

“This Illness Does Not Lead to Death” (John 11:1–44)

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What does the coronavirus have to do with God? Or, what does God have to do with the coronavirus? That’s a question that is natural to ask if we’re thinking about God. Unfortunately, most people seem to be looking for someone to blame, usually their political enemy. But we should think about all things with reference to God. Specifically, we should think about all things with reference to Jesus. He is the Lord of lords, sovereign over all the universe, sovereign over viruses and death.

If that is true, then why does Jesus allow things like viruses and death to happen? Why does God allow bad things, even evil things, to occur?

I don’t know that we’ll ever know exactly why any one event occurred. Perhaps we will. Simply put, though God has reasons for doing what he does, we may not know those reasons. But I think there’s a story about Jesus that gives us an indication of why at least certain evils—and perhaps, in the end, why all evils—are allowed by God. That story is the famous story about Jesus raising Lazarus back to life, found in John 11.

Today, we’re going to look at this story and then we’ll draw some conclusions as to why Jesus allowed a tragedy to occur, and perhaps also why God allows all evil to occur. Without further ado, let’s turn to John 11 and start reading. I’ll read the first four verses:

¹ 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.”¹

I’ll give us a bit of context. John, the author of this biography of Jesus, has told us that Jesus is God (John 1:1) and the Son of God (John 1:14, 34, 49). In the previous chapter, Jesus had been in Jerusalem talking to the Jewish religious leaders. When he said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), they picked up stones to hurl at him. They thought he was committing blasphemy, claiming to be one with God (verse 33). Of course, Jesus was saying that, but he wasn’t

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

blaspheming. He was correct. Still, in order to avoid being killed, he left Jerusalem and crossed the Jordan River and went north. He might have been close to one hundred miles away from Jerusalem.

Jesus had friends named Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, a brother and two sisters, and they lived in the village of Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem. Lazarus became seriously ill, and so Lazarus's sisters sent a message to Jesus, probably so he could heal Lazarus. What's important to see is that Jesus loved Lazarus ("he whom you love") and he also says that his event will not end in death, but in God being glorified.

"Glory" is a very Christian word. It has a meaning of "brilliance," or "fame," or "weight." When we say that God is glorified, we mean he appears to us as more brilliant, he becomes more famous among us, or he takes on more weight in our lives. God never changes. He is always brilliant. But when he is glorified, we see how great he truly is. Somehow, this whole event will reveal how great God the Father is, and also how great God the Son is.

Now, let's look at the next two verses, verses 5 and 6:

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.

We're told that Jesus loved not only Lazarus, but also Martha and Mary, his sisters. And then we have a very odd statement. *Because* Jesus loved them, when he heard Lazarus was sick, he deliberately waited two days. Jesus didn't run to Lazarus and heal him. Actually, Jesus didn't even have to be in the same place as someone in order to heal them (see Matt. 8:5–13/Luke 7:1–10). We would think that if Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, he would heal Lazarus instantly. But he doesn't. He waits.

Already, we learn that God's primary goal is not to remove immediately all things that cause us pain and sorrow. If that were so, Jesus would have healed Lazarus. Or, Jesus would never have allowed Lazarus to get sick in the first place. But God's primary goal is not taking away anything that may cause us pain. He has greater goals in mind.

Let's find out what happens next. We'll read verses 7–16:

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.”

After two days, Jesus tells his disciples that they must go back to Judea again. This is the region of Jerusalem, where people were just trying to kill Jesus. Jesus’ followers think he’s a bit crazy to think of going back there. But Jesus says that there are twelve hours in a day. On average, there are twelve hours of daylight in any given day. In a world before electricity, that is the time when work was done. So, Jesus means he still has work to do. He must do the work that God the Father gave him to do, and while he does God’s work, he is walking in the light. The safest place for him is in the will of God. So, even if it looks like a suicide mission, Jesus knows he must do the Father’s will.

Then he tells his disciples that Lazarus had “fallen asleep.” Of course, he means that Lazarus has died. Jesus must have known that supernaturally. Yet his disciples don’t get it. They take his words literally. (This happens a few times in John. See John 3:3–4; 4:10–11). So, Jesus has to be abundantly clear. Jesus tells them Lazarus has died. And, surprisingly, he says, “for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.” If Jesus was there, he would have healed Lazarus. But he intentionally waited for Lazarus to die. Why? Earlier, he said this event would lead to God—the Father and the Son—being glorified. Here, he says Lazarus’s death, and what will happen soon, will lead to people’s faith.

That statement lets us know that God allows painful things to happen to draw people to faith, or perhaps even greater faith, in Jesus.

Now, let’s continue with the story. We’ll read verses 17–27:

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. ²¹ Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 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. Do you believe this?”²⁷ She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”

When Jesus arrived in Bethany, where Lazarus and his sisters lived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. It seems that Jesus was probably a four days’ journey on foot away, so that if he left right when he knew Lazarus died, he would arrive at this time. We’re told that many Jews from Jerusalem had come to comfort Martha and Mary, and this reminds us that Jesus was in trouble with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. As we’ll see, by returning to the Jerusalem area, Jesus was risking his safety.

The first to greet Jesus is Martha. If you’re familiar with the Gospels, you might remember another time when Jesus was with Martha and Mary. Martha was busy with all kinds of activity while Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teaching (Luke 10:38–42). What we see here fits with that story. When Martha talks to Jesus, she says that if he had arrived sooner, her brother wouldn’t have died. But she still has faith that Jesus can do whatever he asks of God the Father. Jesus tells her that Lazarus will rise again. She says, “Oh, I know he will, because at the end of the age there will be a resurrection of everyone.” That’s true. Jesus is now in heaven, and when he returns to Earth, everyone will be raised back to life, some for eternal salvation and some for eternal condemnation (Dan. 12:2; John 5:25–29). But, as we’ll see, Jesus means more than that.

Yet first Jesus says that *he* is the resurrection and the life. The dead are able to be raised back to life because of Jesus. He is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6). He is the only way to live forever. He says, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” In this world, everyone will die. Only those who are alive when Jesus returns won’t die. But everyone else will. Yet Jesus says that those who trust in him, though they experience that death, will live. The one who experiences a spiritual rebirth and believes in Jesus will live forever.

Then Jesus says to Martha, “Do you believe this?” Martha makes a great confession of faith. She says that she believes, and she knows that Jesus is the Christ. That’s a word based on a Greek word that means “anointed one.”² Jesus is God’s anointed King. He’s also the Son of God, who comes into the world to rescue his people. As the most famous verse in the Bible says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

² Χριστός.

It's important to see that physical death is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. And it's not the final thing that will happen to a person. There is a resurrection after death. If death were final, we should be very afraid of the coronavirus, or any other virus or disease. But if death is not the worst that can happen, and if it is not final, then we should have a different perspective on life.

Now, let's see what happens when Jesus sees Mary. We'll read verses 28–37:

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Martha goes to Mary to tell her that Jesus is here and wants to speak to her. So, Mary comes to him, outside of the village. When Mary comes to Jesus, she falls at her feet and calls him "Lord." This is clearly a sign of respect. Yet she says the same thing that her sister said: "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It seems John really wants his readers to know that Jesus could have spared Lazarus from this death but decided not to.

That might leave us thinking that Jesus is cold or uncaring. But he's not. We're already told that he loves Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. And now we see something stunning. When Jesus sees Mary weeping, and then also sees others weeping, we're told he "was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled." This is really a deceptive translation. And it's not just the English Standard Version. Most other English translations tone down the meaning of the original Greek. The King James Version says that Jesus "groaned in the spirit," which is closer. The New Revised Standard Version says Jesus "was greatly disturbed in spirit." I'm surprised that the New Living Translation comes much closer. It says, "a deep anger welled up within him." The Holman Christian Standard Bible says that Jesus "was angry in His spirit." The Greek word isn't

used much in the New Testament, but it generally refers to anger.³ Outside of the Bible, it was used to refer to the snorting of horses.⁴ You might think of Jesus having his nostrils flared, indignant and furious.⁵ Many translations tone down Jesus' reaction, perhaps for fear of embarrassment, as if the Son of God couldn't have such a passionate response.

Why was Jesus so angry, and so troubled? He knew Lazarus had already died. He had already seen Martha upset. He knows what he is about to do. But now he sees Mary and others weeping. It's one thing to know all facts. As God, Jesus could access divine omniscience at any time he wanted. Before the universe existed, the Son of God knew Lazarus would die. While on Earth, Jesus knew Lazarus had died before anyone had told him. But it's one thing to know a fact. It's another thing to experience it. I believe that Jesus was angry that there was death and sorrow in the world. And it's not because Jesus was like us, powerless and out of control. Remember, Jesus chose not to heal Lazarus. Still, he was so bothered and moved by what he saw that he also wept. And then he asked to see the tomb. (It seems he asked where Lazarus was laid because he "turned off" that divine omniscience. Jesus chose to live fundamentally as a human being.⁶)

John wants us to see, again, that Jesus could have healed Lazarus before he died. That's why he reports that some whispered, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" They're referring to something that happened in chapter 9, when Jesus healed a man who had been born blind.

Let's move ahead to see how the story ends. We'll read verses 38–44:

³⁸ Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. ³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands

³ ἐβριμάομαι.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 415.

⁵ Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990–), 1:442.

⁶ See my sermon, "Jesus Was a Man," preached on January 4, 2015, available at <https://wbcommunity.org/Jesus>.

and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Jesus became angry again, apparently when he saw the tomb. Perhaps he was angry at this visual symbol of death. Perhaps he was angry because it was necessary for Lazarus to die, because he couldn't heal him the way he healed the blind man. At any rate, Jesus is once again disturbed, and he asks for the stone that closed the tomb to be moved. Martha warned him, quite grimly, that Lazarus's body was starting to decompose. The Bible addresses the issue of death quite candidly, without sentimentality. But Jesus says, “I told you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God, didn't I?”

When the stone was removed from the tomb, Jesus prayed. In a sense, he didn't have to pray to the Father. When Jesus performs miracles, he usually doesn't pray. He knew what the Father was going to do, and the Father did, too. The prayer was more for the sake of the crowd. He wanted them to know that he was sent by the Father. In this instance, the Father would respond to Jesus' prayer and his alone. What was about to happen was a sign of divine favor. Once he prayed, he told Lazarus in a commanding voice, “Come out!” And Lazarus did. This is one of the more astonishing miracles that Jesus performs.⁷

Now that we've worked our way through this story, I want to think more carefully about what it says about why bad things happen. The way that John reports this story, he makes it clear that it was necessary for Lazarus to die. Jesus could have healed him before he died, but he chose not to. Twice, we're told that Lazarus' death led to God being glorified (vv. 4, 40). It also led to people believing in God, specifically believing in Jesus (vv. 15, 42).

Now, when people think about evil in the world, they often think about why God would allow evil to occur. Sometimes, people act as if God is not in control, or they act as if God is not good. I reject both of those ideas because God has revealed himself to be in control and good. Sometimes people will say things like, “When we cry, God cries.” As if that is some comfort! If God merely sympathizes with us but can't do anything about evil, that's not a great comfort. I reject any unbiblical picture of God as a nice grandfather who gets really sad when bad things happen, and who wishes he could do something about all the evil in the world but can't. I also reject an unbiblical picture of God as an unloving, uncaring, distant, silent tyrant.

⁷ Jesus did raise two other people back to life (Matt. 9:18–19, 23–26; Luke 7:11–17), but they were not dead for four days.

The Bible teaches that God is eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly wise, and good, among other attributes. That means that God has always existed, he can do anything that he desires, and he never learns a new fact. So, before God created the universe, he knew that evil would enter into it. Yet he chose to create it, even though he didn't have to. God isn't required to create a universe, or to create human beings. But he chose to do so, and he chose to create this particular world and all that is in it.

Now, God had a choice. He could have created a world with no evil or he could have created a world in which evil emerged and led to some good things that are not possible without such evil. God could have created angels that never rebelled, so that there would be no Satan, the devil. He could have created human beings who were glorified, who were incapable of sinning and incapable of dying. The mystery is why God did not choose to do that. But think about what would be missing if there were no evil, no suffering, no pain, and nothing bad in the world.

It's really hard to imagine that, if we stop and think. If there were no evil, there would never be any evil to defeat. That means there would never be a concept of victory. There would be no concept of bravery or courage, for there would be no dangers, no risky situations. There would be no concept of heroism. There would be no opportunities for compassion, mercy, and sacrifice.

If Adam and Eve, the first human beings, never sinned, they would have remained in Paradise with God. Imagine if they had children who never sinned, and they had children who never sinned, and so on. It's very hard to imagine it fully. But if that happened, there would be no need for the Son of God to become a human being. Jesus, the Son of God, came to live the perfect life that we don't live. Adam and Eve sinned, and so did all other human beings, except Jesus. We have all failed to live life the way that God made us to. Since we fail to live according to God's design for humanity, Jesus came to fulfill humanity's purpose. And he also came to die as a sacrifice for our sins. It's not clear why Jesus would come if there were never any sin in the world.

If Jesus never came, we would never know to what great lengths God would go to rescue us. We would never see the full glory of God. Or, so it seems.

If Jesus healed Lazarus immediately, people wouldn't have seen Lazarus raised from the grave. They wouldn't see God's power over death. They wouldn't see that victory, and Jesus'

compassion and bravery, being willing to risk his safety to go back to Jerusalem in order to rescue his friend.

So, this story shows that though Jesus is in perfect control, he deliberately chose for his friends to suffer for a short time so that they would later rejoice, truly know God, and truly believe.

God could have made a world without sin, or he could have made a world in which evil would emerge. The world that God made, in which there is now evil, somehow gives him more glory and, if we know Jesus, it gives us more gratitude. It's a world that has a richer, more complex story. After all, think of any truly great story you've read, heard, or seen, whether in the form of a book, a play, a television show, or a movie. All the greatest stories have evil that must be defeated. They have adventure, bravery, and sacrifice. We are in the midst of the greatest story ever told, a story not possible without evil.

We can also think of every great piece of art. Great pieces of music, like symphonies, often have dissonance that resolves into harmony. If you were to stop those pieces of music during a moment of dissonance, it would sound ugly, but when these bits of cacophony resolve into euphony, when what sounds ugly for a moment turns into harmony, there is a great sense of fulfillment.

If we were to look at life in light of eternity, we would see that our moments of suffering are short. If we know Jesus, if we trust in him, our suffering can only last throughout this life, and this life is but a blink of an eye compared to a never-ending life with God in the new creation. And so, whatever pain we may experience now is nothing but a small moment in time, like a bit of dissonance that resolves to a beautiful, lush chord.

To take another metaphor from the world of art, imagine that you saw the most beautiful painting imaginable. I happen to find Vincent van Gogh's paintings to be marvelous. Imagine we took an extremely high-quality picture of one of his paintings, and then looked at that picture on a computer screen. Then imagine we zoomed in on individual pixels. When looking at individual pixels, they probably look ugly. If we zoomed out just a bit, some groups of pixels might look nice, but I bet groups of them would still look ugly. Yet if we zoom all the way out so we can see the whole picture, everything is harmonious. Everything has its place. Our suffering is like those ugly, small pixelated bits of a larger, beautiful painting. They are the dark bits that make the light stand out.

The apostle Paul said, “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). If we know Jesus, we’ll experience that “weight of glory.” We’ll live in a glorious world forever, and all the pain will be wiped away. There will be no famine, no fighting, no wars, no diseases, no sin, and no death. Every tear that has ever been shed will be wiped away (Rev. 21:4).

But we don’t live in that world now. The reality is that we live in a world corrupted by sin, by the sin of others, and by our own sin. And that is why bad things happen. That doesn’t mean that all bad things happen to us because of our own individual sin. That’s not how things always work. The book of Job is an example of how bad things can occur for other reasons. I’ll talk about that book next week.⁸ Even earlier in John, when Jesus healed a blind man, people wondered if the man had been born blind because of his parents’ sin or his own. Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3). But bad things happen, generally, because of the presence of sin, because of our sin, someone else’s sin, or because something is happening in the unseen spiritual realm. The presence of sin in the world separates all humanity from God and his partial punishment against sin is life in a world that has natural disasters, pain, suffering, and death.

That may sound harsh, but think about this: Imagine if tonight, at the stroke of midnight, God removed all evil from the world. Sounds good, right? But what if God removed *all* evil from the world, not just the big evils like mass shootings and devastating hurricanes, but also the smaller-sized, more mundane evils like hate, greed, envy, pride, covetousness, gossip, selfishness, and so forth? What if God removed all liars, all gossipers, all haters, all people who are full of lust and envy? The big question is, if God removed all evil at the stroke of midnight, where would you and I be? If we judge evil by God’s standards, we would be removed from the world. So, God is patient and gracious with us. He hasn’t stopped the world yet and made it perfect because he is allowing more time for people to turn to Jesus.⁹ If God had stopped the world a hundred years ago, none of us would have been born. We would never have existed.¹⁰ So, even though the world is evil, God is gracious to allow it to go on.

⁸ See <https://wbcommunity.org/job>.

⁹ This is the essence of 2 Peter 3:9.

¹⁰ In the new creation, there will be no more marriage and no more children born.

And God uses pain and suffering to get our attention. When we see bad things occur, whether they are natural evils like hurricanes, or moral evils like mass murders, we have another opportunity to think about how fragile life is. We have another opportunity to wonder where we can turn for safety and refuge. We have an opportunity to think about what really matters in this life.

We think that what matters is safety, convenience, comfort, ease, and entertainment. That's why we might be shocked to hear that Jesus lets his friend suffer and die, and he lets that friend's sisters experience the great pain of mourning. But God doesn't want our happiness so much as our holiness. Instead of settling for ease and comfort, he wants something better—something better for us and something better for himself.

That might sound cruel if God were distant and aloof and uncaring. But he's not. And the chief evidence of that is Jesus. As the Son of God, he lived in heaven for eternity with the Father. He had no pain. But he became a man, entering an evil world. As we saw in this passage, he wept. And he risked his life. If you keep reading, you see that the news of Lazarus being raised back to life angered the Jewish leaders so much that they decided to kill Jesus and they wanted to kill Lazarus, too (John 11:45–53; 12:9–11).

Lazarus' death and his coming out of the tomb foreshadow Jesus' death. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins, not his, because he never sinned. He is the only person who has never done anything wrong, the only one in whom there is no trace of evil. And he rose from the grave. And one day, when he returns, he will call out with a loud cry and his people will leave their tombs. The brief pain of this life will be far, far outweighed and overshadowed by the unending brilliance of eternal life with Jesus.

Jesus told Martha that those who believe in him will live forever. He asked her, "Do you believe this?" That is my question for you. Do you trust that God has a purpose for every pain, even if it doesn't make sense? Do you trust that he's good, even when life doesn't feel good? Do you understand that Jesus is the only God who would subject himself to evil and endure it to save you from this evil world? Do you realize that he is our only hope, and that no set of laws, no government leaders, no amount of money or power or anything will fix evil? If you trust Jesus, you will be raised to eternal life. Your sickness and death will not lead to eternal death.