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To begin with

We talk about visiting different places in order to see the sights. When we visit the Bible, God's own word, there are endless sights to see. They are wonderful sights, breathtaking sights. They are sights which, once seen, remain with you forever. They become sights which you wish to see again and again. They are sights where you see and appreciate more every time you visit them.

By far the most exquisite sights to be found in the Bible are the many sights of the Lord Jesus Christ. This should not surprise us, for when speaking of the Scriptures Jesus himself declares, 'it is they that bear witness about me' (John 5:39). Within these pages, from their opening page to their closing page, Jesus is revealed to us. You cannot miss him. In particular, they tell us about his person (who he is) and his work (what he has done, is doing, and will do). And they reveal so much to us about what it means for us to belong to him by faith.

This book aims to explore this from just one chapter, chapter 11 of John's gospel. In 20:31 of this gospel, the apostle John tells

us why he wrote. He did so, he says to all who read it, ‘so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name’.

Why John 11? Because this single chapter of 57 verses shows us one glorious thing after another concerning Jesus. While there is much more that could be said about him than this chapter contains, it is remarkably comprehensive. Would you know Jesus? Or, if you know him already, would you know him better? Then John 11 is a very fruitful place for you to look.

I have called this book *A Sight of the Saviour*. It focusses upon 19 different things about him. The book’s subtitle is *Beholding Jesus in John 11*. That word ‘beholding’ is carefully chosen. The basic meaning of the verb is ‘to see’ or ‘to observe’, but there is more to it than that. It can carry the sense of wonder, amazement, even pleasure. The chapter records an astounding miracle: Jesus raises from his tomb a man who has been dead for four days. It is a very moving narrative, involving a family of a brother and two sisters, three people who were among Jesus’ most precious friends during his time on earth. So much of human life and experience (including yours and mine) is here.

Several centuries ago a man prayed a prayer concerning himself and the Lord Jesus Christ which expressed his desire to know Jesus more clearly, to love Jesus more dearly, and to follow Jesus more nearly. May that be our mutual desire as we set off together now.

The Bible version I am using is the English Standard Version (ESV).



Jesus' matchless love

John 11:1–4

There is only one place for our sight of the Saviour to begin, and that is exactly where this chapter of John's gospel begins—with the matchless love of Jesus. There are two aspects to *Jesus' matchless love* which need to take our attention: *what it is* and *what it does*.

The love of Jesus: what it is

What kind of a love is the love of Jesus? What is it like? How would you describe it? We sing of 'the deep, deep love of Jesus' and affirm that 'The love of Jesus, what it is, none but his loved ones know.'

If you speak to an unbeliever about the love of Jesus you will likely get no response. The reason for that is that the only ones who know anything about it are his loved ones: those who are actually loved by Jesus and know it, those who have experienced his love in a personal way, who delight in it and are immensely thankful for it, those who adore him on account

of it. Even then, there is so very much more of his love still to be known and relished. The apostle Paul acknowledged this for himself and for every Christian. For the Christians in the church at Ephesus, this was his heartfelt prayer: 'that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:17–19). The Ephesians were already Christians. They already knew the love of Christ, but there was still so much more. Oh that we can all say, to the glory of God, 'Jesus loves me, this I know'.

The scene, as John chapter 11 opens, is Bethany, a village located some two miles from Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives, a lovely place of fig trees, almonds and pomegranates. However, its chief attraction and affection in Jesus' eyes lay in the fact that living there were three people whom he loved and who loved him. It was a home of three dear souls whose names were written in heaven, two sisters and a brother. We are introduced to them straightaway in the opening verse: Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. They have been described as 'going hand in hand to glory'.

Yet there was a dark shadow hanging over that dear home and those dear hearts. 'Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany'. The brother in the family was a sick man and his sisters were greatly concerned for him. So what did they do? They sent a message to Jesus to tell him and to seek his aid. The message could scarcely have been briefer or more to the point, and while it states that Lazarus was ill (and the implication, surely, is that he was very ill and that their desire was that Jesus would come and make him well), all it said was this: 'Lord,

[literally, 'Lord, behold' or 'Lord, look'] he whom you love is ill'. That is all. Not 'he who loves you', not that way round. Just, 'he whom you love' or 'the one you love'. No name mentioned. That was Mary and Martha's plea for Lazarus, that Jesus loves him! That was all they needed to say. Yet how deeply they spoke from their hearts to Jesus' heart! Addressing Jesus as 'Lord', in the way that they did, was their humbling of themselves before his deity and power. They made no demand. They let Jesus know and left the matter with him. They trusted him and they waited for him. They deemed that sufficient.

What, then, is the love of Jesus? In its widest scriptural sense, it is *the love of an eternal Saviour*. Jesus had loved Lazarus from 'before the foundation of the world' (Ephesians 1:4). And he has loved and does love all of his own with this eternal, everlasting love. We call it an *electing* love, for God chose to love us (electing meaning choosing); a *pardoning* love, for 'while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8); a *sacrificial* love, for it took him all the way to the cross, to Calvary; and a *drawing* love, as he makes us willing in the day of his power, so that now 'We love (him) because he first loved us' (1 John 4:19). But it is something else as well, which arises directly from the account here in John 11: it is a *personal* love. Notice again the 'he' of verse 3, with no mention at all of Lazarus' name. To which Jesus does not send the messenger back to ask, 'who is he? Who do you mean?' No. A word from the sisters saying 'he' says it all to Jesus. How so? 'The Lord knows those who are his' (2 Timothy 2:19).

Furthermore, the love of Jesus is *the love of a faithful friend*. He is a friend who 'loves at all times' (Proverbs 17:17) and 'who sticks closer than a brother' (Proverbs 18:24). This unique friendship is the love of a *concerned* friend, an *upholding* friend,

a *sustaining* friend, a *forgiving* friend, a *providing* friend, a *dependable* friend, an *unchanging* friend and, most significantly of all, a *loving* and *faithful* friend.

This is the love with which the Lord Jesus Christ loved Lazarus and Mary and Martha. It was the love of an eternal Saviour and a faithful friend. And this is exactly the same love which he has for all his own. There is no love like the love of Jesus, nothing to match it or to compare with it. And there is no experience like being the object of his care and affection, nothing to match or compare with that either. The three siblings at Bethany rejoiced in the assurance of it. Do we? Do you? They knew 'the love of Jesus, what it is', and so the sisters sent this simple, heartfelt message to Jesus. How important it is to possess a deep, precious and blessed assurance in your very soul that you are loved by Jesus, that you are one of his own loved ones. Is he your eternal Saviour? Is he your faithful friend?

The love of Jesus: what it does

What effect should the clear knowledge and experience of Jesus' love have upon us? What should it 'do' to us? What difference should it make? What do we learn from the Bethany home?

First, *the love of Jesus does not exempt the believer from sickness, trial and affliction.* 'Lord, he whom you *love* is *ill.*' The love of Jesus does not separate us from the common infirmities of life. Christians have bodies, like everyone else, and so are subject to all manner of illness, trial and affliction like everyone else and, if anything, more so. How, more so? Because of the disciplining, chastening (though always loving) hand of our gracious God (on the one hand), and—very differently—because of the malice of our great enemy, the devil (on the other).

Jesus, as is clear, had a very special love for Lazarus, and this will become even more apparent as this chapter of John's gospel unfolds. Yet he was seriously ill (the sisters would surely not have sent this message to Jesus if they did not judge the matter urgent). Maybe they were concerned even for their brother's life. So what must we learn if we are Christians? That we must never for one moment start doubting the love of Jesus towards us whenever he appears to be laying a heavy hand upon us. Just as a surgeon, when operating on a patient, looks and focuses with particular care upon his patient, so the Lord Jesus Christ (the divine physician) is demonstrating his love even more (not less!) when in one way or another his own ones, whom he loves, are up against it. Not less, more! The matter may even be stated as boldly as this: the one whom the Lord loves is in a far better condition when he is sick or tried, than is the unbeliever when he is in full health and vigour.

Second, *the love of Jesus gives us a holy boldness when we approach him*. Here is 'mercy and ... grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:16). Timely grace and mercy awaits us at the throne of heavenly grace. To him we may bring all our burdens, all our sorrows, all our sins and all our cares, remembering that our eternal Saviour and faithful Friend is there in heaven as our great high priest, always bearing our names upon his heart.

Mary and Martha would not have considered even for one moment that this was something in which Jesus would not be interested or that he would not wish to be bothered with. They would not have regarded their messenger as being on a fruitless errand. No! By no means! Lazarus, whom Jesus loved, was poorly. They did not imagine that this was a case too small (or too large) for Jesus' attention. They wrote delicately but passionately as they made known their request to Jesus.

How much we too need to discover (or, perhaps, rediscover) that we *cannot* have true peace in any condition or circumstance until we tell the Lord about it, until we bring it to the Lord in prayer. And, just as much, how we also need to discover (or, perhaps, rediscover) that we *need not* have anxiety in any condition or circumstance once we *have* told the Lord about it.

Moreover, Mary and Martha not only sought Jesus in the matter, but actually *believed*. In contrast, our problem can sometimes be that not only do we 'not have, because [we] do not ask' (James 4:2), but that even when we do ask, we do not necessarily believe. We have to plead with the unnamed father in the gospels, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:24). When all the time the love of Jesus bids us come, ask and welcome—every time!

Third, *the love of Jesus provides us with one after another of God's great and precious promises*. Verse 4 records Jesus' response upon receipt of the message (and the messenger, no doubt, would have relayed this message back to the Bethany home where the sisters would have eagerly been awaiting news). Jesus' response was this: 'This illness does not lead to death.' How relieved and thankful Mary and Martha would have been to hear those words. Surely they came as an immediate answer not only to their message but (more importantly) to their prayers. How their anxious faces and beating hearts must have been calmed, quieted and soothed. And there was more in the message, of course. Not only would Lazarus' illness 'not lead to death', but this also: 'It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' A lot was to happen, however, before all became plain.