

# JOHN — WEEK 14

## THE BIG MIRACLE



F. Michael Slay  
*A DEEP Study*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

## The cover image is *Ecce Homo (Behold the Man)* by Caravaggio

Jesus waits until Lazarus is definitely, stinking dead before raising him. This shows His power most clearly but also causes a lot of pain and suffering.

He even shares in that suffering.

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John, Week 14 — The Big Miracle  
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1 John 11:7–16

*Then after this He said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.”*

*The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?”*

*Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” These things He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.”*

*Then His disciples said, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get well.” However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.*

*Then Jesus said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him.”*

*Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”*

This passage contains two puzzles. First, when the disciples express concern about returning to Judea (for good reason), Jesus replies with an analogy about twelve hours in a day. What does that mean?

Second, what does Jesus mean when He says, *“Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him.”*?

The second question is easier. This ties back to Jesus’s decision to wait two days to go to Lazarus. It’s harsh, but makes the lesson Jesus is teaching crystal clear. He is the resurrection and the life. Lazarus must be definitely dead so that there can be no doubt when he is raised. That’s why Jesus waited two days, and that’s why He’s now *“glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe.”* But what are we to make of His explanation about day and night and the twelve hours in a day?

We know that Jesus is explaining why He’s still going. And we know that He is the light of the world. So, the general sense of, “Make hay while the sun shines,” is obviously there. He’s saying, “Carpe diem.” But why the reference to twelve hours?

Ancient Christian commentators (e.g., Origin and Augustine) have connected this to the twelve apostles and the twelve patriarchs, but that’s not about time. Jesus could be quantifying the daylight hours to emphasize that they are limited—as in, *“Are there not **just** twelve hours in the day?”*

The disciples’ limited time with Him is a point Jesus will make repeatedly.

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Curiously, this convinces them that He’s determined to go but doesn’t convince them that it’ll be safe.

That’s why Thomas says, *“Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”*

2 John 11:17–27

*So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.*

*Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.”*

*Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”*

*Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”*

*Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”*

*She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”*

Martha confesses Christ but still can't imagine that He will raise Lazarus. So, is her faith strong or weak?

It's both. Her faith is strong in depth but weak in range.

She absolutely believes, but she doesn't know the full extent of what that means.

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This is true of every Christian. I can absolutely believe that Jesus is Lord, but still fear things. I know the essentials of the faith are true, but I don't know—and can't even imagine—all that can mean.

But it's wrong to say I need more faith. “More” isn't the right word. The list of the seven deadly sins (envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, rage, and sloth) most definitely does not include fear.

In fact, if someone has no fear, that person is the one that we should worry about. The “health and wealth gospel” is false. Fearsome things happen to Christians. Real persecution and suffering are a normal part of life in Christ. Christians aren't expected to enjoy suffering, even as we *count it all joy when we fall into various trials* (James 1:2b). Like the soreness you get after exercise, it may be normal, but it still hurts.

And this is just one example. Growth in Christ has more than one dimension. Our faith can grow deeper and/or it can grow wider. Our faith can even grow in ways that aren't described by either term.

For example, my faith in Christ is the same as it was a year ago, but my faith in the power of prayer has grown immensely. Specifically, I've seen God powerfully bless prayer groups that meet over the internet. I now see the words “gathered” and “midst” in Matthew 18:20 in ways I could have never imagined.

*“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”*

3 John 11:28–37

*And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, “The Teacher has come and is calling for you.” As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, “She is going to the tomb to weep there.”*

*Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

*Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, “Where have you laid him?”*

*They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.”*

*Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, “See how He loved him!”*

*And some of them said, “Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?”*

Mary is right; Jesus could have prevented this suffering. Yet, even though the course of events was His choice, He’s not immune to the grief.

The shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most profound— *Jesus wept*. Even though He knows what He’s going to do next, He still weeps.

This is complicated. Somehow, despite Jesus’s divine nature, and His eternal perspective, He still thinks and feels like a normal person.

He’s fully human, even though He’s fully God.

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If Jesus isn’t immune to normal human emotions, we shouldn’t expect Christians to be either. This adds to the previous point about fear and the many dimensions of faith.

While becoming a Christian is the ultimate change in perspective, our emotions don’t change so quickly. Our intellects grasp the new concepts, but our hearts still beat to the old tunes. The things that used to make us angry or fearful still do.

And that will change, at best, slowly.

Beware of “Superman Syndrome”—the assumption that Christians have bulletproof emotions. We still cry at funerals for people who are now in paradise.

That’s not just normal; it’s healthy.

4 John 11:38–44

*Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, “Take away the stone.”*

*Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.”*

*Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me.” Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!” And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Loose him, and let him go.”*

Martha says it best in the King James translation—“*He stinketh.*” That’s the point. That was the purpose of Jesus’s delayed arrival. Once someone *stinketh* you know for certain that they aren’t just in a coma. He’s dead and everyone knows it. Jesus leaves no room for uncertainty. He’s ruling out that distraction.

So, Jesus calls out *with a loud voice*, “*Lazarus, come forth!*” And Lazarus emerges looking like a mummy in a low budget horror movie. It about as memorable a moment as you could possibly imagine.

Mission accomplished.

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This whole sequence of events displays the same set of divine priorities that is the central lesson of the book of Job. Avoiding suffering is simply not what floats God’s boat. If it was, the cross would be the last thing He would ever even consider.

The suffering here is less than the suffering in Job, but it’s for a similar purpose—to teach. In Job, the lesson being taught is humility. Job thinks he understands things. He’s wiser than his friends, but his wisdom could still use a tune-up.

And the tune-up comes at enormous cost. People die. From our human perspective, that’s not a reasonable tradeoff. Teaching Job humility isn’t worth that much pain and tragedy.

But God has higher purposes. Those purposes don’t always make sense to us. That’s our limitation, not His.

But the death and resurrection of Lazarus adds a new angle. Some of the suffering is endured by God Himself. That’s why “*Jesus wept*” is such a profound verse.

It breaks the ice on a concept that will reach its full measure at Calvary.

5 John 11:45–48

*Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him. But some of them went away to the Pharisees and told them the things Jesus did. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, “What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”*

At last we hear a reasonable argument against Jesus from the Pharisees. At least it sounds reasonable.

*“What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.”*

Commentators generally agree that “place” here means the temple.

But why do they think the Romans will object to Jesus? Specifically, why do they think the Romans will object to the fact that *this Man works many signs* or that *everyone will believe in Him*.

This is projection! They feel threatened by Jesus (and His *many signs*), so they just assume Rome would feel threatened too.

But Rome, which has real power instead of the pretend power of the Pharisees, doesn’t spook so easily. Pilate will later make this point. He’ll only be interested in punishing people who have broken one of the Roman laws, and Jesus hasn’t done that. Working *many signs* isn’t a problem.

It’s ironic that 40 years later, *the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation*, not because of Jesus, or of His *many signs*, but because the Jews decided to break one of the Roman laws (big time) by staging a rebellion.

The Roman response to that rebellion makes Sherman’s march through Georgia look like a vacation tour.

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But the big mistake the chief priests and Pharisees made wasn’t projection; it was not trusting God. The key words in this passage are, *“If we let Him alone like this.”* What’s wrong with letting Him alone? Gamaliel will make a similar point—convincingly—in Acts 5.

*And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men. ... And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.”*

*And they agreed with him. — Acts 5:35, 38–40a*

We make this same mistake all the time. We feel responsible for things that are not our job. We need to relax and let God run His universe. Don’t invent tasks and responsibilities not clearly assigned by God.

Abraham made this mistake when he “helped” God keep his promise by having a son through Hagar.

*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. Have you ever done something unsafe for the sake of the gospel?
2. What is the most surprising thing you've learned in the last year?
3. When have you expected too much of yourself or of others?
4. Do you think about the possible natural explanations for miracles?
5. Give an example of projection.

*Items for prayer:*