

God Came Down

(The Fourth Gospel)

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Jesus Retires Beyond the Jordan (10:40-42)

Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. Here he stayed ⁴¹and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true." ⁴²And in that place many believed in Jesus.

Here the scene changes from Jerusalem and the Feast of Hanukkah to a location in Judea, beyond the Jordan (10:40-42). There, Jesus receives word that his friend Lazarus is dying (11:1-16). When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead for four days. Two scenes follow centering on the theme of death: one with Martha (11:17-27), and one with Mary (11:28-33). Jesus then raises Lazarus out of death (11:34-44). This is followed by the reaction of the people and the Jewish hierarchy - which involves the theme of belief/disbelief (11:45-53). Jesus withdraws into the desert with his disciples (11:54-57), and then returns to Bethany where Mary anoints him [for his death] (12:1-8).

Compositionally, this block of material sets the stage for the passion material (death/resurrection of Jesus) that follows. Although many themes within this text are worthy of discussion, three areas of special interest stand out: (1) there is a death theme that runs throughout this block of material, (2) Jesus appears to experience some very strong and disturbing emotions as he interacts with death in this text, and (3) the nature of Lazarus' resurrection from death.

The dominant theme running throughout this whole block of material is not resurrection (although it is present); rather, it is “death.” Each scene centers on death: Lazarus is dying (v 3), Lazarus is dead (v 14), the impact of Lazarus death on Martha and Mary (vv 17-27/28-37), Jesus' confrontation with death (vv 33, 38-42), his demonstration of power over death (vv 43-44), the determination of the Jews to destroy him by death (vv 47-53), and his anointing for death in the house of Mary (12:1-8). Although this block of material contains a resurrection from death, it is death that serves as the theme common to all that is going on in this block of material. The question that confronts the interpreter here is, “Why is this death theme so dominantly present in this block of material?”

Scene Two (11:1-16): Receives Word of Lazarus' Illness

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light." ¹¹After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Literary Features

The players of this scene are Lazarus, Mary, Martha, Jesus, the disciples, and the “many people” of 10:41. The scene, as already stated, is a location in Judea, beyond the Jordan where John the Baptist had been preaching and baptizing (10:40-42). There, we are told, Jesus stayed (*emeinen* [aorist tense] – he remained there for a period of time). The scene changes from this location to that of Bethany, a village just two miles outside of Jerusalem, where he met with Martha and Mary. The action is that of Jesus’ teaching, people responding, then Jesus receives word of Lazarus’ impending death, then travels over to Bethany for a meeting first with Martha, then Mary, which is followed by the events at the tomb of Lazarus. The dialogue is first that of Jesus comments to his disciples concerning the news of Lazarus’ condition, then follows Jesus announcement of Lazarus’ death. The dialogue or discussions between Jesus, Martha, and then Mary are very revealing. The themes are numerous and varied, but the most significant theme is that of death and Jesus’ reaction to it; especially, the emotions used to describe his reaction to the death of Lazarus.

Jesus’ Reaction to the Death of Lazarus

The language describing the emotions experienced by Jesus when dealing with the death of Lazarus is stronger than anywhere else in the NT, with the exception of Gethsemane. This is especially so when considering the terms used to describe these emotions in the Greek text. In 11:15, Jesus informs his disciples that Lazarus is dead. No display of emotion appears to be present. However, in verse 33, when Mary was weeping at his feet, he is deeply moved (*embrimaomai*) in spirit and troubled (*tarasso*). In verse 35, he weeps (*dakruo* - his eyes were full of tears). In 11:38, when arriving at the tomb, he is again deeply moved (*embrimaomai*) within himself. Why? What is the meaning of all this?

The Greek terms used to describe these emotional reactions are significant to fully appreciating what was happening. The term *embrimaomai* literally means, "to snort with rage, as with the snorting of a horse." This term is found in verse 33 and 38. In verse 33 we have an additional term, *tarasso* meaning, "to stir (as with water or sand), disturb or agitate). It is often used to describe an emotional reaction (i.e., to quiver, shudder, shake or tremble as with fear, anger or rage). This word *tarasso* is used to describe the reaction of the twelve when they thought they had seen a ghost walking toward them on

the sea of Galilee (Mark 6:50), or when they thought a ghost was appearing before them when Jesus stood in their midst after his resurrection (Luke 24:36-38). This is also the word used for the reaction of Zachariah when the angel of the Lord appeared before him in the Holy Place within the Temple (Luke 1:12). It is also used to describe what was going on in the pool called Bethzatha when the people thought an angel was in the water (John 5:5-7). This is also the word used to describe the emotion Jesus experienced in John 12:27 when discussing the approaching hour of his death.

What does all this tell us about what was going on with Jesus here in John 11? There are some very good possibilities implied by the terms John has used to describe what Jesus was experiencing. It does appear that the emotion, and the visible manifestation of that emotion, Jesus experienced here was anger or rage rather than fear or sadness. One scholar suggests that, ". . . he was angry because he found himself face to face with the realm of Satan which, in this instance, was represented by death." (Raymond Brown, *John*, Anchor Bible, 1:435.) When seeing Mary so broken by the death of her brother, and when approaching the tomb where Lazarus was buried, he appears to have been filled with rage in the presence of these manifestations of the reign of sin in the world. Nowhere more than in death can the smell of Satan and the effect of his presence in our world be detected. Raymond Brown's comments are suggestive of this interpretation,

. . . in 13:21 the verb [*tarasso*] is used to describe how Jesus was moved at the thought of being betrayed by Judas into whose heart *Satan* had entered. Chrysostom suggests that we have here in John the same emotion that, according to the Synoptics, came over Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33) - emotional distress prompted by the imminence of death and the struggle with Satan. (Brown, *John*, 1:435).

Scene Three (11:17-27): Jesus' Discussion with Martha

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸*Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,* ¹⁹*and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.* ²⁰*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.* ²¹*"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* ²²*But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."* ²³*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."* ²⁴*Martha answered, "I*

know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

If You Had Been Here!

When pain or suffering occurs in life, what do we expect God to do when we pray for deliverance from them? What exactly are we wanting him to do? If he doesn't respond to our prayer the way we want him to, what happens then? We become disappointed in him and question whether he cares about what we are experiencing; often times our displeasure leads to serious questioning of God. We expect God to answer our requests or experience our displeasure and disappointment. We must acknowledge that he sometimes allows us to be displeased with him and disappointed in him. This is what happened to both Martha and Mary here in our text. They sent word to Jesus to come to the aid of Lazarus because he was dying. Jesus, however, did not come as soon as they expected. In fact, he waited until Lazarus was dead, then he responded to their request. When he arrived, Martha expressed her disappointment in Jesus that he had not responded as she expected him to (11:20-21); and so also with Mary in 11:28-33. This follows in the next two scenes.

Scene Four (11:28-33): Jesus' Discussion with Mary

And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³²When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

The question of how prayer works has long been a matter of controversy and debate. The way God answers or doesn't answer prayer has been a problem for a lot of people. We tend to think that if we ask him to do something for us, he ought to do it; especially, if it is something we think is in keeping with his will. But, this is not always the case. In John 18 at the time of the arrest of Jesus, his disciples were, no doubt, praying for Jesus' deliverance from the abuse and dehumanizing behavior he was experiencing. Surely they were praying to God to help him, to deliver him for what was being done to him? Jesus prayed similarly in Luke 22:42-44. But all these prayers seemed to go unheard; nothing from God came but his silence. Jesus was beaten, was crucified, died on the cross, and was buried; and, no doubt, a lot of people were wondering, "Where is God?" No doubt, the followers of Jesus were asking, "Why won't God hear us?" One must remember that to answer their prayers the way they wanted them answered would have meant the abortion of the whole scheme of redemption God had set in motion when he entered this world for the deliverance of the whole of mankind. God's response to their prayers had nothing to do with what God could or could not do, it had to do with what he did in keeping with his will and wisdom. God always knows what he is doing, even if we don't think so; and he is not going to do what we ask of him, if it is not in his wisdom to do so.

In Judges 6:12-13, Gidion was told by the angel of God, "God is with you." Gidion answered, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" God replied to Gidion, "Go, I will be with you!" The psalmist wrote, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him," (Psalms 37:7); and in Psalms 138:8, "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your love O Lord, endures forever, do not abandon the works of your hands." Sometimes the silence of God leads us to question his love, his concern, his compassion, and even his existence. But as God says through the psalmist in Psalms 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." Paul said in Romans 11:33-34,

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ³⁴"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵"Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" ³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Scene Five (11:34-44): Jesus Raises Lazarus from Death

"Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. ³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying. ³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

The Rabbis taught that no mortal held power over the rain, the womb, and life consumed in death. Only God possessed such power. What Jesus does here clearly evidences that he is more than a mortal man, more than a son of Adam; and truly he was, he was the very Son of God, the one coming into the world from another realm of existence (11:27). This is, perhaps, the major intent of this resurrection of Lazarus, to give evidence of the presence of deity within this person Jesus of Nazareth.

Lazarus is one of three persons raised from death by Jesus during his ministry: cf. the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:41-42, 49-56), and Lazarus (John 11:38-44). These all, however, experienced death again. Their resurrection was, obviously, not the same as the resurrection of Christ. Their resurrections were escapes from death, not a conquest of death. Perhaps, they should be called resuscitations or restorations to life, in that these were all resurrections into life as it was experienced before. Christ's resurrection was a resurrection into new existence (cf. Rom 6:3-11; 1 Cor 15:45-57; see also Rom 8:9 where Jesus in his resurrection existence is called "the spirit of Christ;" and esp. 1 Cor 15:45 where Christ as the second Adam is called a "life-giving spirit;" all of 1 Cor 15 should be read here).

Jesus' resurrection was a conquest of the reign of death (Heb 2:14-15; Rev 1:18), and a manifestation of the reign of God (*basileia tou theou* - reign/kingdom of God). Jesus identified his conquests of evil (and all Satanic activity) as manifestations of the reign/kingdom of God: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons," he asks, "then the kingdom/reign of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20; see vv 14-23 here). In every instance of Jesus casting out demons, the reign of God is brought into conflict with the reign of Satan and the powers of darkness.

Jesus had instructed the twelve, "there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom/reign (*basileia*) of God has come with power (*dunamis*)," (Mark 9:1). It was by the power (*dunamis*) of God that Jesus was brought forth out of death (Rom 1:4). In Luke 22:14-18, Jesus told the twelve that he would not eat with them again until the kingdom/reign of God had been manifested. Even though this was his last meal with them before his death, his promise was that he would eat with them again, and he fulfilled that promise after he was raised from death (Luke 24:30-32; Mark 16:14; John 21:4-14, 15). The resurrection is not one and the same with the reign of God. It was, however, a dynamic manifestation of it; especially, in terms of the deliverance of man, in that here the whole of humankind was delivered from the satanic powers of darkness, death being the ultimate manifestation of that power (Heb 2:14).

John gives an added dimension to the expression kingdom/reign of God as used by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. John uses the expression "eternal life" in a similar way as the reign of God is expressed in the Synoptic Gospels. Those raised from death by Jesus during his earthly ministry were not raised into eternal life; rather, they were raised into the same kind of life they enjoyed before death. The resurrection of Jesus was a resurrection into eternal life (i.e., eschatological or resurrection existence). Another point of major significance here may be seen in how Jesus gives personification to the doctrine of the resurrection. Only the Sadducees, to the best of our knowledge, rejected the belief of resurrection from death. This doctrine, however, was very popular among most of first century Judaism. It is found in most of the writings of the Jews of the first century (the Pseudepigraphal, Apocryphal, and Apocalyptic writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the *Mishnah*). In fact, the second of the *Eighteen Benedictions* (cited in every synagogue service) reads: "You, O Lord, are mighty forever for you give life to the dead." Jesus, here, takes this "doctrine of resurrection" and identifies himself with it - "I am the resurrection and the life." It is not belief in a

doctrine that gives us hope; it is belief in a person - belief in him as the one who actualizes the resurrection from death. Because he did it, we can also, but only by the power by which he was raised into new existence – the power of belief (cf. "the faith of Christ" in Gal 2:16, 20; 3:22 in the Greek text; also Acts 2:27-31).

Scene Six (11:45-53): Reaction of the People: Many Believe, the Jewish Leaders Disbelieve

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. ⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ⁴⁸"What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." ⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

The players are: the Jews who had come to visit Mary, Jesus, the Pharisees, the chief priests, (the Sanhedrin), and Caiaphas the High Priest. The setting is Judea in general then Jerusalem and a meeting of the Sanhedrin. The action is that of belief and disbelief, informing on the part of the disbelievers, and a meeting of the Sanhedrin Council. The dialogue is that of discussion of the members of the Sanhedrin Council. The themes are: belief vs disbelief, the mind-set of the Jewish leadership, the acknowledgement of the Jewish leadership of the popularity of Jesus with the Jewish people, the contrivance of an assassination plot against Jesus by the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin

The expression of greatest significance here is found in verses 47 and 53, "Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the

Sanhedrin. Caiaphas, who was high priest that year;” and in verse 53, “So from that day on they plotted to take his life.” Here in these verses we see the most powerful force of first century Judaism setting itself against Jesus of Nazareth. They resolve to have him assassinated or executed, whichever method presented itself.

The name *Sanhedrin* is derived originally from the Greek word *sunedrion* (meaning “council”), which, variously modified, passed at an unknown period into the Aramaic vocabulary. Among the Greek-speaking Jews, *gerousía* “the assembly of the elders” was apparently the common name of the Sanhedrin, at least in the beginning; in post-biblical Hebrew the appellation *Beth Din*, “house of judgment,” seems to have been quite popular.

The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of ancient Judaism. According to the testimony of the *Mishnah* (*Sanhedrin*, 1.6; *Shebuoth* 2.2), confirmed by Josephus (“Wars,” II, 20. 5), the Sanhedrin was composed of seventy (or seventy-two) elders, scribes, and priests. To become a member of the Sanhedrin was the highest honor known to a Jewish male. More than just a Supreme Court, it also served as the legislative branch as well as the executive branch of government. The Sanhedrin influenced all aspects of Jewish life. Israel was supposed to be a theocracy (a people ruled by God, they were not, rather, they were an oligarchy (the many ruled by the few).

The Council of Seventy is sometimes said to actually be composed of seventy-one, or seventy-two members, and the difference is sometimes explained as a question of “rounding” or literary convenience, following the example of the name given the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (the *Septuaginta* – “seventy”) written as LXX (i.e., Roman numeral for “70”) by the scribes.

Some Jewish scholars traced its origins to the appointment of the seventy by Moses (Exodus 24:9-11; Numbers 11:16-17 and 24-25). Others attributed the origin of the Sanhedrin to Ezra, the priest and scribe who led the restoration movement of Judaism at the return of the Jews from Babylon in the 5th century BC, which is considered as the connecting link between the last of the prophets and the scribes known as the *Sopherim*. Those making up the Sanhedrin were chosen from the nobles, chiefs, and elders (i.e., the fathers of the people) having returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah and Ezra (Neh., 2:16; 4: 8, 13; 5:7; 7: 5; Ezra 5: 5, 9; 6: 7, 14; 10: 8).

During the time of Herod the Great, it is known that the Sanhedrin was composed of seventy-two members. They were 23 priests, 23 scribes, 23 elders, the presiding High Priest, and two recording heralds - one of whom registered the votes of acquittal and the other those of conviction. This composition of the membership had evolved over the centuries from the original conception of Moses' council of seventy.

In rabbinic literature the quorum of seventy elders was modeled after the *Beth Din* of rabbinic myth; i.e., a heavenly assembly of angels, described in the Talmud. This "Heavenly Assembly," or *sunedrin*, was God's creation for the perfect administration of all law. God had Moses follow that example to assemble his quorum of seventy elders. The Talmud represents the *Beth Din* as a circle, in the center of which God is seated. Elsewhere it is described as "members seated on thrones around the throne of God" (similar imagery is found in the 24 elders who surround the throne of God in the book of Revelation: 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3,4).

According to historical sources, the assembly set in the form of a semi-circle, the president (the High Priest) occupying the center of the arc, the one under interrogation stood at the center, while two 'heralds' sat a little in advance of the president, on his right and his left. In another description, it is said that the members of the Sanhedrin sat in a semi-circle with the High Priest sitting at the head, and the other members sitting around the arc in such a manner as to facilitate conversation among themselves. All members stood to speak. The president was the first to cast his vote on civil or ceremonial law, whereas the younger members were the first to give their opinion in criminal affairs. For an acquittal a majority of one vote sufficed; for a condemnation, a majority of two votes was necessary, of at least twenty-three members was required. A majority of one vote sufficed for the acquittal; for a condemnation a majority of two votes was necessary, except when all the members of the court (seventy-one) were present (*Mishnah, Sanhedrin.*, 4 and 7).

Criminal cases were tried in the "Hall of the Hewn Stone" (*Mishnah, Peah* 2.6; *Eduyoth* 7.4) that was on the south side of the Temple (*Middoth* 5.4). A smaller Sanhedrin of twenty-three (for lesser cases) sat in the entering of the gate of the Temple. The Sanhedrin was abolished by the Zealots at the seizing of power in Jerusalem during the revolt of 66-70 AD, which resulted in the destruction of the Temple. Johanna Ben Zakkai

attempted to reassemble a new Sanhedrin in Jamnia after the destruction, but it was not able to maintain authority over the whole of Diaspora Judaism and soon disappeared with the deaths of the Jamnia scholars.

The Sanhedrin had full authority in all religious and civil matters with the exception of administering the death-sentences in execution. That such a curtailing of the Sanhedrin's power did actually take place seems implied in the cry of the Jews: "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death" (John, xviii, 31), and in Josephus (*Antiquities.*, XX, 9. 1) and in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 18 and 24).

Since the *Beth Din* had to deal frequently with legal matters, it was natural that many of its members should be chosen from among men specially given to the study of the Law; this is why we so often hear of the scribes in the Sanhedrin. Most of those scribes, during the last forty years of the institution's existence, were Pharisees, whereas the members belonging to the sacerdotal caste represented in the assembly reflected the Sadducean influence (Acts, 4, 1; 5, 17, 34; 23, 6; Josephus, *Antiquities*, XX, 9, 1; *Wars of the Jews*, II, 17, 3; *Life of Josephus*, 38, 39); but history shows that at Pharisee's influence, though formidable, was not exclusive as long as the 23 priest were present for decisions and the High Priest occupied the presiding chair. What rules were followed in the appointed of members are not known; it seems that various customs prevailed at different periods. However, it is clear that politics interfered often in the transaction. At any rate we are told (*Sanhedrin* 4.4) that a *semikah*, the laying on of hands, took place at the formal installation of the new appointees; and there is every reason to believe that the appointment was for life. Information for this material taken from: "Sanhedrin," in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*," "Sanhedrin," in *Who's Who in the Bible*," and from an excellent article from the website, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13444a.htm>.

Scene Seven (11:54-57): Jesus Withdraws into the Desert with His Disciples

Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. ⁵⁵*When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover.* ⁵⁶*They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked*

*one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?"
⁵⁷But the chief priests and Pharisees had given orders that if anyone found out where Jesus was, he should report it so that they might arrest him.*

The players here are Jesus, his disciples, many who went up to Jerusalem for the Passover, the chief priests and Pharisees. The setting is a village called Ephraim where Jesus and his disciples stayed for a while, then Jerusalem. The action is that of Jesus retiring from public activity and the events in Jerusalem before his last Passover. The dialogue is that of the questions of the people looking for Jesus in the Temple area. The themes are: Jesus' withdrawal from public activity, the third Passover reference, the expectation of the people, and the common knowledge of the desire of the Sanhedrin to take Jesus into custody if and when he came to Jerusalem.

Jesus was in the habit of withdrawing from public activity for time of solicitude and teaching with his disciples. Here he withdraws to a village called Ephraim just a few miles north of Jerusalem near Bethel. It was in the forest of Ephraim that David's men met the rebel forces of Absalom and "the forest claimed more lives that day than the sword," and both the forest and the sword claimed the life of Absalom (2 Sam 18:6-17).

In 11:55, John makes reference to the third Passover Jesus attends. The ceremonial cleansing before the Passover was for those who may have been ritually unclean through touched someone or something unclean. They had to purify themselves through immersion (Num 9:10-11). In some instances the purification required seven days (Num 31:19-20). See: David H. Stern, *Jewish NT Commentary*, p 191. John mentions the Passover in 2:13, 23; 6:4; and 11:55 and 12:1. This is Jesus' third Passover counting from 2:13; his second would have been at 6:4 (unless one considers 5:1 the Passover), with this Passover (11:55, 12:1) being his third. With this reckoning Jesus' ministry has lasted a little more than two years considering the time prior to 2:13.

The curiosity concerning the appearance of Jesus in the Temple indicates that at this time Jesus enjoyed a significant amount of popularity with the people. John's comments about the crowd well define the anticipation Jesus had created, "They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple area they asked one another, What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all?" (11:56). The Jewish leadership knew that with

this kind of expectation and anticipation, they had a problem of no little significance.

Scene Eight (12:1-8): Jesus Returns to Bethany: Anointed for His Death

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ²Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. ³Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, ⁵"Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. " ⁶He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷"Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. ⁸You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

The players are Jesus, Martha, Lazarus, Mary, the disciples and Judas Iscariot specifically named. The setting shifts from Ephraim to Bethany and the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, where Jesus and his disciples were dinner guests. The action is that of the anointing of Jesus' feet by Mary, Judas' reaction to what she did, and Jesus' reaction to Judas. The dialogue is that of the comments of Judas and Jesus' interpretation of what Mary had done. The themes are: that of table fellowship, the presence of Lazarus, the anointing of Mary, the attitude of Judas, John's editorial comment on Judas, and the theme of Jesus' anticipation of death.

The shift of scene here is characteristic of John. One cannot move from verse to verse with the assumption that one day is followed by the next. John often jumps months ahead from one verse to the next. Here the time is relatively confined since the people who have come to Jerusalem for purification are looking for him in 11:55-56, then 12:1 it is six days before the Passover. This scene is "in the meantime" before Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast.

The theme of table fellowship is not as present here as in Luke's

Gospel, but there are several references to Jesus dining with his friends and disciples. Table fellowship had a very significant import in this culture: acceptance, rejection, place at table, actions associated with the event; e.g., greeting, washing feet, washing ceremony, conversation among guests. In Luke we see Jesus sharing table fellowship with Levi and others in Luke 5:29-33. In Luke 7:36 Jesus eats in the home of a Pharisee. So also in Luke 7:37, as well as Luke 14:1ff. In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus dined in the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, and here he was eating with them again. Jesus shared table fellowship with a variety of people and never rejected anyone or any invitation to share a meal with anyone. He was accused of being a glutton and winebibber (Luke 7:33-34), so table fellowship must have been very important to him. It was during his last Passover meal with his disciples that he does some of his most important teaching to them (John 13-14). In fact, at his last meal with his disciples he promises to eat and drink with them again following his resurrection (Luke 22:14-23); and this he does (Luke 24:30-32, 40-43; John 21:4-6, 9-15).

In the account of Jesus eating with this family in Luke 10:38ff, Mary is the one who insists on doing what is not done by sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to his teaching. Women were not allowed such a privilege nor were teachers supposed to allow a woman to sit at their feet and assume the position of a disciple or *talmud*. Here Mary, again, does what is not acceptable. She sets herself at Jesus feet again, and pours a very valuable jar of perfume on his feet, so much so that, "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." In this culture it was never acceptable for a woman to appear in public with her hair unbound. In fact, when a young woman was married she put up her hair and she was never again to be seen in public with her long tresses of hair flowing loose. To loosen ones hair was the sign of an immoral woman. But Mary loosens her hair and wipes Jesus feet with it. Her concern in both biblical accounts of he reactions to Jesus was to express her love and admiration, no matter what the cost.

In contrast to the graciousness of Mary's behavior is the stark lack of grace on in the behavior of Judas. To him, all he could see was the loss of the value of the expensive perfume. "He did not say this because he cared about the poor," says John, "but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." Whether one sees what Mary did as an extraordinary expression of love and admiration or an extravagant waste depends on one's sense of values. Jesus clearly sees nothing admirable in Judas' behavior, "Leave her alone," Jesus replies;

"*Aphes auten*" (lit. let her be) - a very sharp rebuke of Judas. Then follow his very esoteric interpretation of what she has done, "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." What was to be done for him must be done now, the poor will always be there to draw the concerns of the world; Jesus would not be with them much longer, and all chances to show him their love and affection for him would be gone forever. There is no question but that Jesus knew fully what was about to happen to him.

Scene Nine (12:9-11): The Chief Priests Plan Jesus' Assassination

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.¹⁰ So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well,¹¹ for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.

The players are a large crowd of Jews, Jesus, Lazarus, and the chief priests. The scene is the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, with a shift of scene to Jerusalem and a meeting of the chief priests. They have committed themselves to the assassination of both Jesus and Lazarus in order to protect themselves from a loss of power, which was sure to come if Jesus proved to be who many were coming to believe he was – the long awaited Messiah. The action is that of curiosity seeking on the part of a large number of people, and a resolve to destroy Lazarus because his existence as one brought back from death at the calling forth of Jesus of Nazareth was too great a feat for them to reject and then explain to the people. There is no dialogue; this paragraph is, essentially, an editorial comment of John. The themes are: the reaction of the people caused by what Jesus had done, and the presence of the "hearts of darkness" which beat within the breasts of those who would kill both Jesus and Lazarus before they would see Jesus as the promised Messiah.

As long as Lazarus was alive, he was a personified miracle; he could not be allowed to stand in the midst of the people as living proof of Jesus' claims to be the very Son of God, who possessed the power of life over death. Only God possessed such power. If Jesus was not who he claimed himself to be, then how had he accomplished such a marvelous thing as calling Lazarus out of his tomb after he had been dead for four days?

For centuries man has used the tactic of resorting to violence when truth and reason is against him. If Lazarus were eliminated, then they would not have to acknowledge the miracle he represented. They, no doubt, intended to have him murdered covertly, then insist that he had not been raised from the dead, or that the “miracle” of Jesus was not legitimate, because Lazarus had fallen back into death. Here is why Jesus said that to deny the obvious manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit was to sin beyond forgiveness. To evidence a heart so darkened with evil that it tenaciously refuse to see what God was showing them, and more over, would go so far as to murder the one on whom God had worked a miracle, is to be beyond the point of return from darkness. In the debate concerning who was responsible for the death of Jesus of Nazareth, there can be no doubt in the record of John; it was those whose were so full of devotion to power and wealth that they had become idolaters – the hierarchy of the Jewish Sanhedrin Council.

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