

John 11:1-27

by St. John Chrysostom

Christ's statement, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life,' shows that He is the Giver of good things and that we must ask of Him, and that He is not confined by place, but present everywhere, knows how to heal.

Scripture: John 11:3-6, John 11:9, John 11:11, John 11:15, John 11:21, John 11:26-27

Topics: "Suffering And Faith", "Resurrection Hope"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the story of Lazarus, highlighting the importance of enduring suffering and sickness as beloved friends of God, like Lazarus, to bring glory to God. He emphasizes the faith and love of Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Mary, who believed in Christ's power even in the face of death. Chrysostom addresses the cultural practice of excessive mourning, urging women to mourn with dignity and faith in the resurrection, rather than in disbelief. He encourages believers to focus on heavenly wisdom, almsgiving, and a virtuous life to honor the departed and find comfort in God's grace.

Transcript

Now a certain man was sick, named Lazarus, of Bethany, of the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment.

1. Many men, when they see any of those who are pleasing to God suffering anything terrible, as, for instance, having fallen into sickness, or poverty, and any other the like, are offended, not knowing that to those especially dear to God it belongs to endure these things; since Lazarus also was one of the friends of Christ, and was sick. This at least they who sent said, Behold, he whom You love is sick. But let us consider the passage from the beginning. A certain man, It says, was sick, Lazarus of Bethany. Not without a cause nor by chance has the writer mentioned whence Lazarus was, but for a reason which he will afterwards tell us. At present let us keep to the passage before us. He also for our advantage informs us who were Lazarus' sisters; and, moreover, what Mary had more (than the other), going on to say, It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment. Here some doubting say, How did the Lord endure that a woman should do this? In the first place then it is necessary to understand, that this is not the harlot mentioned in Matthew Matthew 26:7, or the one in Luke Luke 7:37, but a different person; they were harlots full of many vices, but she was both grave and earnest; for she showed her earnestness about the entertainment of Christ. The Evangelist also means to show, that the sisters too loved Him, yet He allowed Lazarus to die. But why did they not, like the centurion and the nobleman, leave their sick brother, and come to Christ, instead of sending? They were very confident in Christ, and had towards Him a strong

familiar feeling. Besides, they were weak women, and oppressed with grief; for that they acted not in this way as thinking slightly of Him, they afterwards showed. It is then clear, that this Mary was not the harlot. But wherefore, says some one, did Christ admit that harlot? That He might put away her iniquity; that He might show His lovingkindness; that you might learn that there is no malady which prevails over His goodness. Look not therefore at this only, that He received her, but consider the other point also, how He changed her. But, (to return,) why does the Evangelist relate this history to us? Or rather, what does he desire to show us by saying,

John 11:5

Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.

That we should never be discontented or vexed if any sickness happen to good men, and such as are dear to God.

John 11:3

Behold, he whom you love is sick.

They desired to draw on Christ to pity, for they still gave heed to Him as to a man. This is plain from what they say, If you had been here, he had not died, and from their saying, not, Behold, Lazarus is sick, but Behold, he whom you love is sick. What then said Christ?

John 11:4

This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

Observe how He again asserts that His glory and the Father's is One; for after saying of God, He has added, that the Son of God might be glorified.

This sickness is not unto death. Since He intended to tarry two days where He was, He for the present sends away the messengers with this answer. Wherefore we must admire Lazarus' sisters, that after hearing that the sickness was not unto death, and yet seeing him dead, they were not offended, although the event had been directly contrary. But even so they came to Him, and did not think that He had spoken falsely.

The expression that in this passage denotes not cause, but consequence; the sickness happened from other causes, but He used it for the glory of God.

John 11:6

And having said this, He tarried two days.

Wherefore tarried He? That Lazarus might breathe his last, and be buried; that none might be able to assert that He restored him when not yet dead, saying that it was a lethargy, a fainting, a fit, but not death. On this account He tarried so long, that corruption began, and they said, He now stinks.

John 11:7

Then says He to his disciples, Let us go into Judea.

Why, when He never in other places told them beforehand where He was going, does He tell them here? They had been greatly terrified, and since they were in this way disposed, He forewarns them, that the suddenness might not trouble them. What then say the disciples?

John 11:8

The Jews of late sought to stone You, and You are going there again?

They therefore had feared for Him also, but for the more part rather for themselves; for they were not yet perfect. So Thomas, shaking with fear, said, Let us go, that we also may die with Him John 11:16, because Thomas was weaker and more unbelieving than the rest. But see how Jesus encourages them by what He says.

John 11:9

Are there not twelve hours of the day?

He either says this, that he who is conscious to himself of no evil, shall suffer nothing dreadful; only he that does evil shall suffer, so that we need not fear, because we have done nothing worthy of death; or else that, he who 'sees the light of this world' is in safety; and if he that sees the light of this world is in safety, much more he that is with Me, if he separate not himself from Me. Having encouraged them by these words, He adds, that the cause of their going there was pressing, and shows them that they were about to go not unto Jerusalem, but unto Bethany.

John 11:11-12

Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may awake him out of sleep.

That is, I go not for the same purpose as before, again to reason and contend with the Jews, but to awaken our friend.

John 11:12

Then said His disciples, Lord, if he sleep he shall do well.

This they said not without a cause, but desiring to hinder the going there. Sayest Thou, asks one of them, that he sleeps? Then there is no urgent reason for going. Yet on this account He had said, Our friend, to show that the going there was necessary. When therefore their disposition was somewhat reluctant, He said,

John 11:14

He is dead.

2. The former word He spoke, desiring to prove that He loved not boasting; but since they understood not, He added, He is dead.

John 11:15

And I am glad for your sakes.

Why for your sakes? Because I have forewarned you of his death, not being there, and because when I shall raise him again, there will be no suspicion of deceit. Do you see how the disciples were yet imperfect in their disposition, and knew not His power as they ought? And this was caused by interposing terrors, which troubled and disturbed their souls. When He said, He sleeps, He added, I go to awake him; but when He said, He is dead, He added not, I go to raise him; for He would not foretell in words what He was about to establish certainly by works, everywhere teaching us not to be vainglorious, and that we must not make promises without a cause. And if He did thus in the case of the centurion when summoned, (for He said, I will come and heal him, Matthew 8:7) it was to show the faith of the centurion that He said this. If any one ask, How did the disciples imagine sleep? How did they not understand that death was meant from His saying, 'I go to awake him?' for it was folly if they expected that He would go fifteen stadia to awake him; we would reply, that they deemed this to be a dark saying, such as He often spoke to them.

Now they all feared the attacks of the Jews, but Thomas above the rest; wherefore also he said,

John 11:16

Let us go, that we also may die with Him.

Some say that he desired himself to die; but it is not so; the expression is rather one of cowardice. Yet he was not rebuked, for Christ as yet supported his weakness, but afterwards he became stronger than all, and invincible. For the wonderful thing is this; that we see one who was so weak before the Crucifixion, become after the Crucifixion, and after having believed in the Resurrection, more zealous than any. So great was the power of Christ. The very man who dared not go in company with Christ to Bethany, the same while not seeing Christ ran well near through the inhabited world, and dwelt in the midst of nations that were full of murder, and desirous to kill him.

But if Bethany was fifteen furlongs off, which is two miles, how was Lazarus dead four days? Jesus tarried two days, on the day before those two one had come with the message, (on which same day Lazarus died,) then in the course of the fourth day He arrived. He waited to be summoned, and came not uninvited on this account, that no one might suspect what took place; nor did those women who were beloved by Him come themselves, but others were sent.

John 11:18

Now Bethany was about fifteen furlongs off.

Not without cause does he mention this, but desires to inform us that it was near, and that it was probable on this account that many would be there. He therefore declaring this adds,

John 11:19

Many of the Jews came to comfort them.

But how should they comfort women beloved of Christ, when they had agreed, that if any should confess Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue? It was either because of the grievous nature of the calamity, or that they respected them as of superior birth, or else these who came were not the wicked sort, many at least even of them believed. The Evangelist mentions these circumstances, to prove that Lazarus was really dead.

3. But why did not [Martha,] when she went to meet Christ, take her sister with her? She desired to meet with Him apart, and to tell Him what had taken place. But when He had brought her to good hopes, she went and called Mary, who met Him while her grief was yet at its height. Do you see how fervent her love was? This is the Mary of whom He said, Mary has chosen that good part. Luke 10:42 How then, says one, does Martha appear more zealous? She was not more zealous, but it was because the other had not yet been informed, since Martha was the weaker. For even when she had heard such things from Christ, she yet speaks in a groveling manner, By this time he stinks, for he has been dead four days. John 11:39 But Mary, though she had heard nothing, uttered nothing of the kind, but at once believing, says,

John 11:21

Lord, if You had been here, my brother had not died.

See how great is the heavenly wisdom of the women, although their understanding be weak. For when they saw Christ, they did not break out into mourning and wailing and loud crying, as we do when we see any of those we know coming in upon our grief; but straightway they reverence their Teacher. So then both these sisters believed in Christ, but not in a right way; for they did not yet certainly know either that He was God, or that He did these things by His own power and authority; on both which points He taught them. For they showed their ignorance of the former, by saying, If you had been here, our brother had not died; and of the latter, by saying,

John 11:22

Whatsoever you will ask of God, He will give it you.

As though they spoke of some virtuous and approved mortal. But see what Christ says;

John 11:23

Your brother shall rise again.

He thus far refutes the former saying, Whatsoever you will ask; for He said not, I ask, but what? Your brother shall rise again. To have said, Woman, thou still lookest below, I need not the help of another, but do all of Myself, would have been grievous, and a stumblingblock in her way, but to say, He shall rise again, was the act of one who chose a middle mode of speech. And by means of that which follows, He alluded to the points I have mentioned; for when Martha says,

John 11:24

I know that he shall rise again in the last day, to prove more clearly His authority, He replies,

John 11:25

I am the Resurrection and the Life.

Showing that He needed no other to help Him, if so be that He Himself is the Life; since if He needed another, how could He be the Resurrection and the Life? Yet He did not plainly state this, but merely hinted it. But when she says again, Whatsoever you will ask, He replies,

He that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

Showing that He is the Giver of good things, and that we must ask of Him.

John 11:26

And whosoever lives and believes in Me, shall never die.

Observe how He leads her mind upward; for to raise Lazarus was not the only thing sought; it was necessary that both she and they who were with her should learn the Resurrection. Wherefore before the raising of the dead He teaches heavenly wisdom by words. But if He is the Resurrection, and the Life, He is not confined by place, but, present everywhere, knows how to heal. If therefore they had said, as did the centurion, Speak the word, and my servant shall be healed Matthew 8:8, He would have done so; but since they summoned Him to them, and begged Him to come, He condescends in order to raise them from the humble opinion they had formed of Him, and comes to the place. Still while condescending, He showed that even when absent He had power to heal. On this account also He delayed, for the mercy would not have been apparent as soon as it was given, had there not been first an ill savor (from the corpse). But how did the woman know that there was to be a Resurrection? They had heard Christ say many things about the Resurrection, yet still she now desired to see Him. And observe how she still lingers below; for after hearing, I am the Resurrection and the Life, not even so did she say, Raise him, but,

John 11:27

I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God.

What is Christ's reply? He that believes in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, (here speaking of this death which is common to all.) And whosoever lives and believes in Me, shall never die John 11:26, signifying that other death. Since then I am the Resurrection and the Life, be not thou troubled, though your brother be already dead, but believe, for this is not death. For a while He comforted her on what had happened; and gave her glimpses of hope, by saying, He shall rise again, and, I am the Resurrection; and that having risen again, though he should again die, he shall suffer no harm, so that it needs not to fear this death. What He says is of this kind: Neither is this man dead, nor shall you die. Believest thou this? She says, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God.

Which should come into the world.

The woman seems to me not to understand the saying; she was conscious that it was some great thing, but did not perceive the whole meaning, so that when asked one thing, she answered another. Yet for a while at least she had this gain, that she moderated her grief; such was the power of the words of Christ. On this account Martha went forth first, and Mary followed. For their affection to their Teacher did not allow them strongly to feel their present sorrow; so that the minds of these women were truly wise as well as loving.

4. But in our days, among our other evils there is one malady very prevalent among our women; they make a great show in their dirges and wailings, baring their arms, tearing their hair, making furrows down their cheeks. And this they do, some from grief, others from ostentation and rivalry, others from wantonness; and they bare their arms, and this too in the sight of men. Why doest thou, woman? Do you strip yourself in unseemly sort, tell me, thou who art a member of Christ, in the midst of the market-place, when men are present there?

Do you pluck your hair, and rend your garments, and wail loudly, and join the dance, and keep throughout a resemblance to Bacchanalian women, and do you not think that you are offending God? What madness is this? Will not the heathen laugh? Will they not deem our doctrines fables? They will say, There is no resurrection -- the doctrines of the Christians are mockeries, trickery, and contrivance. For their women lament as though there were nothing after this world; they give no heed to the words engraven in their books; all those words are fictions, and these women show that they are so.

Since had they believed that he who has died is not dead, but has removed to a better life, they would not have mourned him as no longer being, they would not have thus beaten themselves, they would not have uttered such words as these, full of unbelief, 'I shall never see you more, I shall never more regain you,' all their religion is a fable, and if the very chief of good things is thus wholly disbelieved by them, much more the other things which are revered among them.

The heathen are not so womanish, among them many have practiced heavenly wisdom; and a woman hearing that her child had fallen in battle, straightway asked, And in what state are the affairs of the city? Another truly wise, when being garlanded he heard that his son had fallen for his country, took off the garland, and asked which of the two; then when he had learned which it was, immediately put the garland on again. Many also gave their sons and their daughters for slaughter in honor of their evil deities; and Lacedæmonian women exhort their sons either to bring back their shield safe from war, or to be brought back dead upon it.

Wherefore I am ashamed that the heathen show true wisdom in these matters, and we act unseemly. Those who know nothing about the Resurrection act the part of those who know; and those who know, the part of those who know not. And oftentimes many do through shame of men what they do not for the sake of God. For women of the higher class neither tear their hair nor bare their arms; which very thing is a most heavy charge against them, not because they do not strip themselves, but because they act as they do not through piety, but that they may not be thought to disgrace themselves.

Is their shame stronger than grief, and the fear of God not stronger? And must not this deserve severest censure? What the rich women do because of their riches, the poor ought to do through fear of God; but at present it is quite the contrary; the rich act wisely through vainglory, the poor through littleness of soul act unseemly. What is worse than this anomaly? We do all for men, all for the things of earth. And these people utter words full of madness and much ridicule. The Lord says indeed, Blessed are they that mourn Matthew 5:4, speaking of those who mourn for their sins; and no one mourns that kind of mourning, nor cares for a lost soul; but this other we were not bidden to practice, and we practice it.

What then? says some one, Is it possible being man not to weep? No, neither do I forbid weeping, but I forbid the beating yourselves, the weeping immoderately. I am neither brutal nor cruel. I know that our nature asks and seeks for its friends and daily companions; it cannot but be grieved. As also Christ showed, for He wept over Lazarus. So do thou; weep, but gently, but with decency, but with the fear of God. If so you weep, you do so not as disbelieving the Resurrection, but as not enduring the separation. Since even over those who are leaving us, and departing to foreign lands, we weep, yet we do this not as despairing.

5. And so do thou weep, as if you were sending one on his way to another land. These things I say, not as giving a rule of action, but as condescending (to human infirmity). For if the dead man have been a sinner, and one who has in many things offended God, it behooves to weep (or rather not to weep only, since that

is of no avail to him, but to do what one can to procure some comfort for him by almsgivings and offerings;) but it behooves also to rejoice at this, that his wickedness has been cut short.

If he have been righteous, it again behooves to be glad, that what is his is now placed in security, free from the uncertainty of the future; if young, that he has been quickly delivered from the common evils of life; if old, that he has departed after taking to satiety that which is held desirable. But you, neglecting to consider these things, incitest your hand-maidens to act as mourners, as if forsooth thou were honoring the dead, when it is an act of extreme dishonor. For honor to the dead is not wailings and lamentings, but hymns and psalmodes and an excellent life.

The good man when he departs, shall depart with angels, though no man be near his remains; but the corrupt, though he have a city to attend his funeral, shall be nothing profited. Will you honor him who is gone? Honor him in another way, by almsdeeds, by acts of beneficence and public service. What avail the many lamentations? And I have heard also another grievous thing, that many women attract lovers by their sad cries, acquiring by the fervor of their wailings a reputation for affection to their husbands.

O devilish purpose! O Satanic invention! How long are we but dust and ashes, how long but blood and flesh? Look we up to heaven, take we thought of spiritual things. How shall we be able to rebuke the heathen, how to exhort them, when we do such things? How shall we dispute with them concerning the Resurrection? How about the rest of heavenly wisdom? How shall we ourselves live without fear? Knowest not thou that of grief comes death? For grief darkening the seeing part of the soul not only hinders it from perceiving anything that it ought, but also works it great mischief.

In one way then we offend God, and advantage neither ourselves nor him who is gone; in the other we please God, and gain honor among men. If we sink not down ourselves, He will soon remove the remains of our despondency; if we are discontented, He permits us to be given up to grief. If we are thankful, we shall not despond. But how, says some one, is it possible not to be grieved, when one has lost a son or daughter or wife? I say not, not to grieve, but not to do so immoderately.

For if we consider that God has taken away, and that the husband or son which we had was mortal, we shall soon receive comfort. To be discontented is the act of those who seek for something higher than their nature. You were born man, and mortal; why then do you grieve that what is natural has come to pass? Grieveest thou that you are nourished by eating? Seekest thou to live without this? Act thus also in the case of death, and being mortal seek not as yet for immortality. Once for all this thing has been appointed.

Grieve not therefore, nor play the mourner, but submit to laws laid on all alike. Grieve for your sins; this is good mourning, this is highest wisdom. Let us then mourn for this cause continually, that we may obtain the joy which is there, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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