine Author of all resurrection, whether spiritual or physical, and the Root and Fountain of all life. "I am that high and holy One who by taking man's nature upon Me have ennobled his body and made its resurrection possible. I am the great First Cause and Procurer of man's resurrection, the Conqueror of death, and the Savior of the body. I am the great Spring and Source of all life, and whatever life anyone has--eternal, spiritual, physical--is all owing to me. All that are raised from the grave will be raised by Me. All that are spiritually quickened are quickened by Me. Separate from Me there is no life at all. Death came by Adam; life comes by Me."

All must feel that this is a deep saying; so deep that we see but a little of it. One thing only is very clear and plain: none could use this language but one who knew and felt that He was very God. No prophet or Apostle ever spoke in this way.

I do not feel sure that the two first words of this verse do not contain a latent reference to the great title of Jehovah, "I am." The Greek quite permits it.

[*He who believes...dead...live.*] This sentence receives two interpretations. Some, as Calvin and Hutcheson, hold that "dead" here means *spiritually* dead. Others, as Bullinger, Gualter, Brentius, Musculus, hold that "dead" means *bodily* dead. With these last I entirely agree, partly because of the point that our Lord is pressing on Martha, partly because of the awkwardness of speaking of a believer as "dead." Moreover, the expression is a verb--"though he has died," and not an adjective--"is a dead person." The sense I believe to be this: "He who believes in Me, even if he has died and been laid in the grave, like your brother, shall yet live and be raised again through my power. Faith in Me unites such a one to the Fountain of all life, and death can only hold him for a short time. As surely as I, the Head, have life and cannot be kept a prisoner by the grave, so surely all my members, believing in Me, shall live also."

26.--[*And whoever...never die.*] In this verse our Lord seems to me to speak of living believers, as in the last verse He had spoken of dead ones. Here, then, He makes the sweeping declaration that "everyone who believes in Him shall never die;" that is, "he shall not die eternally," as the Burial Service of the Church of England has it. The second death shall have no power over him. The sting of bodily death shall be taken away. He partakes of a life that never ends from the moment that he believes in Christ. His body may be laid in the grave for a little season, but only to be raised after a while to glory; and his soul lives on uninterruptedly for evermore and, like the great risen Head, dies no more.

That there are great depths in this and the preceding sentence, every reverent believer will always admit. We feel that we do not see the bottom. The difficulty probably arises from the utter inability of our gross, carnal natures to comprehend the mysteries of life, death, and resurrection of any kind. One thing is abundantly clear, and that is the importance of faith in Christ. "He who believes" is the man who, though dead, shall live and shall never die. Let us take care that we believe, and then all shall one day be plain. The simple questions, "What is life, and what is death?" contain enough to silence the wisest philosopher.

[*Do you believe this?*] This searching question is the application to Martha of the great doctrines just laid down. "You believe that the dead will rise. It is well. But do you believe that I am the Author of resurrection and the source of life? Do you realize that I, your Teacher and Friend, am very God and have the keys of death and the grave in my hands? Have you yet got hold of this? If you have not and only know me as a prophet sent to teach good and comfortable things, you have only received half the truth."

Some questions like these are very useful. How little most of us know what we really believe and what we do not; what we have grasped and made our own and what we hold loosely. Above all, how little we know what we really believe about Christ.

Melancthon points out how immensely important it is to know whether we really have faith and believe what we hold.

27.--[*Se said...I believe.*] Poor Martha, pressed home with the mighty question of the last verse, seems hardly able to give any but a vague answer. In truth, we cannot expect that she would speak distinctly about that which she only understood imperfectly. She therefore falls back on a general answer in which she states simply, yet decidedly, what was the extent of her creed.

Our English word "I believe" hardly gives the full sense of the Greek. It would be literally, "I have believed, and do believe." This is my faith and has been for a long time.

Augustine, Bede, Bullinger, Chemnitius, Gualter, Maldonatus, Quesnel, and Henry think that the first word of Martha's reply is a full and explicit declaration of faith in everything our Lord had just said. "Yes, Lord, I do believe You are the resurrection and the life," etc. I cannot see this myself. The idea seems contradicted by Martha's subsequent conduct at the grave.

Musculus strongly maintains that Martha's confession, good as it was, was vague and imperfect. Lampe takes much the same view.

[*You are the Christ...come into the world.*] Here is Martha's statement of her belief. It contains three great points: (1) that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed One, the Messiah; (2) that He was the Son of God; (3) that He was the promised Redeemer who was to come into the world. She goes no further, and probably she could not. Yet considering the time in which she lived, the universal unbelief of the Jewish nation, and the wonderful difference in the views of believers before the crucifixion and after, I regard it as a noble and glorious confession, and even fuller than Peter's in Matthew 16:16. Melancthon points out the great superiority of Martha's faith to that of the most intellectual heathen, in a long and interesting passage.

It is easy to say that Martha's faith was rather vague and that she ought to have seen everything more clearly. But we at this period of time and with all our advantages are very poor judges of such a matter. Dark and dim as her views were, it was a great thing for a solitary Jewish woman to have got hold of so much truth, when within two miles in Jerusalem all who held such a creed as hers were excommunicated and persecuted.

Let us note that people's views of truth may be very defective on some points, and yet they may have the root of the matter in them. Martha evidently did not yet fully realize that Christ was the resurrection and the life; but she had learned the alphabet of Christianity--Christ's Messiahship and Divinity--and doubtless learned more in time. We must not condemn people hastily or harshly because they do not see all at once.

Chrysostom says: "Martha seems to me not to understand Christ's saying. She was conscious it was some great thing but did not perceive the whole meaning, so that when asked one thing she answered another."

Toletus remarks: "Martha thought she believed everything Christ said, while she believed Him to be the true promised Messiah. And she did truly believe, but her faith was implicit and general. It is just as if some rustic, being questioned about some proposition of faith which he does not quite comprehend, replies, 'I believe in the Holy Church.' So here Martha said, 'I believe, Lord, that You are the true Christ, and that all things You say are true;' and yet she did not distinctly perceive them." This is a remarkable testimony from a Romanist.

Ought we not, perhaps, to make some allowance for the distress and affliction in which Martha was when she made her confession? Is it fair to expect a person in her position to speak as distinctly and precisely as one not in trouble?

28.--[*And when she had said, etc.*] The affection of Martha for her sister appears here. Once assured that her Master was come, and perhaps somewhat cheered by the few words He spoke, she hastens home to tell Mary that Jesus was come and had called for her. We are not told expressly that Jesus had mentioned Mary, but we may suppose that He did and had asked where she was.

The word "secretly" may be applied to the word which follows, if we like, and it would then mean that "Martha called Mary, saying secretly." This is probably the correct rendering.

The words rendered "has come" would be more literally translated "is present, is actually here."

The expression "the Master" is probably the name by which our Lord was familiarly known by the family at Bethany. It is literally, "the Teacher."

Bullinger remarks that the word "secretly" is purposely inserted to show that the Jews who followed Mary had no idea that Jesus was come. Had they known it, he thinks, they would not have followed her and so would not have seen the miracle.

Hall evidently thinks that Martha told Mary "secretly" for fear of the unbelieving Jews who were among the comforters. He remarks: "Christianity does not bid us abate anything of our wariness and honest policy; yea, it requires us to have no less of the serpent than of the dove."

29.--[*As soon as she heard, etc.*] The two last words in this sentence are both in the present tense. It would be more literally rendered, "She, when she heard, arises quickly and comes to Him." It is evident, I think, that the sudden movement of Mary was not caused by hearing that Jesus was come but that Jesus called for her.

It is not unlikely, from the word "arose," that Mary was lying or sitting prostrate on the ground under the pressure of grief. We may also well suppose that our Lord, who doubtless knew her state, asked for her in order to rouse her to exertion, as when David heard that his child was dead and nothing was left for him to do but to be resigned, he "arose from off the earth" (2 Sam. 12:20).