

JOHN
for
EVERYONE

PART 2
CHAPTERS 11–21

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Oliver,
remembering John's words
about the father and the son*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
2022

INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*,’ he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in **bold type** in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what’s going on.

INTRODUCTION

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

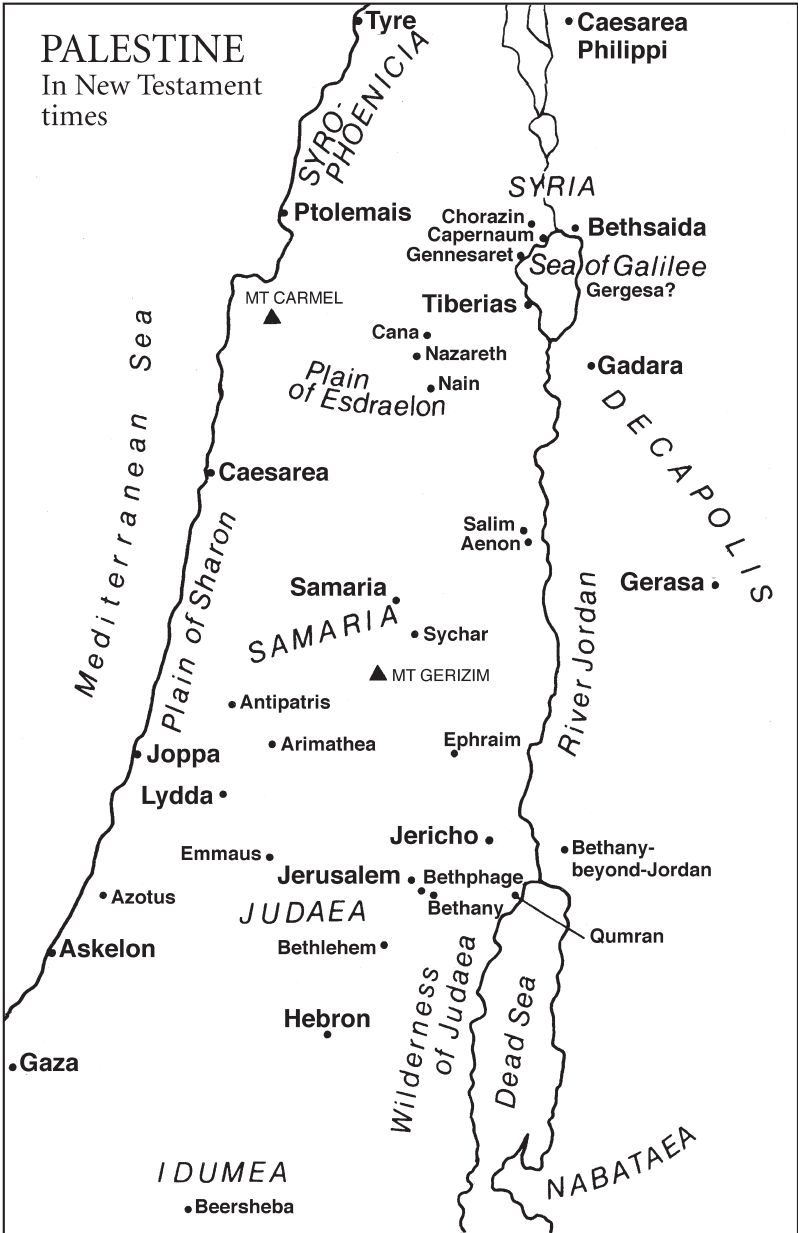
Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

The gospel of John has always been a favourite for many. At one level it is the simplest of all the gospels; at another level it is the most profound. It gives the appearance of being written by someone who was a very close friend of Jesus, and who spent the rest of his life mulling over, more and more deeply, what Jesus had done and said and achieved, praying it through from every angle, and helping others to understand it. Countless people down the centuries have found that, through reading this gospel, the figure of Jesus becomes real for them, full of warmth and light and promise. It is, in fact, one of the great books in the literature of the world; and part of its greatness is the way it reveals its secrets not just to high-flown learning, but to those who come to it with humility and hope. So here it is: John for everyone!

Tom Wright

PALESTINE

In New Testament times



JOHN 11.1–16

The Death of Lazarus

¹There was a man in Bethany named Lazarus, and he became ill. Bethany was the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (²This was the Mary who anointed the Lord with myrrh, and wiped his feet with her hair. Lazarus, who was ill, was her brother.)

³So the sisters sent messengers to Jesus.

‘Master,’ they said, ‘the man you love is ill.’

⁴When Jesus got the message, he said, ‘This illness won’t lead to death. It’s all about the glory of God! The son of God will be glorified through it.’

⁵Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. ⁶So when he heard that he was ill, he stayed where he was for two days.

⁷Then, after that, he said to the disciples, ‘Let’s go back to Judaea.’

⁸‘Teacher,’ replied the disciples, ‘the Judaeans were trying to stone you just now! Surely you don’t want to go back *there!*’

⁹‘There are twelve hours in the day, aren’t there?’ replied Jesus. ‘If you walk in the day, you won’t trip up, because you’ll see the light of this world. ¹⁰But if anyone walks in the night, they will trip up, because there is no light in them.’

¹¹When he had said this, Jesus added: ‘Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. But I’m going to wake him up.’

¹²‘Master,’ replied the disciples, ‘if he’s asleep, he’ll be all right.’

(¹³They thought he was referring to ordinary sleep; but Jesus had in fact been speaking of his death.)

¹⁴Then Jesus spoke to them plainly.

‘Lazarus,’ he said, ‘is dead. ¹⁵Actually, I’m glad I wasn’t there, for your sakes; it will help your faith. But let’s go to him.’

¹⁶Thomas, whose name was the Twin, addressed the other disciples.

‘Let’s go too,’ he said. ‘We may as well die with him.’

Why didn’t they *do* something?

A friend of mine had been invited to take on the leadership of a vibrant, growing church. He and his family were eager to go and meet this new challenge. But the church authorities seemed to be dragging their feet about where he was going to live. The present house was quite unsuitable; should they build a new one? Should they convert an existing church building? Should they house him some way off for the time being and hope something would turn up?

Meanwhile suitable houses, near the church, were coming on the market, and nothing was being done. My friend and his family prayed about it, and still nothing happened. I and others prayed about it, wrote letters, made phone calls, and still nothing happened. The time came

for him to be installed at the church; it was a great occasion, but still nothing definite had happened. Finally, as the whole church prayed about what was to be done, the logjam burst. The decision was made. And one of the most suitable houses, which they had looked at from the beginning, had now come down in price. The church authorities bought it, the family moved in and the new ministry began.

But I shan't forget the months of frustration, during which it seemed as though nothing was happening. It seemed as though God was ignoring our prayers for the proper solution. We all got tired of it. People became irritable and wondered if we'd made some mistake somewhere. And I know that there are many stories like that which don't have a happy ending at all, or not yet. In many ways the story of the world is like that. We pray for justice and peace, for prosperity and harmony between nations and races. And still it hasn't happened.

God doesn't play games with us. Of that I am quite sure. And yet his ways are not our ways. His timing is not our timing. One of the most striking reminders of this is in verse 6 of the present passage. When Jesus got the message from the two sisters, the cry for help, the emergency-come-quickly appeal, *he stayed where he was for two days*. He didn't even mention it to the **disciples**. He didn't make preparations to go. He didn't send messages back to say 'We're on our way'. He just stayed there. And Mary and Martha, in Bethany, watched their beloved brother die.

What was Jesus doing? From the rest of the story, I think we can tell. He was praying. He was wrestling with the father's will. The disciples were quite right (verse 8): the Judaeans had been wanting to stone him, and surely he wouldn't think of going back just yet? Bethany was and is a small town just two miles or so from Jerusalem, on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. Once you're there, you're within easy reach of the holy city. And who knows what would happen this time.

It's important to realize that this wonderful story about Lazarus, one of the most powerful and moving in the whole Bible, is not just about Lazarus. It's also about Jesus. The chapter begins with the disciples warning Jesus not to go back to Judaea; it ends with the **high priest** declaring that one man must die for the people (verse 50). And when Jesus thanks the father that he has heard his prayer (verses 41-42), I think he's referring to the prayers he prayed during those two strange, silent days in the wilderness across the Jordan (10.40). He was praying for Lazarus, but he was also praying for wisdom and guidance as to his own plans and movements. Somehow the two were bound up together. What Jesus was going to do for Lazarus would be, on the one hand, a principal reason why the authorities would want him out of the way (verses 45-53). But it would be, on the other hand, the most powerful

sign yet, in the sequence of ‘signs’ that marks our progression through this **gospel**, of what Jesus’ life and work was all about, and of how in particular it would reach its climactic resolution.

The time of waiting, therefore, was vital. As so often, Jesus needed to be in prayer, exploring the father’s will in that intimacy and union of which he often spoke. Only then would he act – not in the way Mary and Martha had wanted him to do, but in a manner beyond their wildest dreams.

The word ‘Bethany’ means, literally, ‘the house of the poor’. There is some evidence that it was just that: a place where poor, needy and sick people could be cared for, a kind of hospice a little way outside the city. Jesus had been there before, perhaps several times. He may have had a special affection for the place, and it for him, as he demonstrated again and again his own care for those in need, and assured them of the promise of the **kingdom** in which the poor would celebrate and the sick be healed. John points us on, in verse 2, to the moment which he will later describe (12.1-8), when Mary poured expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet and provoked a fuss about why it hadn’t been given to the poor. Extravagance doesn’t go down well in a poor-house.

But this story is all about the ways in which Jesus surprises people and overturns their expectations. He didn’t go when the sisters asked him. He did eventually go, although the disciples warned him not to. He spoke about ‘sleep’, meaning death, and the disciples thought he meant ordinary sleep. And, in the middle (verse 9), he told them in a strange little saying that people who walk in the daytime don’t trip up, but people who walk around in the darkness do. What did he mean?

He seems to have meant that the only way to know where you were going was to follow him. If you try to steer your course by your own understanding, you’ll trip up, because you’ll be in the dark. But if you stick close to him, and see the situation from his point of view, then, even if it means days and perhaps years of puzzlement, wondering why nothing seems to be happening, you will come out at the right place in the end.

The end of the passage introduces us to one of John’s great minor characters. Thomas is loyal, dogged, slow to understand things, but determined to go on putting one foot in front of another at Jesus’ command. Now he speaks words heavy with foreboding for what’s to come: ‘Let’s go too, and die with him.’ They don’t die with him, of course, or not yet, but this is certainly the right response. There is a great deal that we don’t understand, and our hopes and plans often get thwarted. But if we go with Jesus, even if it’s into the jaws of death, we will be walking in the light, whereas if we press ahead arrogantly with our own plans and ambitions we are bound to trip up.

JOHN 11.17–27

The Resurrection and the Life

¹⁷So when Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. ¹⁹Many of the Judaeans had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.

²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus had arrived, she went to meet him. Mary, meanwhile, stayed sitting at home.

²¹‘Master!’ said Martha to Jesus. ‘If only you’d been here! Then my brother wouldn’t have died!’ ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask him.’

²³‘Your brother will rise again,’ replied Jesus.

²⁴‘I know he’ll rise again,’ said Martha, ‘in the resurrection on the last day.’

²⁵‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ replied Jesus. ‘Anyone who believes in me will live, even if they die. ²⁶And anyone who lives and believes in me will never, ever die. Do you believe this?’

²⁷‘Yes, Master,’ she said. ‘This is what I’ve come to believe: that you are the Messiah, the son of God, the one who was to come into the world.’

When did you last say ‘If only . . .’?

If only he hadn’t stepped out in front of that car . . .

If only she had worked a bit harder and not failed the exam. . . .

If only a different president had been elected last time round . . .

If only we hadn’t decided to go on holiday that very week . . .

And whatever it is, you will know the sickening sense of wanting to turn the clock back. That’s why movies are made, like that *Back to the Future* series, in which people do just that, moving this way and that within the long history of time, changing something in a previous generation which will mean that now everything in the present – and the future – can be different. And of course it’s a wistful dream. It’s a kind of nostalgia, not for the past as it was, but for the present that could have been, *if only* the past had just been a little bit different. Like all nostalgia, it’s a bittersweet feeling, caressing the moment that might have been, while knowing it’s all fantasy.

All of that and more is here (verse 21) in Martha’s ‘if only’ to Jesus. She knows that if Jesus had been there he would have cured Lazarus. And she probably knows, too, that it had taken Jesus at least two days longer to get there than she had hoped. Lazarus, as we discover later, has already been dead for three days, but perhaps . . . he might just have made it . . . if only . . .

Jesus' reply to her, and the conversation they then have, show that the 'back to the future' idea isn't entirely a moviemaker's fantasy. Instead of looking at the past, and dreaming about what might have been (but now can't be), he invites her to look to the future. Then, having looked to the future, he asks her to imagine that the future is suddenly brought forwards into the present. This, in fact, is central to all early Christian beliefs about Jesus, and the present passage makes the point as clearly and vividly as anywhere in the whole New Testament.

First, he points her to the future. 'Your brother will rise again.' She knows, as well as Jesus does, that this is standard Jewish teaching. (Some Jews, particularly the **Sadducees**, didn't believe in a future **resurrection**, but at this period most Jews did, following Daniel 12.3 and other key Old Testament passages.) They shared the vision of Isaiah 65 and 66: a vision of new **heavens** and new earth, God's whole new world, a world like ours only with its beauty and power enhanced and its pain, ugliness and grief abolished. Within that new world, they believed, all God's people from ancient times to the present would be given new bodies, to share and relish the **life** of the new creation.

Martha believes this, but her rather flat response in verse 24 shows that it isn't at the moment very comforting. But she isn't prepared for Jesus' response. The future has burst into the present. The new creation, and with it the resurrection, has come forward from the end of time into the middle of time. Jesus has not just come, as we sometimes say or sing, 'from heaven to earth'; it is equally true to say that he has come from God's future into the present, into the mess and muddle of the world we know. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' he says. 'Resurrection' isn't just a doctrine. It isn't just a future fact. It's a *person*, and here he is standing in front of Martha, teasing her to make the huge jump of trust and hope.

He is challenging her, urging her, to exchange her 'if only . . .' for an 'if Jesus . . .'.

If Jesus is who she is coming to believe he is . . .

If Jesus is the **Messiah**, the one who was promised by the prophets, the one who was to come into the world . . .

If he is God's own son, the one in whom the living God is strangely and newly present . . .

If he is resurrection-in-person, life-come-to-life . . .

The story breaks off at this point, keeping us in suspense while Martha goes to get her sister. But this suspense – John is, after all, a master storyteller – is designed not least to give us space to think the same questions through for ourselves. This is one of those stories in which it's not difficult to place ourselves among the characters.

Martha is the active, busy one (see Luke 10.38–42), and Mary the quieter. We shall see Mary's response presently. Martha had to hurry off to meet Jesus and confront him directly. Many of us are like that; we can't wait, we must tell Jesus what we think of him and his strange ways. If you're like that, and if you have an 'if only' in your heart or mind right now, put yourself in Martha's shoes. Run off to meet Jesus. Tell him the problem. Ask him why he didn't come sooner, why he allowed that awful thing to happen.

And then be prepared for a surprising response. I can't predict what the response will be, for the very good reason that it is always, always a surprise. But I do know the shape that it will take. Jesus will meet your problem with some new part of God's future that can and will burst into your present time, into the mess and grief, with good news, with hope, with new possibilities.

And the key to it all, now as then, is **faith**. Jesus is bringing God's new world to birth; but it doesn't happen automatically. It doesn't just sweep everyone along with it, willy-nilly. The key to sharing the new world is faith: believing in Jesus, trusting that he is God's Messiah, the one coming into the world, into our world, into our pain and sorrow and death.

JOHN 11.28–37

Jesus Goes to the Tomb

²⁸With these words, Martha went back and called her sister Mary.

'The teacher has come,' she said to her privately, 'and he's asking for you.'

²⁹When she heard that, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Jesus hadn't yet arrived in the village. He was still in the place where Martha had met him.

³¹The Judaeans who were in the house with Mary, consoling her, saw her get up quickly and go out. They guessed that she was going to the tomb to weep there, and they followed her.

³²When Mary came to where Jesus was, she saw him and fell down at his feet.

'Master!' she said. 'If only you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died!'

³³When Jesus saw her crying, and the Judaeans who had come with her crying, he was deeply stirred in his spirit, and very troubled.

³⁴'Where have you laid him?' he asked.

'Master,' they said, 'come and see.'

³⁵Jesus burst into tears.

³⁶'Look,' said the Judaeans, 'see how much he loved him!'

³⁷‘Well, yes,’ some of them said, ‘but he opened the eyes of a blind man, didn’t he? Couldn’t he have done something to stop this fellow from dying?’

One of the greatest cultural divides in today’s world is the different ways in which we do funerals.

In many parts of the world people still mourn their dead in much the same way that they did in Jesus’ day. There are processions, carrying the coffin along the streets to the place of burial or cremation. Everyone, particularly the women, cries and wails. There is wild, sad music. The process of grief is well and truly launched. One person’s grief communicates to another; it’s part of the strange business of being human that when we are with very sad people their sadness infects us even if we don’t share their particular grief. (The psychologists would point out that we all carry deep griefs of one sort or another, and these come to the surface when we are with others who have more immediate reason for sorrow.)

In other cultures, not least in the secularized world of the modern West, we have learned to hide our emotions. I well remember visiting an old lady whose husband had died after more than forty years of marriage. She was busying herself with arrangements, making phone calls, sorting out clothes, wondering what she should wear at the funeral. On the day itself she was bright and perky, putting on a good show for her family and friends. She was with us as we went for a cup of tea afterwards, chatting cheerfully, not wanting anyone else to be upset. I couldn’t help feeling that the older way, the way of most of the world to this day, is actually kinder. It doesn’t do any good to hide grief, or pretend it doesn’t exist. When Paul says he doesn’t want us to grieve like people who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4.13) he doesn’t mean that he doesn’t want us to grieve at all; he means that there are two sorts of grief, a hopeless grief and a hopeful grief. Hopeful grief is still grief. It can still be very, very bitter.

As though to rub this point in, we find Jesus in this passage bursting into tears (verse 35). It’s one of the most remarkable moments in the whole **gospel** story. There can be no doubt of its historical truth. Nobody in the early church, venerating Jesus and celebrating his own victory over death, would have invented such a thing. But we shouldn’t miss the levels of meaning that John intends us to see within it.

To begin with, we should not rest content, as some older writers did, with treating Jesus’ tears as evidence that he was a real human being, not just a divine being ‘playing’ at being human. That is no doubt true; but nobody in Jesus’ world imagined he was anything other than a real, flesh-and-blood human being, with emotions like everyone else’s.

Rather, throughout the gospel John is telling us something much more striking; that when we look at Jesus, *not least when we look at Jesus in tears*, we are seeing not just a flesh-and-blood human being but the **Word** made flesh (1.1–14). The Word, through whom the worlds were made, weeps like a baby at the grave of his friend. Only when we stop and ponder this will we understand the full mystery of John's gospel. Only when we put away our high-and-dry pictures of who God is and replace them with pictures in which the Word who is God can cry with the world's crying will we discover what the word 'God' really means.

Jesus bursts into tears at the moment when he sees Mary, and all the Judeans with her, in tears. 'He has borne our griefs', said the prophet, 'and carried our sorrows' (Isaiah 53.4). Jesus doesn't sweep into the scene (as we might have supposed, and as later Christians inventing such a story would almost certainly have told us) and declare that tears are beside the point, that Lazarus is not dead, only asleep (see Mark 5.39). Even though, as his actions and words will shortly make clear, Jesus has no doubt what he will do, and what his father will do through him, there is no sense of triumphalism, of someone coming in smugly with the secret formula that will show how clever he is. There is, rather, the man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief and pain, sharing and bearing it to the point of tears.

What grief within Jesus' own heart was stirred by the tears of Mary and the crowd? We can only guess. But among those guesses we must place, not a grief for other deaths in the past, but a grief for a death still to come: his own. This passage points us forward to the questions that will be asked at Jesus' own death. Couldn't the man who did so many signs have brought it about that he himself didn't have to die? Couldn't the one who saved so many have in the end saved himself? John is telling us the answer by a thousand hints and images throughout his book. It is only *through* his death, it is only *through* his own sharing of the common fate of humanity, that the world can be saved. There is a line straight on from Jesus' tears in verse 35 to the death in which Jesus will share, not only the grief, but also the doom of the world.

But there is also a hint of what will then follow. 'Where have you laid him?' Jesus asks Mary and the others. 'They have taken away my master,' says Mary Magdalene just a week or two later, 'and I don't know where they have laid him' (20.13). Listen to the echoes between the story of Lazarus and that of Jesus himself. That's part of the reason John has told the story at all. (The other gospels don't have it; some have suggested that they were anxious to protect Lazarus from the sort of unwelcome attention indicated in 12.9–11. Presumably this danger was past by the time John was writing.)

‘Come and see,’ they respond, as Jesus had responded to the early **disciples’** enquiry as to where he was staying (1.46). It is the simplest of invitations, and yet it goes to the heart of Christian **faith**. ‘Come and see,’ we say to Jesus, as we lead him, all tears, to the place of our deepest grief and sorrow. ‘Come and see,’ he says to us in reply, as he leads us through the sorrow to the place where he now dwells in light and love and **resurrection** glory. And, even more evocative (21.12), ‘come and have breakfast.’ The new day is dawning; and, though where we live the night can be very dark, and the tears very bitter, there is light and joy waiting not far away.

JOHN 11.38–46

The Raising of Lazarus

³⁸Jesus was once again deeply troubled within himself. He came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was placed in front of it.

³⁹‘Take away the stone,’ said Jesus.

‘But, Master,’ said Martha, the dead man’s sister, ‘there’ll be a smell! It’s the fourth day already!’

⁴⁰‘Didn’t I tell you,’ said Jesus, ‘that if you believed you would see God’s glory?’

⁴¹So they took the stone away.

Jesus lifted up his eyes.

‘Thank you, father,’ he said, ‘for hearing me! ⁴²I know you always hear me, but I’ve said this because of the crowd standing around, so that they may believe that you sent me.’

⁴³With these words, he gave a loud shout: ‘Lazarus – come out!’

⁴⁴And the dead man came out. He was tied up, hand and foot, with strips of linen, and his face was wrapped in a cloth.

‘Untie him,’ said Jesus, ‘and let him go.’

⁴⁵The result of all this was that several of the Judaeans who had come to Mary, and who had seen what he had done, believed in him.

⁴⁶But some of them went off to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

We saw a programme on the television last night about the fossilized remains of what looks like an ancient race of creatures. They seem to be like humans, but much taller. They appear to have been significantly different from any monkeys or apes known to us. Now the archaeologists are teaming up with explorers (all this takes place in some of the remotest mountains of China) to see if these creatures might still exist.

It’s an exciting story, and a remarkable prospect. But I am fascinated by the way in which the archaeologists piece together their finds. Here

is a fossil which seems to be part of an animal. Here is a bone which might be part of the same animal. Here is a piece of hair, stuck to a rock deep inside a cave, high in the mountains. Could they all go together? Could one of these puzzles explain the others?

The present passage is one of the most dramatic moments in the whole story of Jesus. When Jesus raised Jairus' daughter in Mark 5, he ordered almost everyone out of the room, and when it was over he told them not to tell anyone. Now he stands in front of a large crowd, puts his reputation on the line, and shouts to Lazarus to come out. (The tomb, like many at the time, was clearly a cave, with a large stone across its mouth.)

And the dead man comes out – a heart-stopping moment of shuddering horror and overwhelming joy, mixed together like dark mud and liquid gold. All this is hugely important. If we don't feel its power, and find ourselves driven to awe and thanks and hope, then either we haven't learned to read or we have hearts of stone.

There must have been many other newly buried people Jesus didn't attempt to raise. There is a mystery about this moment which is bound up with the mysterious uniqueness of Jesus' own work. He brought God's love and power into sharp and clear focus in one small place; only then would it go out into the rest of the world. This passage raises these questions for us quite sharply.

But the raising of Lazarus isn't itself the most extraordinary thing about the passage. The most extraordinary thing is what isn't said, but what provides the link between the two puzzles that we are otherwise facing, like the archaeologist trying to put together a fossil and a bone.

To begin with, we have an unanswered comment from Martha. Good old Martha, we think, always fussing and anxious, wanting to do her best, even at a time like this. 'Master,' she says, 'you can't take the stone away! There'll be a smell!' She knows perfectly well that a human body, particularly in a warm climate, will begin to putrefy within at most three days of death. That's why many in that part of the world bury their dead the very first day.

John doesn't have Jesus answer her, except with an oblique comment: if she believes, she will see God's glory. Somehow, what he is going to do will achieve that. But the question remains: what has happened to Lazarus's body? Will it have started to decay?

The other unexplained bit of evidence is what Jesus says when they take the stone away. He doesn't pray that he will now have the power to raise Lazarus. He thanks the father that he has heard him. And he adds an odd little extra sentence about wanting to show the people around that they should believe in him.

How do we put these two bits of evidence together and make sense of them?

John has omitted – but surely wants us to understand, and to be struck all the more powerfully for having to work it out – that when they took the stone away from the tomb *there was no smell*. From that moment on, Jesus knew that Lazarus was not dead, or was dead no longer. His body had not begun to decompose. All that was required now would be a word of command, and he would come out, a shuffling, sightless figure, to be unwrapped and released into the world of **life** and light. But we are left pondering how Jesus had got to that point.

There is only one conclusion that we can draw, and it's very striking. In those two silent days the other side of the Jordan (11.6), before he even told the **disciples** of the problem, he was praying: praying that, though Lazarus would die, he would be preserved from corruption; praying that, when eventually they arrived at Bethany, the body in the tomb would be whole and complete, ready to be summoned back into life. And when they took the stone away he knew that his prayer had been answered.

This, of course, raises the other question which looms up behind this story. The disciples warned Jesus that to go back to Judaea again was to court death (11.8). Thomas, gloomily accepting this as inevitable, proposes that they go and die with him (11.16). Jesus, meanwhile, has been praying for a dear and now dead friend, praying that his body will not decay in the days after death and burial, but that he will be ready to come back to life. We cannot but connect the two, the fate of Lazarus and the fate of Jesus. We cannot but suppose that Jesus, in praying for Lazarus and then raising him to life, was aware that he was walking towards his own death, and praying his way into the father's will for what would happen thereafter.

Of course, there are differences. Lazarus came back into ordinary human life. For him, the process of death was simply reversed. He could still become ill again. One day, he too would die (and there were some who wanted to make that happen sooner rather than later, as 12.10 indicates). But the journey Jesus would make would be *through* death and out the other side into a new sort of life. We shall peer into this mystery when we reach the last two chapters of the book.

For the moment, we pause and reflect not only on the power of God but the **faith** and prayer of Jesus. So often we find two or three parts of our life which pose us the same sort of puzzle that we find in this text, things that should go together, but we can't quite see how. We should remember that in this story the unspoken clue to it all was prayer and faith. If Jesus needed to spend time praying and waiting, how much more will we.

JOHN 11.47-57

The Plan of Caiaphas

⁴⁷So the chief priests and the Pharisees called an assembly.

‘What are we going to do?’ they asked. ‘This man is performing lots of signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone is going to believe in him! Then the Romans will come and take away our holy place, and our nation!’

⁴⁹But one of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, addressed them.

‘You know nothing at all!’ he said. ⁵⁰‘You haven’t worked it out! This is what’s best for you: let one man die for the people, rather than the whole nation being wiped out.’

⁵¹He didn’t say this of his own accord. Since he was high priest that year, it was a prophecy. It meant that Jesus would die for the nation; ⁵²and not only for the nation, but to gather into one the scattered children of God. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted how to kill him.

⁵⁴So Jesus didn’t go around openly any longer among the Judaeans. He went away from there to the region by the desert, to a town called Ephraim. He stayed there with the disciples.

⁵⁵The time came for the Judaeans’ Passover. Lots of people went up to Jerusalem from the countryside, before the Passover, to purify themselves. ⁵⁶They were looking for Jesus. As they stood there in the Temple, they were discussing him with one another.

‘What d’you think?’ they were saying. ‘Do you suppose he won’t come to the festival?’

⁵⁷The chief priests and the Pharisees had given the order that if anyone knew where he was, they should tell them, so that they could arrest him.

We hadn’t been in the country very long when we noticed that our host was driving in a strange fashion. At first, being sleepy from the journey, we thought we were just imagining it; but then it became quite unmistakable. He would drive along an ordinary road, and then suddenly take a sharp turn off, go along some narrow back roads, make a few other detours, and then come out again on what, we were sure, was the same road we’d been on in the first place.

Eventually we plucked up the courage to ask him. Why were we taking these odd little detours? What was the problem?

‘I thought you were going to ask me sooner or later,’ he said ruefully. ‘I didn’t want to scare you. But the fact is that we’re still quite close to the border here. There have been terrorist attacks on isolated cars, especially after dark. So every time I know we’re coming near a place where there have been incidents in the past, I take evasive action.’

At once it became clear. What had seemed like strange, even paranoid behaviour was completely explicable in the light of the threat which, until that moment, we hadn't even thought of.

That is the flavour of the meeting called by the chief **priests** and **Pharisees**. This is the first and only time in all four **gospels** where the word 'Romans' is mentioned; and it explains a great deal, not only what was said that day.

The Romans were behind much of the anxiety of the Jews in Jesus' day, both ordinary Jews and their actual and self-appointed leaders. They had taken over more or less the whole Middle East about a century before Jesus' day. There weren't many Roman soldiers about in the ordinary towns and villages, but there were whole legions stationed a few miles north, in Syria, and the governor of Judaea could call on them for help at any time. That had happened in living memory, and thousands of young rebel Jews had been crucified when the army marched in. Though many Jewish leaders longed to be free from this threat, free to order their national life without having to do what Rome said, they greatly preferred the semi-freedom that Rome granted them to the devastation that would follow if a major revolution sprang up.

And they clearly thought that's what would happen if Jesus went any further. Healing blind people (on the **sabbath**, too!) was one thing; but raising the dead, and doing so publicly where a lot of people could scurry back to Jerusalem and tell their friends about it – this was too much. Obviously, they thought, he was gathering support for some kind of prophetic or even **messianic** action, perhaps a march on Jerusalem itself. Once that happened, if the Romans got wind of it they would call up the troops. And that would be the end of any national hope they might still have. As likely as not, it would be the end of the nation itself.

This forecast of the likely political outcome of Jesus' activity is full of irony and paradox. John's reader knows by now that whatever Jesus is doing he isn't mounting a political-style revolution. The shepherd who speaks of giving his life for the sheep is hardly likely to tell those same sheep to take up arms and follow him into battle. The victory Jesus intends to win will be won by self-giving love, not by normal revolutionary means. Yet the authorities are naturally jumpy. They know of plenty of revolutionary movements in recent times, many of which had begun, as Jesus' movement had, in Galilee. They know that they all come to the same thing in the end. Indeed, many of the Pharisees themselves, and perhaps some of the priests too, longed to see Roman rule thrown off. They knew the way their people's minds worked.

At the same time, with the advantage of hindsight we can see that the fear was justified. Less than forty years later, a real, large-scale

revolution did indeed spring up, after some abortive previous attempts. The Romans did indeed come and destroy the **Temple**, leaving Jerusalem a smoking ruin and the Jewish people in shreds.

Jesus, it seems, was anxious on his own account to save the sheep from just those wolves. There is a strange coming together between his own sense of the father's vocation (to protect the sheep from the predators, even at the cost of his own life) and the cynical suggestion of Caiaphas that if one person were to die the whole nation might be spared.

John highlights this by pointing out that Caiaphas was after all **high priest** that year. Even his proposal, a matter of cynical politics from top to bottom, could and should be read as a kind of prophecy, a prophecy which followers of Jesus could muse over and make their own. Jesus would indeed die for the nation, executed in the manner reserved for rebel subjects; but this death would not just be for the nation, but (as Jesus indicated in the 'shepherd' discourse (10.16)), for a much larger company: all God's children, wherever they might be on the face of the earth.

This two-level scene – the politicians anxiously plotting a judicial murder, and John interpreting it as a divine prophecy – brings John's slow build-up on the meaning of Jesus' death towards its climax. From the very beginning he has told us that Jesus is the lamb of God (1.29, 36). Jesus has spoken of his own death and **resurrection** in terms of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple (2.19–21), which chimes in interestingly with our present passage. He has declared that the **son of man** was to be 'lifted up', like the serpent in the wilderness (3.14–15), so that anyone who believes in him could experience **the life of God's coming age**. He has spoken of giving his own flesh for the life of the world (6.51), and of the shepherd giving his life to save the sheep (10.15–18).

At the same time, we have seen the build-up of hostility towards Jesus, especially among the leaders in Judaea. Several times they have wanted to arrest him; sometimes, even, to stone him. Now the whole picture comes together. Jesus' sense of vocation on the one hand meets the leaders' sense of anxiety and political calculation on the other. All it will now take is the right opportunity.

And when better than Passover, when the lambs were killed to celebrate God's promise of freedom? John portrays the scene of pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the festival; but, in the way he describes them and the question they are asking, he wants his readers to ask the question too (much as in 7.1–13). Jesus has gone away into the hill country just outside Jerusalem. 'Ephraim' probably refers to a town about fifteen miles away, where he was safe for the moment. Will he now go up to the festival? Will this be the moment when all the hints and guesses turn into action?

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