

John 11:17-27 – “I Am: Resurrection”

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Intro: We live in an age of “miracles and wonder,” sang Paul Simon some years ago, and I think we all agree that his words are not an overstatement. We look around us at the world we live in and see a place our ancestors could scarcely imagine. A world of instant world-wide communication. A world of technological alchemy – computers that now obey the sound of our voices, unlimited energy at the flip of a switch. In another song, Simon sang, “We come on a ship they call the Mayflower; we come on a ship that sailed to the moon.” Indeed, we have. But for all our technological and scientific know-how, there remains one problem we cannot find a solution to: we all must die. Death is the insoluble problem, the inescapable tragedy of man. We may be clever enough to fly to the moon, but no one has yet found a way to keep us from taking flight in death’s grip when the day has come for our departure. Death is completely beyond our ability to solve. God has decreed that death will reign until Sin is defeated, and only the great “I Am” has the power to bring that about.

Proposition: Jesus is the Great I Am that overturns death by Resurrection. Believe in Him and be raised.

Billboard: (vv.17-20) The Insoluble Problem
 (vv.21-24) The Inadequate Solution
 (vv.25-27) The Indispensable Resolution

(vv.17-20) The Insoluble Problem – When Ebenezer Scrooge was confronted with his name chiseled into his tomb stone, he wept and pleaded with the Ghost of Christmas future for a way to “sponge away the writing from this stone.” Death is the great problem no man may sponge away as we see in these verses. **John 11:17 - 17** *Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.* We are told that Lazarus had been in his grave for four days when Jesus arrived, and the timing is significant to the story. A common belief of first-century Jews was that the spirit of a man would hover around the body for three days after death seeking a way to get back in. On the fourth day, after decay had set in, the spirit would abandon hope and leave the body behind for good; the case would be finally and forever hopeless. Jesus intentionally delayed His coming for four days to emphasize that Lazarus’ case was hopeless by the time He arrived. In fact, a careful reading of the whole passage reveals that Lazarus was already dead by the time news of his illness reached Jesus. Since Jewish practice was to bury the body immediately after death occurred, Lazarus would have been placed in his tomb the same day the messenger left Bethany with the message for Jesus. His journey would take one day; Jesus delayed another two days, then took a fourth day to journey to Bethany Himself. The text tells us that Jesus did this intentionally for the purpose of strengthening His disciples’ faith: **John 11:14–15 - 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.”* His purpose was also to demonstrate His love for Lazarus’ family, as we’re told in **John 11:5–7 - 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. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”* We might ask ourselves, “How did Jesus’ delay show His love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and strengthen the faith of His disciples?” Jesus delayed to give them

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something greater than the miracle of healing they sought; He delayed to show them that He Himself is Resurrection. Lazarus died. In the face of death, man can do nothing beyond the ministry of consolation, as we see in verses **John 11:18–19** - **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.* These verses reveal to us something of the status of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. They are apparently well known to the Jewish community in Jerusalem, so they must have been well off. Further, the order in which their names are given in John and in Luke indicates that Martha was the head of the household and must have been the oldest sibling. Mary would have been next, and Lazarus would have been the youngest – probably a vital young man at the time of his death. In spite of Lazarus’ youth, some disease had taken hold and carried him away, despite all that could humanly be done for him. In the face of this tragedy, friends came to console Martha and Mary, the only thing that can be done when a loved one is taken from us. It was an act of love and ought to be appreciated as such. When the news of Jesus’ arrival came to Martha, she went to meet Jesus without telling Mary where she was going. This is likely a matter of social convention – it would be impolite and unappreciative to leave visitors in the home without a family member or an explanation, and Martha evidently did not want any company with her when she met Jesus.

[DOCTRINE] Death is the insoluble problem for which man has no answer beyond the ministry of consolation.

[ILLUSTRATION] The details of grieving we are given in the passage all sound so familiarly timeless, don’t they? The hopeless feeling. The sad coming of friends to offer consolation. The attention to cultural politeness which seems so unimportant yet necessary under the circumstances. Death is the age-old problem which seems too strangely familiar, yet obscenely grotesque from generation to generation.

[APPLICATION] To die is one of the most human things we can do, and yet we rebel against it. We try madly to deny its existence. We dress like teenagers well beyond our teenage years. We watch our diets and take our meds to stave it off. We make light of it at funerals; speak platitudes at wakes: “He’s in a better place. She’s with her friends. God must have needed another angel.” All these things are said as a means to comfort, but let’s not kid ourselves; that’s just the sound of people whistling past the graveyard. And that is all man can do in the face of death: attempt to offer comfort to those who grieve. Men have no other solution. Only the great “*I Am*” can ultimately resolve the issue.

(vv.21-24) The Inadequate Solution – Martha went to meet Jesus alone with an accusation in one hand, and a hinted solution in the other. First, the accusation: **John 11:21** - **21** *Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* There is more than a suspicion that this is meant as a subtle rebuke of Jesus’ delay in coming. Obviously, what she wanted was for Jesus to come immediately and heal Lazarus from his illness. She believes Jesus would have healed him, and in this she is probably right. In all likelihood if Jesus had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Jesus made no response to this so Martha proposed a way for Jesus to set things right: **John 11:22** - **22** *But even now I know that whatever you ask from*

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God, God will give you.” She seems to be hinting at resuscitation. She has heard about Jairus’ daughter; she knows well about the Widow of Nain’s son. Both had been brought back to life – resuscitated shortly after their deaths. True, this case is different: Lazarus has been in his tomb four days, but even now, she believes, Jesus can call him back. She is proposing the same solution everyone longs for in the face of death: “Just bring him back and everything will be okay.” But resuscitation is no solution to the problem. The Bible knows several instances of resuscitation: The Widow of Zarephath’s son; the son of the Shunammite Woman; Jairus’ daughter; the Widow of Nain’s son; indeed, Lazarus himself – all were raised again and gave temporary relief to their grieving loved ones. But the relief was only a postponement, setting aside the pain till a later time, for each one would have to die again. That is because resuscitation treats the symptoms but can’t cure the disease. Sin must be finally and forever dealt with, and resuscitation can’t do that. We need something more than resuscitation. But resuscitation is all we can think of in our grief: “If only I could have him back! If only she could be here with me again.” Jesus offered something better to Martha: **John 11:23 - 23** *Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”* This is a promise Jesus made to Martha, and I don’t believe He was speaking of the resuscitation of Lazarus He would accomplish later that day. Jesus’ promise to Martha wasn’t about the immediate but about the future; not about resuscitation but about something better – resurrection. Not about temporary relief, but permanent solution. Jesus made Martha a promise, “*Your brother will rise again,*” but all Martha heard was a doctrinal statement. She completely missed the true consolation Jesus was offering her: **John 11:24 - 24** *Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* I cannot read that without hearing some impatience in Martha’s voice. “Yes, I know about the resurrection; but what I’m really asking for right now is resuscitation – I just want him back.”

[DOCTRINAL STATEMENT] Faced with death, men can only imagine an inadequate solution; one that treats the symptoms but leaves the disease untouched.

[ILLUSTRATION] While we were missionaries in Paraguay our mission hosted several mission teams from the United States that came to give treatment to poor people in the countryside communities in which we worked. A popular remedy for various aches and pains was a shot of cortisone in the affected area. This worked wonders for a while, but when the medication finally worked its way out of the system, the pain reappeared. Year after year, our campesino friends lined up for those shots, and year after year their symptoms were treated, but their disease was left untouched.

[APPLICATION] That is all the natural man can imagine in the face of death. “If only I could have him back just as he was before he died!” But that’s no solution at all. We need something more. The disease must be forever resolved, and only the great “*I Am*” can provide that.

(vv.25-27) The Indispensable Resolution – Jesus responded to Martha’s impatience by offering her something greater than resuscitation; He offered her Himself: **John 11:25–26 - 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?”* Jesus offered Himself as the solution to the problem of death. He said, “*I am the resurrection and the*

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life.” The solution to death isn’t technical, but personal. Jesus is life itself given to men. We don’t need a cure for death; we need a cure for Sin and Jesus is that cure. Jesus is life. He is the solution to death that endures forever – resurrection to a whole new kind of life. What does this kind of life consist of? He goes on to tell us: *Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.* It survives beyond physical death. Physical death is the penalty for Sin. Through His broken body, Jesus paid sin’s penalty for all who believe in Him. *And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.* This life that survives physical death is beyond the grasp of spiritual death forever. The “*second death*” of eternal separation from God is swept away through union with the resurrected Christ – “*the firstborn from the dead*” (cf. Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5). Jesus asked Martha, *Do you believe this?*” Her reply is instructive: **John 11:27 - 27** *She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.”* Notice that He asked, “*Do you believe this?*” and her response was, “*Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.*” She sees immediately that He isn’t asking about the *doctrine* of resurrection, but about the *person* who is resurrection. It isn’t an accident that she fuses His words with His person. When we put our faith in Jesus, we put our faith in everything He said, everything He did, everything He is. Jesus IS resurrection; Jesus IS life. To believe is to commit all of oneself to Jesus Christ. It’s to put all our hope and confidence in all that He is.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Jesus is resurrection and life. All who believe in Him are transformed to life eternal.

[APPLICATION] The problem with resuscitation is that it doesn’t fix our problem. All those resuscitated simply die again. Resuscitation does not solve our problem; we need transformation, not resuscitation. Resurrection fixes our problem because it transforms us. Eternal life replaces temporal life and eternal death. Through simple trust in Jesus, we enter union with Jesus. All who trust in Him have resurrection as a present and future reality.

Conclusion: Our rescue from death comes through belief. When we put all our chips on who He is, we enter resurrection life, and that is all we need. The great “*I Am*” is Resurrection. And *He* is all we need.