

“This Sickness Will Not End in Death,” John 11:1-16 (January 10, 2016)

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”⁸ The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?”⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world.¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”¹² The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.”¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep.¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died,¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

PRAY

Four years ago, in January 2012, we began working through the gospel of John. We’ve taken almost every spring since then – 2012, 2013, 2015 – and taught verse-by-verse through this book of the Bible. This is what we do at Grace – we study the Bible carefully, deliberately, going verse-by-verse through the text.

So each spring we make it to some chapter and verse of John, and then the next year we’d pick up where we left off and keep going. Last January we started in John 6 and went verse by verse until we finished up John 10 in the middle of May, and so this morning we are again picking up where we left off and studying the first part of John 11, which is where Jesus raises his friend, Lazarus, from the dead.

And this is what we will study this morning. We have a very clear theme in our text for today. Everything that happens in John 11 happens, Jesus says, for one reason: **the glory of God.** I’ll re-read verses 1-4 (with an emphasis on verse 4); Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.”⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

The glory of God. That's what we'll study this morning, and then we'll come to the Lord's Table. Three questions I want us to answer: *first, why does the glory of God matter? Second, what brings God glory? Third, how can we survive glorifying God?*

First, why does the glory of God matter? I don't assume anyone knows what I mean when I use the phrase "glory of God." It's a rather opaque, difficult to define, phrase. So here's my definition: when we speak of the glory of God, we mean "the splendor, the beauty, the wonder, the power, and the perfections of God." So to glorify God means to magnify, to draw attention to, to display, the splendor, beauty, wonder, power, and perfections of God.

You may or may not realize it but the glory of God is not just the theme of John 11 *but the whole Bible*. All of Scripture, and the Scripture says all existence, is **for**, is **about**, magnifying the God of the universe in all his splendor, beauty, wonder, power, and perfections. The unifying thread of the Bible is the glory of God.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism in its first question sums up the importance of the glory of God like this: "What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Everything else in the catechism flows from that first question and answer.

Perhaps you're thinking, "J.D., if the glory of God is the theme of the Bible, then why don't you talk about it more?" The answer is because the glory of God is so foundational to everything else, and when you think about it it's not always easy to talk about foundations. If you ever watch one of those real estate rehab or flipping shows on HGTV, they never talk about the foundation of those houses. They talk about knocking out walls, the material the countertops are made out of, and lately they spend a lot of time talking about the vintage light fixtures. *But of course none of that would matter at all if there were no foundation.* The foundation ties everything together, the foundation makes the rest possible. It's of paramount importance, yet it would be hard to spend an hour talking about it.

That's not a perfect analogy, but it is like that in some sense with the glory of God in the Bible. It is absolutely foundational, it is the theme, to all of Scripture. If the Bible were a painting, then the glory of God would be the canvas.

Nothing else in the Scripture makes any ultimate sense, but for the glory of God. Everything flows from it. In fact, the Bible says God created the universe to display his glory, he created man in his image to display his glory, everything is from and for the glory of God. God did not create the universe not out of any need but to display his glory. In Psalm 19 we read that creation glorifies God: "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge." And in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul writes that man is the "image and glory of God." We wouldn't even exist without the glory of God.

If you really want to see the glory of God bubble up to the surface in the pages of Scripture, the best place to turn is the book of Psalms. It's all over the Psalms. I'll give you just one example – Psalm 96. At the end of the Psalm, after much talk of praising the glory of God, the Psalmist writes this: “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; ¹² let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; ¹³ they will sing before the LORD, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.”

The psalmist writes how even inanimate objects – earth, sea, fields, trees – will glorify and praise God when he comes to judge the earth. It sounds like what Jesus said in Luke 19 – when the Pharisees called on Jesus to rebuke his disciples for praising and glorifying him, Jesus said, “I tell you if they keep quiet (what?) the stones will cry out!” Friends, if on that day the stones are going to glorify God, *what do you think we'll do?*

Like I said a moment ago, the Psalms is the place to go for the glory of God in the Bible. Now, if we never read the Psalms, if we are bored by the Psalms, if we just don't get the Psalms, then we don't understand the glory of God at all, and that's a huge problem in the church today.

Too often when Christians encounter the Bible (whether reading it ourselves, or hearing it in a sermon, or in a Bible study) we naturally tend to do so as if the Bible were primarily only some sort of instruction manual for human beings to know how to live on earth. We all do this. We ask, “What's a word in this for me?” And of course that's why in a lot of churches you'll never hear a sermon on the glory of God. Instead, you'll only ever hear topical sermons on subjects that we all have our mind on: marriage, money, children, work, relationships, rest, sex, *but never the glory of God*. And preachers are afraid to teach on it because we are afraid your eyes will glaze over with boredom if we do.

But if we never learn about and encounter the glory of God in the Scriptures – not just the “how-to's” of the Bible but the “who is” of the Bible – we will never be transformed into someone great, we will never really be changed. Only the glory of God in your life can do that.

So if you read the Bible or go to church or a Bible study never to encounter the glory of God, but only to learn what you think you need in your life right now – right now, I feel like I need to learn how to be a good mom, so I'm going to read the Bible for that – if you read the Bible that way do you know what will happen? You'll learn details about how a mother should care for her children, you'll pick up some tips, you'll learn some techniques, but you'll never really **be changed into a great mother.** You won't be transformed into something different, your heart won't be altered; it will all be on the surface. You'll only ever be a superficial Christian that way, maybe even just a phony Christian.

When I was in law school, you could go to Off Square Books (this was before Amazon) and get these little study guides of all the material taught in a specific course at the school. Cliff Notes, basically, for law school. They were helpful study guides for the

course. One series was called Legalines, and you could go buy a Legalines for Civil Procedure, Legalines for Commercial Paper, Legalines for Property.

When I took Constitutional Law at Ole Miss, I bought the Legaline to help me study. And I noticed that my Con Law professor would always bring in this huge stack of books to every class. It had to be ten books, and for the first few weeks of class I thought it was so weird, because none of the other professors did this – they might bring in one book, and some just brought a manila folder, and some didn't bring anything. Just taught from their heads.

One day the professor was giving his lecture on a certain case, and I just happened to bring my Con Law Legaline that day I looked down and I discovered that my professor's "lecture," so-called, was him reading from the Legaline. When he gave his analysis of cases in class each day, word-for-word it was from the Legaline! I couldn't believe it – and he never opened all those other books he brought into class. He brought all those books in so that we couldn't see over them to him reading from the Cliff Notes as opposed to him actually knowing the cases and lecturing on them.

You know what that meant? He wasn't really a Constitutional Law professor – he was faking it. *He had not been transformed by years and years of study into someone who knew the law deep in his heart.* He hadn't been changed by the glory of Constitutional Law (and it does have a glory, after a fashion). Instead, he was a phony, it was all superficial. And I was mad, I felt like I'd been cheated out of three semester hours at Ole Miss, that at the end of the semester when it came time to give our student evaluations you better believe I gave him a horrible one, and he did not come back to teach the next year. I like to think I had something to do with that. Unfortunately now he's a judge.

But here's the point: friends, that will be what our Christian walk is like if we don't search the Scriptures and pray and push ourselves in worship to experience the glory of God – to behold his beauty, wonder, splendor, power, and perfections. We will be faking it, because only the glory of God can transform you into something great – into a great husband, a great wife, a great parent, a great friend, a great Christian. That's why it's so important.

You say, "OK, I don't want that to happen to me – what do I do?"

Second, what brings God glory? In John 11, Jesus points to one thing and says, "This is for God's glory." What is it? The death of Lazarus. Verse 4: ⁴But when Jesus heard it [that Lazarus was sick] 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." Then, down in verses 14-15: ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe."

Lazarus died, Jesus said, to glorify God. How? A couple of ways: first, and most obviously, Lazarus' death gave Jesus an opportunity to display his glory. A miracle like

raising someone from the dead will do it. No doubt power was evident in that miracle, and more than a little wonder.

But that's not the main way God was glorified through Lazarus. Jesus never, ever viewed his miracles as the main attraction of his ministry. He wasn't pleased if what you wanted out of him most were the miracles.

Instead, you know what Jesus calls miracles in the Scriptures? **Signs.** Almost a dozen times in the gospel of John alone he does that. The reason Jesus calls them signs is because his miracles point (like a sign) to something else, something bigger than his miracles, that glorify God in a more powerful way.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus' miracles are all so "natural"? Jesus never does anything like this: he never says to his disciples, "Hey – you see that mountain over there? I'm going to blow it up. Watch." And then, "Boom!" He never does that. He never turns mice into horses like the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella. Almost all of Jesus' miracles are related to *healing, resurrection, and life.* He restores the leper's skin. He makes the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, the lame to walk, and the blind to see. He raises the dead to life.

Why? Because his miracles are *signs*, signs which communicate to the world his mission! Later in John 11, verse 25, Jesus tells Martha why he came into the world, what his mission was, and it wasn't just to show off his divine power through miracles. Jesus said, "²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." John 11:25-26.

What's Jesus saying? He's saying that right now everyone on the earth is facing two deaths: their natural death and a spiritual death that will follow. Everyone will experience physical death, like Lazarus did. But after that we will face a judgment, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And in the second death, the spiritual death, hell, you will pay forever the penalty you owe for your sins. We deserve wrath, we deserve judgment.

But Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and life," and Lazarus is primarily a sign pointing us in that direction. Jesus did not raise Lazarus from the dead to show off. Rather, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as a sign to say, "This is what's going to happen to me. I'm going to die. But I'm not going to die the way Lazarus did. I'm going to die on a cross, bloody, beaten, and abandoned by everyone – even my Father in heaven. I'm going to die utterly alone. That's how you deserve to die for your sins. But three days later I'm going to be raised from the dead. And if you believe that on the cross I died in your place, I took the punishment you deserve for your sins, and if you believe that three days later I was raised from the dead in glory, then one day *you will be raised in glory, too.* You will experience the first death – you will experience physical death. All men will die, if the world doesn't end first. But you won't experience the second death."

Again, verse 4: ⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” The death and resurrection of Lazarus glorified God, but not as much as *the miracle to which it pointed – not as much as the death and resurrection of Jesus*. Because in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see so much more of the splendor, beauty, power, wonder, and perfections of God. We see his power, but we also see his the beauty of his love for and mercy toward sinners, love and mercy that he has no earthly reason to have. We also see the wonder of his righteousness – punishing the sin and evil in the universe perfectly yet giving righteousness to sinners. The last verse of one of my favorite hymns goes like this: “He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove, the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders of his love!”

You know, every Sunday morning I come to the Middle School down Jefferson Street, and so every Sunday I drive past the town cemetery, behind Bramlett Elementary. And I can’t help but think about it: one day this trumpet will sound in the sky, and all those graves facing east, toward the morning sun, will be opened. And those who died trusting Christ will rise to life – *they will not taste the second death*. They will receive new, resurrection bodies – bodies that will not get sick, will not wear out, will never die – and they will live together with the Lord and with all their brothers and sisters in joy forever in the new heavens and new earth. Now, do you think that will glorify God? You better believe it.

Now, it’s easy for us to see why Jesus let Lazarus die, because we know that in just a few verses that Jesus was going to raise him from the dead, so we’re just fine with Lazarus dying. But, what if you’re Lazarus? What if you’re the one dying and lying in a tomb for four days to point people to Jesus? Or, what if you are Mary and Martha? What if it’s your loved one who dies to glorify God? And none of them knew how the story was going to end – they didn’t get the script ahead of time. What if it happens to you? Friends, it will.

Third, how can we survive glorifying God? That’s the question, isn’t it? I said earlier that the theme of the Bible is the glory of God, and that’s true. But a close second is suffering. In every book of the Bible, you see wrestling with the question: what does the follower of God do with her pain? There’s one whole book of the Bible devoted to weeping as a result of suffering: *Lamentations*. “[M]an is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” Job 5:7 (NIV 1984).

But this is the passage that really gets me: ¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to *test you*, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed ... ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 1 Peter 4:12-13, 16.

Friends, the Bible says we will suffer in order to glorify God. When suffering comes, will we take it as a sign that God has rejected us? Will we say that everything is pointless

and God doesn't exist and suffering is meaningless and give up? ***Or will we run to Jesus? Will we trust that he is good even when we hurt? Will we glorify him?***

What do you do when you're Lazarus? When you're going through pain for whatever reason – physical pain, or a relationship in your life that's an absolute wreck, or your career is in the toilet – what do you do? How do you survive? How do you manage in the pain?

The answer is to look to the sisters, Mary and Martha. John 11:3: “So the sisters sent to him, saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill.’” Notice what the sisters *don't* say. They don't say, “Lord, the one who served you so well is sick. He is such a good person, he's always obeyed you, and he deserves your attention; he deserves better than this.” No, they say, “Lord, he whom thou lovest is sick” (KJV).

When you are suffering, when you are Lazarus, the temptation is to do one of two things. You're tempted either to get self-righteous with God, and say in your heart, “I deserve better than this. Look at all I've done, Lord; look at how I've served you and obeyed your commands and all the good I've tried to do. And yet you're letting me suffer! Where are you? Why aren't you making me feel better?” Or you are tempted to despair: “God must be punishing me. He must hate me, he must think I'm awful and he must have abandoned me.”

No, what we must do is pray the way the sisters prayed, “He whom thou lovest is sick”? In other words, we must say, “Lord Jesus, the one you bled and died for and purchased for yourself and completely forgave and wrote on your heart even though he didn't deserve it, he's sick. He's hurting. He's scared. He needs you.” I know of one older Christian who when he got in trouble said, “Lord, your property is in danger.”

If you do, you will glorify God by trusting his grace. Don't stand before God because of your good works, because they aren't good enough and you'll be warped by self-righteousness.

But don't despair, either. In just a moment come to the Lord's Table. Take this bread and cup in your hands, and be reminded again of what all the Lord Jesus went through to make you his. Take this bread and cup in your hands and remember the grace he's already shown you on the cross, going through far more suffering than you or I ever will. If Jesus did not abandon you then he won't abandon you now. Take this bread and cup and trust Jesus in your pain, in your suffering, in your loss, even though you have no idea how it will all turn out, do it. And as you do you know what you'll be doing? You'll be glorifying God. “This sickness will not end in death. It is for God's glory.” Amen. Let's pray together. PRAY