

“The Mystery Of Faith In Jesus”

Do you ever find yourself questioning God? Just puzzled by the stuff that happens and asking “why?” Sometimes there are things we just don’t understand that’s when faith is tested. The story we see so vividly here in **John 11** is not just about Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. It is about the mysteries we sometimes have to wrestle with while we walk with Jesus. It’s important to know that these people, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were not only believers in Christ -- they were his friends. That’s part of the mystery. **Verse 2** says, *It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.* **Verse 5** says: *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* In the gospel of Luke, it says that this family living just outside of Jerusalem opened their home to Jesus. They gave him a place where he could go at any time and find rest and friendship. This is the relationship in the background. But Lazarus got sick and from what follows his condition was serious. **John 11:3** says: *So the sisters sent to him, (Jesus) saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.*

That little sentence right there captures part of what we mean by the mystery of faith. The mystery has to do with the fact that...

I. THERE ARE MANY THINGS, ORDAINED BY GOD IN LOVE, THAT ARE MYSTERIOUS TO US AT THE TIME.

There are at least three things going on in this story all of which are confusing. *First this story shows us that...*

A. Sometimes *it seems as if* the love of Christ doesn’t make much of a difference for us.

Verse 3 introduces something *hard* to understand: the relationship between the love of Christ and the suffering of his loved ones.

“Lord, he whom you love is ill. I’m not saying the love of Christ doesn’t make a difference we will see in the end that it does, but sometimes, from our perspective it doesn’t *seem* to make a difference.

1. If Jesus loves him so much why is Lazarus so sick? I wonder if even in the sister’s message there is a little bit of a bite. The subtle, expression of an age-old frustration; “Lord, if you loved him; why has this happened to Him?” It’s the common question “Why?” we ask of God when things go wrong.

2. If Jesus loves him why doesn't he do more to help him?

Verses 5-6 say: *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.* There's a story about St. Theresa, a 16th-century reformer who was on a mission journey for God when she fell into deep mud and ended up stuck in the mud, and filthy dirty. As she stood mired in the mud she cried out to God, "If this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you don't have many!"

We talk a lot about the love of Christ. But the Bible itself tells us that sometimes it may seem as if the love of Christ doesn't make a lot of difference. Here's a second thing that can seem confusing.

B. Sometimes it may seem as if the word of Christ isn't true.

In **verse 4** Jesus said: *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."* Now, if you had heard that promise what would you think if after you heard Lazarus died? The words Jesus spoke seem clear enough – so what happened?

I'm not saying the words of Christ are not true but that sometimes, at a certain time in your story it may seem to you that they aren't true.

C. Sometimes it may seem as if the way of Christ doesn't make much sense.

In the middle of this story, **verses 5-16** there is a section where Jesus has a confusing discussion with his disciples.

1. First, he says they are going to do something that seems too dangerous to be wise. In **verse 7** he says, *"Let us go to Judea again."* **Verse 8**, *"Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"* That seemed dangerously foolish.

2. His reply to their implied objection seems too weird to be helpful. In **verses 9-10**: Jesus answered, *"Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. 10 It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.* Everyone agrees this is a little hard to understand. Back in **John 9:4** Jesus has said, *as long as it is day I must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work.* So he is picturing his earthly life as a work day in which he has a responsibility to use the light to do his work and fulfill his purpose. He's saying the most important thing – the thing that keeps you from stumbling is to keep walking in the light and doing God's will.

3. Then in verses 11-15, Jesus seems to add more confusion. He says, *Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to awaken him.* The disciples say, *“Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.”* At this point, Jesus speaks plainly and says, *When I said sleeping I meant He died.* Then he says, *for your sake, I am glad I wasn't there, so that you may believe.*

4. Then, at the end of verse 15 he repeats the seemingly unwise part and says, “Let's go to him”. So in **verse 16** the disciple Thomas basically rolls his eyes and says, cynically, *“great idea, let all go, and we'll all die”*. It seems that everything Jesus is saying is too weird to be helpful and too dangerous to be wise.

Can we admit there is a lot of mystery in life? Consider a seemingly unrelated area. Scientists tell us that when we measure all the gravity in the universe 85% has no known origin. This is how the concept of dark matter originated. It's the hypothesis that there must be matter out there that we cannot detect or measure to account for the gravity that we can measure. Dr. Niel DeGrasse Tyson suggests that dark matter is not what we should even call it because that implies it is matter. It implies we know something about it that we actually don't. He says we might as well call it Fred or Wilma. Richard Panek, is a recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship for science writing and has recently published a book titled *The 4 Percent Universe*. In it, he says, *all the stars, planets and galaxies that can be seen today make up just 4 percent of the universe. The other 96 percent is made of stuff astronomers can't see, detect or even comprehend.* If that is true why does it upset us when the God who made the universe eludes our attempts to fully understand him and doesn't remain safely inside our categories of comprehension. **Romans 11:33** says, *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

The true acceptance of mystery in a life of faith is very practical even if difficult because a life of faith often means trusting when you do not understand. It might mean something like choosing to serve others even though it *seems* like that might leave you coming up short. It might mean choosing to be humble, open and even vulnerable when it *seems* like shutting down or striking out would hurt less. Ask yourself, where does following Jesus require you to trust what he says even when it doesn't *seem* to make sense.

That's where it gets real. And it is a struggle, but if you only act on what makes sense to you, it is yourself you are following not Jesus. Stories like this teach us that faith is a deep surrender to God and trust in God that requires us to surrender our agenda to his purposes and trust him precisely when things seem mysterious to us.

II. IN THE END CHRIST PROVES WORTHY OF YOUR TRUST. YOU CAN TRUST IN HIM.

As you know from the Scripture reading when Jesus speaks and calls Lazarus back to life after four days in the tomb it all comes together in a heartbeat. In the end the story shows us that we can trust in Jesus.

A. The love of Christ didn't *seem* to make much difference, but in the end, it made all the difference in the world.

1. *The love Jesus had for Lazarus and his sisters was real.* The word for love in **verse 3** is *philia*, which is the word for friendship and brotherly affection. The word in **verse 5** is *agape* which is the word for devotion and sacrificial care. Jesus had and felt both. That's the love with which Christ loves us. In the mysteries of life, the love of Christ is constant. Nothing separates us from the love of Christ.

2. *But the manifestation of that love is sometimes deliberately delayed. Verses 5-6: 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.* It takes time for the tests of faith to accomplish their purposes in our lives. So waiting is allowed for the same reason that the test was sent. It's sometimes of little use to send a test of faith for just a little while. Waiting made the miracle more wonderful! It glorified God and strengthened the disciples and the sisters. The delays of Christ are the delays of love, and the help of Christ always comes at the right time.

B. The word of Christ didn't seem to prove true, but in the end, it was completely true.

1. *In verse 4 Jesus said: This illness does not lead to death.* Sure, hearing that you might think he is not going to die but you could also understand it to mean death will not be the conclusion to which this illness leads. The illness would not end or ultimately result in death. *It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*" In **verse 5** Jesus says: *for your sake, I am glad I was not there, so*

that you may believe. The disciples were already believers, but faith that his word is trustworthy has to grow and deepen through testing.

2. His word proves true -- this sickness will not end in death. And it is for God's glory. At the end of the story, **verse 45**, we read this: *Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.* Faith was deepened and strengthened for Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the disciples and many more who put their faith in Christ for the first time. It was for the good of many people and the glory of God and God's Son.

Jesus used this whole incident to prepare the disciples for what was going to happen soon afterwards with him. He was showing them this one truth: ***Many things that seem mysterious to us are ordained by love for God's glory and our good. We can trust God at all times.*** This was preparing the disciples for what they would experience with Jesus. God in human flesh. The perfect man. Full of grace and truth. And yet, Jesus was rejected, betrayed, beaten and crucified. What a mystery. What a seeming tragedy. But that was Friday and then came Sunday and Jesus rose again. Then -- then it all came into focus. God brought good out of evil, and His word proved itself completely true.

The love of Christ, for a little while, didn't seem to make any difference but in the end, it made all the difference in the world. And his word proved to be completely true ...

C. The way of Christ didn't seem to make much sense, but in the end, it proved to be right.

The next time you are tempted to question God's love remember this: ***Many things that seem mysterious to us are ordained by love for God's glory and our good. We can trust God at all times.***

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman wrote a book titled *The Cry of the Soul, how our emotions reveal our deepest questions about God.* In a chapter on the mystery of God Dan tells about a close friend of his who came to one of his sexual abuse seminars. The material provoked a strong reaction in him. It was so troubling he went outside to walk around the church parking lot.

He found a place to sit down and was struggling with the question, *"Where are You, God—why don't You seem to do more for those who have been betrayed and violated?"* He was also battling with loneliness. He wanted God to engage him, comfort him. As he sat

there, he noticed a small bird only a few feet away. He thought to himself with a little bit of humor and slight cynicism, *“I wonder—is this bird perhaps an agent of God, sent to encourage my heart?”* He thought about the Dr. Doolittle story of the talking to the animals. He thought about Elijah nourished by the birds. A moment later he noticed that the bird was moving slowly toward him. To his astonishment, it hopped onto his hand. He was stunned. He said He felt oddly alive as if he were in the presence of an act of God. He blinked, and the bird pooped on his hand and flew away. It left a large splotch of whitish goop all over his hand. At that very moment, he felt his other hand suddenly burning like it was on fire. He looked and saw it was covered by red ants that were biting him. He started swiping away the ants. When he had knocked most of them off, his hand was swollen, and his shirt was smeared with bird poop. He sat there stupefied. He had longed for God’s comfort, but what he experienced felt like an attack of nature sent by God. What’s with this? He wondered. He sat there for a while and then began to laugh.

He said, *“I wasn’t laughing at all that had happened so much as at the irony of how God dealt with my demands. I thought I wanted God to treat me like a little boy who needed someone to comfort and care for him.”* He said thankfully God responded to what he desired more deeply than comfort and needed most of all, God showed up with irony to treat him like a man who needed to awaken the courage to face real life. He said in an odd sense he felt invigorated to move back into life. In a sense he faced a crossroads, a test there. He could have held onto to self-pity and bitterness. Instead he surrendered and trusted.¹

Our life of faith in Jesus is often mysterious. Doubt, confusion, even radical struggle are sometimes required before we are willing to surrender more deeply and trust more deeply. We should not glorify the struggle. But it *is* often mysteriously provoked by God himself because it is part of the process of our growth in faith. The mysterious way God works exposes our double-mindedness and how shallow our faith really is. When God doesn’t do what we expect it compels us to struggle. It requires us at some point to surrender more deeply to him and to trust more radically in him.

CONCLUSION

Why should we struggle to trust in him? Don't forget who stands at the center of the story in Scripture: Jesus. The eternal love in the heart of God which is at the center of the universe was revealed in this man,

who was God in human flesh. He himself embodies the proof of God's love, God's word, and God's ways. Do you want to know if you are loved? Do you want to know what matters? Do you want to know that everything will prove all right in the end? In Christ God came into the world to lay down his life for our salvation. He suffered because of our ignorance. He paid for our sins. He rose from the dead. The gospel not only tell us that He loves and forgives us, but it also shows us that his plans, no matter how mysterious, will always be victorious, His power is preeminent and his promises are true.

He will be your Savior if you turn to him and trust in him. It is that simple. You admit that you need the saving grace that only He can give. Trust in him, and you will see, often in this life but ultimately in eternity that his *love* makes all the difference. His *word* proves to be completely true. His *ways* prove absolutely right.

Ask Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Soon after the drama of **John 11** in the next chapter we read these words. **John 12:1-3**. *Six days before the Passover, Jesus, therefore, came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* What a picture of what we hope for and where we are headed if you belong to Jesus and He belongs to you. *Trust in Him.*

Eugene O'Neill's play *Laughing with Lazarus* begins with Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead and deals with the change this miracle makes in Lazarus' life. After he has been raised, Lazarus becomes fearlessly joyful. No matter how hard they try the religious leaders, who are enemies of Jesus, cannot stifle his gladness. Laughter becomes his trademark, and everywhere he goes people are warmed and enlivened by his presence. Because he has learned that Christ is Lord and Christ watches over his life, and his sins are forgiven and even the final enemy death cannot defeat him. He knows that no matter how things seem along the way, in the end, the love of Jesus makes the difference, the word of Jesus comes true and his ways prove right and so Lazarus is eternally infected with joy.

Amen

¹ Allender and Longman, *The Cry of the Soul*, NAVPRESS, pp 222-223