

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
11:7-16

7. Then after this he said to *his* disciples, Let us go to Judea again. 8. *His* disciples said to him, Master, lately the Jews sought to stone you, and are you going there again? 9. Jesus answered, Are there not twelve hours in the day? If any man walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10. But if a man walks in the night, he stumbles, because there is no light in him. 11. These things he said, and after that he said to them, Our friends Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up. 12. Then his disciples said, Lord, if he sleeps, he shall do well. 13. However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that he had spoken of taking rest in sleep. 14. Then Jesus said to them plainly, Lazarus is dead. 15. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him. 16. Then Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him.

7.--[*Then...said to his disciples.*] The Greek words which begin this sentence mark an interval of time even more emphatically than our English version does. The word translated "then" is the same that is translated "after that" in 1 Cor. 15:6,7.

[*Let us go to Judea again.*] This is the language of the kind and loving Head of a family and the Chief in a party of friends. Our Lord does not say "I shall go to" or "Follow Me to Judea," but "Let us go." It is the voice of a kind Master and Shepherd proposing a thing to His pupils and followers, as though He would allow them to express their opinions about it. How much depends on the manner and language of a leader!

The familiar, easy manner in which our Lord is said here to tell His disciples what He proposes to do, gives a pleasant idea of the terms on which they lived with Him.

8.--[*His disciples said to him, Master.*] The answer of the disciples is an interesting illustration of the easy terms on which they were with their Master. They tell Him frankly and unreservedly their feelings and fears.

Let it be noted that the word rendered "Master" here is the well known word "Rabbi." The use of it shows that there is nothing necessarily insulting, sneering, or discourteous about the term. It was the title of honor and respect given by all Jews to their teachers. Thus John the Baptist's disciples said to him, when jealous for his honor, "Rabbi, he who was with thee," etc. (John 3:26).

[*Lately the Jews...stone you.*] The "Jews" here means especially the leaders or principal persons among the Scribes and Pharisees at Jerusalem, as it generally does in St. John's Gospel. The word rendered "lately" is generally translated "now" or "at this time." There is not another

instance of its being translated "of late" in the New Testament. Hence the sentence would be more literally rendered, "The Jews even now were seeking to stone You." They allude to the attempt made at the Feast of Dedication a few weeks before. The attempt was so recent that it seemed "even now."

[*And are You going there again?*] This question indicates surprise and fear. "Do we hear aright? Do You really talk of going back again to Judea? Do You not fear another assault on Your life?" We can easily detect fear for their own safety, as well as their Master's in the question of the disciples; yet they put it on "You" and not on "us."

Let us note how strange and unwise our Lord's plans sometimes appear to His short-sighted people. How little the best can understand His ways!

9,10.--[*Jesus answered...twelve hours, etc.*] The answer which our Lord makes to the remonstrance of His timid disciples is somewhat remarkable. Instead of giving them a direct reply (bidding them not to be afraid), He first quotes a proverbial saying, and then draws from that saying general lessons about the time which any one who is on a journey will choose for journeying. He draws no conclusion and leaves the application to be made by the disciples themselves. To an English ear the answer seems far more strange than it would to an Eastern one. To quote a proverb is, even now, a common reply among Orientals. To fill up the sense of our Lord's elliptical reply and draw the conclusions He meant to be drawn, but did not express, is, however, not very easy. The following may be taken as a paraphrase of it:

"Are not the working hours of the day twelve? You know they are, speaking generally. If a man on a journey walks during these twelve daylight hours, he sees his road and does not stumble or fall because the sun, which is the light of the world, shines on his path. If, on the contrary, a man on a journey chooses to walk in the unreasonable hour of night, he is likely to stumble or fall for lack of light to guide his feet. It is even so with Me. My twelve hours of ministry, my day of work, is not yet over. There is no fear of my life being cut off before the time. I shall not be slain until my work is done. Until my hour is come, I am safe and not a hair of my head can be touched. I am like one walking in the full light of the sun who cannot fall. The night will soon be here when I shall walk on earth no longer; but the night has not yet come. There are twelve hours in my day of earthly ministry, and the twelfth with Me has not arrived."

This seems to me substantially the correct explanation of our Lord's meaning. The idea of ancient writers, as Hugo and Lyranus, that by mentioning the twelve hours of the day our Lord meant that men often change their minds as the day goes on, and that the Jews, perhaps, no longer wished to kill Him, is very improbable and unsatisfactory.

I grant that the conclusion of the tenth verse, "there is no light in him," presents some difficulty. The simplest explanation is that it only means "because he has no light."

Pearce conjectures that the clause should be rendered, "Because there is no

light in it: viz., the world." The Greek will perhaps bear this interpretation.

Let us note that the great principle underlying the two verses is the old saying in another form, "Every man is immortal until his work is done." A recollection of that saying is an excellent antidote against fears of danger. The missionary in heathen lands and the minister at home, pressed down by unhealthy climate or over-abundant work, may take comfort in it, after their Lord's example. Let us only, by way of caution, make sure that our dangers meet us in the path of duty, and that we do not go out of the way to seek them.

Rupertus suggests that our Lord had in His mind His own doctrine, that He was the Light and Sun of the world. Now as the sun continues shining all the twelve hours of the day, and no mortal power can stop it, so He would have the disciples know that until the evening of His own course arrived, no power of the Jews could possibly check, arrest, or do Him harm. As to the disciples He seems to add, "So long as I am shining on you with my bodily presence, you have nothing to fear; you will not fall into trouble. When I am taken from you, and not till then, you will be in danger of falling into the hands of persecutors and even of being put to death." Ecolampadius takes the same view.

Melancthon thinks that our Lord uses a proverbial mode of speech in order to teach us the great broad lesson that we must attend to the duties of our day, station, and calling, and then leave the event to God. In the path of duty all will turn out right. Calvin, Bullinger, Gualter, and Brentius take much the same view.

Leigh remarks: "Christ comforts from God's providence. God made the day twelve hours. Who can make it shorter? Who can shorten man's life?"

Does it not come to this, that our Lord would have the disciples know that He Himself could not take harm till His day of work was over, and that they could take no harm while He was with them? (Compare Luke 13:32,33.) Bishop Ellicot suggests that this was the very time in our Lord's ministry when He said to the Pharisee, "I do cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. Nevertheless I must walk today and tomorrow and the day following." But I doubt this.

It is certain that there came a time when our Lord said "This is your hour and the power of darkness" to His enemies. Then He was taken, and His disciples fled.

11.--[*These things...Lazarus sleeps...wake him up.*] In this verse our Lord breaks the fact that Lazarus is dead to His disciples. He does it in words of matchless beauty and tenderness. After saying "these things" about the twelve hours of the day, which we have considered in the last verse, He seems to make a slight pause. Then, "after that," comes the announcement, which would be more literally rendered, "Lazarus, the friend of us, has been laid asleep."

The word "sleeps" means "is dead." It is a gentle and pathetic way of

expressing the most painful of events that can befall man, and a most suitable one when we remember that after death comes resurrection. In dying we are not annihilated. Like sleepers, we lie down to rise again. Estius well remarks: "Sleeping, in the sense of dying, is only applied to men because of the hope of the resurrection. We read no such thing of brutes."

The use of the figure is so common in Scripture that it is almost needless to give references. (See Deut. 31:16, Daniel 12:2, Matt. 27:52, Acts 7:60, 13:36, 1 Cor. 7:39, 11:30, 15:6-18, and 1 Thess. 4:13,14.) But it is a striking fact that the figure is frequently used by great heathen writers, showing clearly that the tradition of a life after death existed even among the heathen. Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, and Catullus supply instances. However, the Christian believer is the only one who can truly regard death as sleep, that is, as a healthy, refreshing thing which can do him no harm. Many among ourselves, perhaps, are not aware that the figure of speech exists among us in full force in the word "cemetery," applied to burial ground. That word is drawn from the very Greek verb which our Lord uses here. It is literally a "sleeping place."

The word "friend" applied to Lazarus gives a beautiful idea of the relation between the Lord Jesus and all His believing people. Each one is His "friend:" not servant, or subject only, but "friend." A poor believer has no cause to be ashamed. He has a Friend greater than kings and nobles who will show Himself friendly to all eternity. A dead saint lying in the grave is not cut off from Christ's love; even in his grave, he is still the friend of Christ.

The expression "our" attached to friend teaches the beautiful lesson that every friend of Christ is or should be the friend of all Christians. Believers are all one family of brothers and sisters and members of one body. Lazarus was not "my" friend, but "our" friend. If anyone is a friend of Christ, every other believer should be ready and willing to hold out his hand to him and say "You are my friend."

When our Lord says "I go that I may awaken him out of sleep," He proclaims His deliberate intention and purpose to raise Lazarus from the dead. He boldly challenges the attention of the disciples, and declares that He is going to Bethany to restore a dead man to life. Never was bolder declaration made. None surely would make it but One who knew that He was very God.

"I go" is equivalent to saying, "I am at once setting forth on a journey to Bethany." The expression, "that I may awake him up" is one word in Greek and is equivalent to "that I may unsleep him." What our Lord went to do at Bethany He is soon coming to do for all our friends who are asleep in Christ. He is coming to awaken them.

Some commentators have thought that Lazarus died in the very moment that our Lord said "Our friend sleeps," and that it means "Lazarus has just fallen asleep and died." But this is only conjecture, though doubtless our Lord knew the moment of his decease.

Let it be noted that our Lord says "I go" in the singular number, and not "Let us go." Does it not look as if He meant, "Whether you like to go or not, I intend to go"?

Hall remarks: "None can awaken Lazarus out of this sleep but He that made Lazarus. Every mouse or gnat can raise us up from that other sleep; none but an omnipotent power from this."

12.--[*Then his disciples said...do well.*] It seems strange that the disciples should misunderstand our Lord's words, considering how commonly death was called sleep. But their unwillingness to go into Judea probably made them shut their eyes to our Lord's real meaning.

Most writers think that the disciples referred to the general opinion that sleep in a sickness is a sign of amendment. Some, however, suggest that they had gathered from the messenger sent by Martha and Mary what was the precise nature of Lazarus' illness, and therefore knew that it was one in which sleep was a favorable symptom.

The Greek word for "he shall do well" is curious. It is the same that is often rendered "shall be made whole." Sometimes it is "healed," and generally "saved."

The latent thought is manifest: "If Lazarus sleeps, he is getting better, and there is no need of our going to Judea."

13.--[*However, Jesus spoke, etc.*] This verse is one of those explanatory glosses which St. John frequently puts into his narrative parenthetically. The three first words of the verse would be more literally rendered, "But Jesus had spoken."

How the disciples could have "thought" or "supposed" that our Lord meant literal sleep and not death seems strange when we remember that Peter, James, and John had heard Him use the same expression after the death of the ruler's daughter--"The maid sleeps" (Matt. 9:24). Two probable reasons may be assigned. One is that they had heard from the messenger that Lazarus' recovery turned on his getting sleep, and that if he only got some sleep he might do well. The other is that they were so afraid of returning to Judea that they determined to believe Lazarus was getting better and to construe our Lord's words in the way most agreeable to their fears. It is common to observe that men will not understand what they do not want to understand.

Quesnel remarks here: "The misunderstanding of the Apostles was a great instance of stupidity, and shows plainly how sensual and carnal their minds still were. The knowledge of this is useful in order to convince incredulous persons that the Apostles were not of themselves capable either of converting the world or of inventing the wonderful things and sublime discourses which they relate."

The readiness of the disciples to misunderstand figurative language is curiously shown in two other places--where our Lord spoke of "leaven" and "meat" (Matt. 16:6 and John 4:32).

14.--[*Then Jesus said to them plainly, Lazarus is dead.*] Here at last our Lord breaks the fact of Lazarus' death to His disciples openly and without any further reserve. He had approached the subject gently and delicately and thus prepared their minds for something painful by steps. First he said simply "Let us go into Judea" without assigning a reason. Secondly He said "Lazarus sleeps." Lastly He says "Lazarus is dead." There is a beautiful consideration for feelings in these three steps. It is a comfortable thought that our mighty Savior is so tender-hearted and gentle. It is an instructive lesson to us on the duty of dealing gently with others, and specially in announcing afflictions.

The word rendered "plainly" is the same as in John 10:24. Here, as there, it does not mean "in plain, intelligible language" so much as "openly, unreservedly, and without mystery."

15.--[*And I am glad...ye may believe.*] This sentence would be more literally rendered, "And I rejoice on account of you, in order that ye may believe, that I was not there." Our Lord evidently means that He was glad that He was not at Bethany when Lazarus became ill and had not healed Him before his death, as in all probability He would have done. The result now would be most advantageous to the disciples. Their faith would receive an immense confirmation by witnessing the stupendous miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Thus great good, in one respect, would come out of great evil. The announcement they had just heard might be very painful and distressing, but He, as their Master, could not but be glad to think how mightily their faith would be strengthened in the end.

Let us note that our Lord does not say, "I am glad Lazarus is dead," but "I am glad I was not there." Had He been there, He seems to say, He could not have refused the prayer of Martha and Mary to heal His friend. We are not intended to be so unfeeling as to rejoice in the death of Christian friends, but we may rejoice in the circumstances attending their deaths, and the glory redounding to Christ, and the benefit accruing to saints from them.

Let us note that our Lord does not say "I am glad for the sake of Martha and Mary and Lazarus that I was not there," but "for your sakes." It is no pleasure to Him to see His individual members suffering, weeping, and dying, but He does rejoice to see the good of many spring out of the suffering of a few. Hence He permits some to be afflicted in order that many may be instructed through their afflictions. This is the key to the permission of evil in the world: it is for the good of the many. When we ourselves are allowed of God to suffer, we must remember this. We must believe there are wise reasons why God does not come to our help at once and take the suffering away.

Let us note our Lord's desire that His disciples "may believe." He did not mean that they might believe now for the first time, but that they might believe more firmly, heartily, and unhesitatingly; that their faith, in short, might receive a great increase by seeing Lazarus raised. We see here the immense importance of faith. To believe on Christ and trust God's word is the first step towards heaven. To believe more and trust more is the real secret of Christian growth, progress, and prosperity. To make us

believe more is the end of all Christ's dealings with us. (See John 14:1.)

[*Nevertheless let us go to him.*] The first word here would be more literally rendered "but." It is as though our Lord said, "But let us delay no longer; let us cast aside all fears of danger; let us go to our friend."

It is noteworthy that our Lord says "Let us go to Lazarus," though he was dead and would be buried by the time they reached Bethany. Can it be that the disciples thought He had David's words about his dead child in His mind, "I shall go to him"? The words of Thomas, in the next verse, seem to make it possible.

We may notice three gradations in our Lord's language about going to Bethany. The first in the seventh verse, where He says in the plural "Let us all go into Judea." The second in verse 11 where He says in the singular "I go that I may wake him up," as though He was ready to go alone. The third is here in the plural, "Let us all go."

Toletus thinks that by these words our Lord meant to hint His intention of raising Lazarus.

Burkitt remarks: "O love, stronger than death! The grave cannot separate Christ and His friends. Other friends accompany us to the brink of the grave, and then they leave us. Neither life nor death can separate from the love of Christ."

Bengel remarks: "It is beautifully consonant with divine propriety that no one is ever read of as having died while the Prince of Life was present."

16.--[*Then Thomas...said...we may die with him.*] The disciple here named is also mentioned in John 16:5 and John 20:24-27. On each occasion he appears in the same state of mind--ready to look at the black side of everything, taking the worst view of the position and raising doubts and fears. In John 14:5 he does not know where our Lord is going. In John 20:25 he cannot believe our Lord has risen. Here he sees nothing but danger and death if his Master returns to Judea. Yet He is true and faithful nevertheless. He will not forsake Christ, even if death is in the way. "Let us go," he says to his fellow disciples, "and die with our Master. He is sure to be killed if He does go, but we cannot do better than be killed with Him."

Some, as Brentius, Grotius, Leigh, Poole, and Hammond think that "with him" refers to Lazarus. But most commentators think that Thomas refers to our Lord. With them I entirely agree.

Let it be noted that a man may have notable weaknesses and infirmities of Christian character and yet be a disciple of Christ. There is no more common fault among believers, perhaps, than despondency and unbelief. A reckless readiness to die and make an end of our troubles is not grace but impatience.

Let us observe how extremely unlike one another Christ's disciples were. Peter, for instance, overrunning with zeal and confidence, was the very

opposite of desponding Thomas. Yet both had grace and both loved Christ. We must not foolishly assume that all Christians are exactly like one another in details of character. We must make large allowances when the main features are right.

Let us remember that this same Thomas, so desponding in our Lord's lifetime, was afterwards the very Apostle who first preached the Gospel in India, according to ecclesiastical history, and penetrated further East than any whose name is recorded. Chrysostom says: "The very man who dared not go to Bethany in Christ's company afterwards ran alone through the world, and dwelt in the midst of nations full of murder and ready to kill him."

Some have thought that his Greek name "Didymus," signifying "two" or "double," was given him because of his character being double: viz., part faith and part weakness. But this is very doubtful. In the first three Gospels, in the catalog of the twelve, he is always named together with Matthew the publican. But why we do not know.

The Greek word for "fellow disciple" is never used in the New Testament excepting here.