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Series: The Gospel of John
Message: Jesus' View of Death

Transcribed Message
March 22, 2026
John 11:7-20

Well, you are familiar with Neil deGrasse Tyson. He is an astrophysicist, something of a popular scientist. He has a million followers on X. Recently, he made this statement. He's also a declared agnostic. He posted this: "The universe is blind to our sorrows and indifferent to our pain. Have a nice day." The universe is blind to our sorrows and indifferent to our pain. Have a nice day. I don't know what more you could expect from an agnostic. I don't know that you could expect any more than that from either an agnostic or an atheist. But aren't we glad this morning that as followers of Jesus Christ, we don't have to wonder what the universe itself is thinking of us in one way or another because we know the creator. The creator of the universe is interested in us, knows us, cares about us, loves us. We see that again this morning in this amazing passage in John chapter 11.

Let's open our Bibles and turn again to John 11. We want to see this morning as a carryover of what we looked at last week, that neither God's silence nor His delays impact His love for us. They're not a revealer of His love for us, just in terms of what we see subjectively so often, but they are often the means that He uses to grow us in our faith.

This is what we've seen so far in chapter 11 in just these opening verses. We talked about the context of this 11th chapter. This is the last of the seven miracles, and it's kind of borrowing what is yet to come, but it is also going to be the fifth of the great I Am's, and we're going to see that in a couple of weeks.

The chronology of this chapter, how it fits in with the rest. In chapter 10, we saw that Jesus was in Judea, He was in Jerusalem, and He left hastily because they were about to kill Him. And then we come to this 11th chapter, and a messenger comes from Mary and Martha that Lazarus is sick, and then we read that Jesus stays two more days. After He gets this news about Lazarus, He stays on two more days.

Then the consequences of what that looked like in this story. From the human viewpoint, just looking at it from the human viewpoint, Lazarus is sick. Jesus, we know you love Him, and because we know that you love Him, we fully anticipate that when you get word about the fact that He's sick, that you're going to come immediately. The anticipation is that when Jesus comes – which will be immediately, because He loves Lazarus - He's going to intervene, and He's going to heal Lazarus. That's no doubt from the human viewpoint, that's the anticipation. That's what would be understood.

But from the divine viewpoint, we noted last week that that sixth verse that speaks to the fact that Jesus then stayed two more days, it literally flows out of that fifth verse. It just underscores this matter that the silence of God is ultimately going to be linked to the glory of God. And while we would expect from the human viewpoint that Jesus would make haste and go back and be with Lazarus and Mary and Martha, He had another plan to follow, and that flows out of that fifth verse into the sixth verse. And of course, that doesn't make the circumstances any easier, does it? We know how this story goes, but it doesn't make the story as it was lived out by Lazarus and Mary and Martha any easier, does it? Because for them, there was silence. For them, there was no Jesus. For them, there was no healing. And they had to step into and walk in that circumstance.

I think two lessons come out of that, and the first one is ask. Ask, right? Let your request be made known. Mary and Martha know who to turn to, and hopefully we know who to turn to. We have all manner of admonitions and commands to come to our Lord in every circumstance, every season, every situation of life. We have a loving Heavenly Father who loves when His children come to Him and ask Him.

And of course, we know ultimately all that's going to be filtered through His love and grace in our life, and so that's the second lesson, isn't it? Trust. Trust that whatever God does, it is out of this deep sense of love for us, and ultimately, of course, it's for our good. And all the while we're doing that, we're walking by faith, aren't we? We're walking by faith and not by sight. I think that is the context that we find ourselves this morning.

As we look at this major point, the shadow of death, and it begins with the plan to return to Judea. Let's look in verses 7 through 10 at this plan to return to Judea, and it

begins simply with the proposal in verse 7. And Jesus says, then after this. After this, He said to His disciples, let us go to Judea again. So, the messenger comes, Lazarus is sick. It must be a sickness that is very serious, otherwise they would not have sent him. Jesus, you certainly love Lazarus. We fully expect that you're going to hear this message, you're going to come back. Jesus doesn't do that. He waits two more days.

And then, verse 7, after waiting two more days, we have this announcement. We have this proposal. Jesus says, let us go back to Judea. Now why would He say, let us go back to Judea? Why wouldn't He say, let us go back to Bethany? Why wouldn't He say, let us go to Lazarus, the guy who's sick? Let's go to his sisters, Mary and Martha. Why would Jesus say, let's go back to Judea? I think clearly what's happening in this unfolding of this story, as we're going to see as we get farther into these verses, is Jesus is setting up a test for the disciples. They fully understand what it means to go back to Judea. Did you notice how purposeful Jesus is when He says, let us go back? He didn't say, I'm going to go back. He said, let us go back. In one of the apocryphal books, one of the disciples said to the other, does he have a mouse in his pocket? Let us go. No, I made that up. That's very close to a bad dad joke, and a bad one at that. But it is interesting, isn't it? The Holy Spirit underscores the fact that Jesus says, yeah, we're all going back. I'm not going back by myself. We're all going back together, so let us go back.

Then the protest that follows immediately in verse 8, right? The disciples said to Him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again? Their protest and their response are immediate. They know what this means. When Jesus says, we're going back to Judea, clearly their ears perked up. He didn't say, we're going back to Bethany, even though it's very close. He didn't say, we're going back to Mary and Martha and Lazarus, even though it's very close. He said, we're going back to Judea. Their most recent memory of Judea is watching religious leaders and others picking up rocks, getting ready to stone Jesus. That immediately comes to the forefront.

You notice the change in the plural to the second person singular. The disciples said to Him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going back there again? They switched it. They didn't say, are we going back there? Now this time, it's Jesus,

you're going back there, right? You're going by yourself. They haven't at this point processed. They don't understand the journey that Jesus is on. They will not understand all of this until after the resurrection. But they clearly don't understand that when Jesus talks about the mission for which He is here, when He talks to them as He has done frequently about His impending death, there's no sense in their mind that that is ultimately going to be a great triumph, that that death and resurrection and ascension is going to be the high point. They haven't connected any of those dots together. For them, the idea of Jesus going back to Judea and facing impending, almost certain death is from a very human viewpoint.

Jesus is always teaching, isn't He? How instructive is this for all of us who are in positions where we can do this with our children, our grandchildren, with friends, with each other? But just this picture of Jesus always teaching. Every one of these situations, our sanctification is our spiritual education, isn't it? And we're in this process of sanctification from the moment of trust in Christ until death or until Jesus comes back. We're in this point of education that this proverb in verses 9 and 10 underscores just that.

Look at verse 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. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles because the light is not in him. You just look at that for a minute and you say, that's a kind of an odd thing for Jesus to transition from, let's go, let's not go, to here's a proverb. And just look back a page or two to chapter 9 and verse 4. They had heard something like this before because in the fourth verse, we read, we must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. Well, that was chapter 9, verse 4. Here we are in chapter 11, verses 9 and 10. It's almost the same thing in a little bit more of a proverbial form. What's happening here?

What's going on is before the wonderful invention of clocks and watches and, you know, phones and everything else that constantly tell us what time it is, right? The Romans and the Jews and people of that time and culture, they just simply divided the day in half. It's light basically for twelve hours and it's dark basically for twelve hours. Till you mess around with daylight savings time and all that other stuff. But that's just the point, isn't it? When it's light, we work. When it's dark, since they didn't have technology and capacities

to work at night, they didn't work. Sunlight, you work. Darkness falls, you don't work. Out of that proverb, there are two principles that Jesus is wanting to teach, I think.

The first one is simply this, the goal and purpose of our lives is to do God's will. That's what Jesus said in chapter 9 and verse 4. That's what He's basically saying here. The Father has given me a job to do. The Father has given you a job to do. Jesus says, I'm going to do it. It takes us again to Psalm 40, doesn't it? When Jesus in that life verse declaration says, I have come to do your will, oh my God. That was literally the way Jesus lived out His life. Nothing is more important to Him than the will of God for His life.

We talk about the goal of our life being the glory of God. How do you ever realize bringing glory to God in your life? You do it by walking in the will of God, right? Walking in the truth of His Word. Walking in obedience. So that's what Jesus is underscoring. You walk in the light. He's already said, I am the light of the world, right? That was chapters before. I'm sure in His mind, He's drawing from that truth. And He's basically saying to His disciples, you walk with me, you're walking in the light. You walk with me, and you're walking in obedience. You walk with me and you're doing the will of God and bringing glory to God.

I think the second truth is the time allotted to me is fixed. This is Jesus living out His life, understanding ultimately that the end of His life is at the cross from the physical viewpoint, the human viewpoint, right? Psalm 90, teach us to number our days. Our days are numbered. I can't lengthen the number of days that God has determined for me to live. The enemy can't shorten the number of days that God has determined for me to live. I don't need to live in fear. I don't need to live in anxiety. I don't need to be consumed and worried about all the things going on in the world and how they may impact me from that vantage point because God has numbered my days. God has called upon me to steward those days, but He's numbered my days. You may say, wait a minute, Carlton. Are you saying if I walk out into rush hour traffic on I-40, I'm going to be fine? No, that was your day. If you jump out of an airplane without a parachute, that is your day. That falls into don't be stupid, right? Steward what God has entrusted to you. Do it with wisdom. Walk in what He just said. Walk in the light. Walk with Christ. All these things are instructive.

Now, the purpose of the return. Let's look at the purpose. That was the plan. We're going back to Judea. Now look at the purposes of the return to Judea, and we'll see this in the rest of these verses this morning. Of course, it starts with the central figure, which is, of course, Lazarus, verses 11 through 13. After saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him. The disciples said to him, Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover. Now, Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. So, what do we have? We have another metaphor that gets missed, don't we? John loves to work these into his narrative, how Jesus says something in the figurative sense, the metaphorical sense, and the listeners are hearing him in the physical sense.

We saw that probably the first time in the Gospel of John in the third chapter, when Jesus says to Nicodemus, you've got to be born again. Nicodemus starts to think, and how is this going to even happen? I can't comprehend this. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, figuratively. Nicodemus hears it in the physical realm, so that's what's happening here. The disciples, when Jesus said that Lazarus is sleeping, there was just this collective, oh man, that is good news. We are so glad to know that he is simply sleeping. What does that mean? Well, that means he's going to be getting better, and that means we don't have to go back to Judea. This announcement from Jesus is offering a sigh of relief. He's getting better. Better still, we don't have to go back.

Now, just as a side note, notice Jesus talks about Lazarus being our friend. Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. It just underscores what we talked about last week, how this little community, two miles not even two miles from Jerusalem, this became the place of refuge, the place of just pulling away when Jesus and the disciples were in Jerusalem. You can be sure that all these disciples had spent time in this home with this family, so they all have this connection that he is our friend.

And then that singular statement that Jesus says, but I am going to awaken him. And that's just a foreshadowing of what? Yet later into the chapter, Jesus is going to say, I'm the resurrection and the life. I'm going to awaken him because I am the resurrection and the life.

Now, notice then secondly, Jesus gives us this picture of death regarding the New Testament. How does a New Covenant believer, living like we are today, how do we see death being presented to us in Scripture? Well, this is it right here. And it's captured in this beautiful word, "sleep". It's sleep, isn't it? After saying these things, he said to them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. That word "sleep" is used 18 times in the New Testament. Four of those times, it's talking about physical sleep. Physical sleep. Just take a quick look at your neighbor and see if they're physically asleep. So sometimes it means physical sleep, but just four times, 14 times in the New Testament, the word "sleep" speaks of physical death. It speaks of physical death.

Remember in Matthew nine, when Jesus was called to the home of Jarius and his daughter, and he didn't get there in time and his daughter died. And what did Jesus do? He comes, he sees all the mourning that's going on, all the grieving that's going on, and this public display regarding the loss of this little girl. He said, you can stop all of this. She's asleep. And they laughed at him. They mocked him. She's not asleep. She's dead. Well, Jesus is bringing this New Testament truth to the very circumstance in which he finds himself. First Thessalonians chapter four. When Paul is writing to the Thessalonian believers who are very anxious and very concerned about things related to the return of Christ and those who have died and who's going first and where are they going, all of that, right? He steps into that whole thing, and he speaks about those who have fallen asleep. And he says, we don't sorrow as those who have no hope. Well, why would they not sorrow as those who have no hope? Because the one they love has simply fallen asleep.

To fall asleep, when we think of death in that way, what does that connote to us? What does that convey to us? Well, it conveys a sense of rest. It conveys a sense of they're going to wake up because that's what happens when we sleep. We wake up. There's a sense of transition. There's a sense of rest. All those ideas are there. But this is crucial to understand. He's talking about believers. It's never used of unbelievers. Unbelievers when they die don't sleep in this sense. Unbelievers when they die apart from Christ enter into the second death. And the second death is eternal separation from God for all of time. And

there is no second chance. So that is the truth for an unbeliever. For the believer, it is this beautiful picture of simply sleep.

I would want you to understand. This is not soul sleep. This is not soul sleep. Second Corinthians chapter 5 verse 8, Paul says, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. If there's any sleep that's going on here, it's not the soul, it's the body. The body is put in the grave in a cemetery, which means sleeping place. And so here, Jesus is not teaching a doctrine that is often put forward that there is something called soul sleep, or there's an intermediate state, or there's something called purgatory. No, to be absent from the body for the believer is to be present with the Lord. That's another beautiful picture. Someone has said, we close our eyes on earth, and we open them in heaven. And so here is the picture that Jesus gives. I think that's significant for the disciples.

For the disciples in verses 14 through 16, let's look at this. And it begins with what can only be described as surprising words in verse 14. Then Jesus told them plainly, Lazarus has died. So, they're hearing Jesus's metaphorical language as being literal. Now Jesus says, no, no, you missed the point. Lazarus is dead. And if that isn't surprising, I think it's shocking because they are processing what they think is good news. Lazarus is simply asleep. He's getting better. He's going to wake up. We don't have to go back to Judea. Now, oh, this is a totally different thing.

It's an insight, isn't it, into the divine omniscience of our Lord. I mean, there's nothing in the text of another messenger coming. In fact, I think if you go into the chronology of this, which maybe we will later at another study, but I think if you go into the chronology of this, the messenger comes to Jesus with word that Lazarus is sick. I think Lazarus dies that day. He may have already died before the messenger even got to Jesus because that would be day one. Then Jesus stays two days, and then we're going to see that there is a travel time to get back. It's very likely that Lazarus had already died, but Jesus exemplifies this mystery of Jesus being the God-man. And from the human perspective, He gets word by a messenger, but in His divine omniscience, He knows that Lazarus has now died.

If that's not surprising enough, verse 15 should get our attention, right? Look at verse 15. Now, what do you rightly conclude when Jesus says, but I am glad that I was not there? What would have happened if He had been there? What would have happened if He had been there is almost certainly the way this story has unfolded, and it would have been almost without question that He would have healed Lazarus. Jesus is going to step into that reality and say, I'm glad that I wasn't there because if I had been there, you would miss out on this lesson that I want you to hear and to see and to learn. He gives them a bigger story to understand and unfold in light of this. Jesus' words, I'm glad I wasn't there, only make sense if we see what Jesus intends to teach the disciples. Look at that. His words aren't just surprising. They're not just shocking, but they are also purposeful. They're directed, first of all, to the disciples. He says, and for your sake. He says, so that. So that you see what's going on here during this unfolding story.

What is on Jesus' heart? Well, on Jesus' heart is, of course, this is an opportunity for the growth of my children. Certainly, it's going to be a growth experience for Mary and Martha. It's going to be a growth experience for the disciples, isn't it? We like comfort. We like comfort. Jesus wants to teach us what it's like to step into discomfort. What it's like to step into grief and sorrow and pain and trial and difficulty. He says, these things are happening. These things are happening so that you may believe. It's the development of the disciples' faith. But it isn't just the disciples, is it? Because it's us. It's ours too, isn't it? The same principles apply to us as they apply to them.

We know how this story goes. I said that just a moment ago. We know how this story goes. It's easy to read right past all the anxiety and the worry and the stress and the loss and the sorrow and the grief and the disappointment, all of that. It's easy to read right by that because we know Lazarus is going to be raised from the dead, but we can't do that. Because we don't know what God's going to be doing in our lives. We don't have the last chapter of our lives. This is a story that calls on not just the disciples, but on us to walk by faith and not by sight. To step into the midst of those trials and those hardships and those difficulties and those hard spaces and to trust God.

Go back to what we said at the beginning. Ask and then trust. Trust and then ask. Pray and wait. Wait and pray. And what happens when you pray and wait? And what happens when you wait and pray? You realize very quickly that you don't have any control over the circumstance that's going on in your life. And that's exactly where God wants you to be. Because He wants you to look to Him, doesn't He? He wants you to trust Him. He wants you to be resting in Him. He wants you to be walking with Him in the light of who Jesus is. This is a beautiful picture of dependency in the midst of this trial.

Now, I want to just say a word about verse 16. Look at verse 16. So, Thomas called the twin, said to his fellow disciples, let us also go that we may die with Him. That we may die with Him. Now, I think about 90% of the commentaries that you pull off of the shelf about verse 16 immediately point out how flawed Thomas is. This is the doubting Thomas guy. I just think that is very unfair. I just don't think it's fair to take a snapshot – whether it's going to be Thomas in this place or whether it's Martha in just a little bit or some other Biblical storylines – where we see somebody's flaw and we see somebody's failing. Do we really want that to be the way we're treated? Do we want everybody to remember us by our failing and our flaw? Of course we don't. I just don't think it's fair to Thomas.

In fact, when I read that, you can go yeah, he's resigned to the negative. Or you can look at this and say this guy is willing to follow Jesus even to the point of death. That's what he's saying, isn't he? He's literally putting in play Luke 14. Take up your cross daily and follow me because it could very well cost you your life. And oh by the way, it will because that's what he calls us to. He calls us to die daily to ourselves. Do you want to see your marriage change? Do you want to see relationships change? Do you want to see what God can do in your life when you adopt the very principles that Jesus teaches regarding his followers, which is you take up your cross daily and you die to self? That's painful. That's hard. But that's what he calls us to. Thomas is later going to give the greatest declaration in all the New Testament save maybe Peter's when he says my Lord and my God. It is truly you. You who died on the cross are now standing before me having been raised again. I think we just give it up to Thomas and say hey, he's probably a lot like me. I think I would have done the same thing. I think I would be just like Martha. Lord, if you had been here this

wouldn't have happened. Jesus, let's just go. We're all going to be killed. Anyway, let's all go. We're all in this together, right? You know, I doubt if any of us would have exemplified something so much better. When you get to heaven just go up to Thomas and say hey Thomas, my pastor said I shouldn't call you doubting Thomas.

Now look at Martha. This is just a quick wrap-up verses 17 to 20. There's a lot more about Mary and Martha coming. Let me just say in verse 17 all doubt is removed in Martha's mind or anybody else's mind. When Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. If you just look at the map that we saw last week, remember, Jesus is somewhere to the east of the Jordan. We don't even know where but he's likely a couple of days away. So, the messenger comes, gives him the message, and Jesus waits in light of that news two days. Well, if he's probably two days away, it's a four-day deal of returning. It was believed, and those of you that are walkers can testify to that with me that a healthy person can walk 20 to 25 miles a day. If you're a walker you can walk 20 to 25 miles a day. That's kind of what they would do back then. A healthy man or woman would walk 20 miles a day, so it's likely that's what happened.

And so here now it's day four. Why is that significant? Why does it even matter what day it was when he got back? He's dead. Because rabbinic tradition taught that the soul would hover above the body for up to three days. Well, it was of course just a heretical theory. It was totally false. There's no biblical basis for it. But this is probably why Jesus waits until the fourth day. By the fourth day the body has begun to decompose and there's no chance that the Spirit is coming back. I think the Holy Spirit says don't overlook the fact that this is four days later. This is a miracle about to unfold.

That of course takes us back to verse 15 when and for your sake I am glad that I was not there so that you may believe the Spirit didn't just mysteriously come back. No, I raised him from the dead. Take another look here at verses 17 through 20 and just another indicator of all that's going on here. When Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem about two miles off. And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming she went out and met him, but Mary remained seated

in the house. You see how close this is to Jerusalem. We're told that again. The proximity to danger is being underscored again. The impact of this family as all through this community is seen because many, many people came from even Jerusalem to be a part of the official mourning party and grieving that was going on. Then we're going to see the differing responses as we go forward with Mary and Martha and the rest. A lot more to come.

What do we take away? When we're struggling in our suffering, in our trials, in our difficulty, whatever that life circumstance is, and our doubts begin to grow as they often do, look again to the cross. Look again to the cross and see the greatness of God's love because that's where it is exemplified. We go back to John chapter 3 verse 16: for God so loved the world. For God so loved you that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. Think again of that quote by Neil deGrasse Tyson: "The universe is blind to our sorrows and indifferent to our pain. Have a nice day." No, my friend. We've got something far better. We have the creator of the universe who cares intimately and personally about each one of us. He loves you. He longs for a relationship with you.

That relationship of course has been broken by sin because all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There's not one person that can stand up and say I'm perfect. I've never done anything wrong. Even if there was such a person who would say, I can only think of one thing in my whole life I've done wrong, that one thing would result in your separation from God forever and ever. That's what sin does. It separates us from God, and that's why Jesus came. That's why he lived this perfect life, that's why he died this terrible death on the cross, so that my sins and your sins could be forgiven and our relationship to God could be restored. What the Bible calls for us to do is simply to believe that what God has said about us is true. In that sense, we repent that we can do anything right, that we can add anything. No, we can't. But what we can do is we can believe. What we can do is we can trust. What we can do is agree with God that what his Son did is all that needed to be done. I invite you to do that right now.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, once again, we thank you for the life of Jesus. There are remarkable stories, Father, that just fill the gospel of John with the wonder and the beauty,

with the heart and the love and the compassion, with the grace and the truth and the mercy of our Lord. Lord, thank you that it isn't just a truth from centuries ago, but it is a reality in our life today. We want to walk with you. We want to walk in the light. We want to walk in the truth. Lord, we want to ask that by your Spirit, if there's someone here this morning who has never believed that what Jesus did on the cross was for them and was all that needs to be done that you would open their heart to this glorious gospel right now right where they're sitting in this moment. May they trust you as their Savior. In Jesus's name, amen