

I AM

LESSON FOUR

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

JOHN 11:17-27

D. A. Carson, in the *Pillar Commentary*, expounds upon Jesus's conversation with Martha at Lazarus' death:

11:17. On the geography and time required for travel, *cf.* notes on v. 6. From a slightly later date there are sources attesting the rabbinic belief that the soul hovers over the body of the deceased person for the first three days, 'intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its appearance change', i.e. that decomposition has set in, it departs (*Leviticus Rabbah* [a rabbinical commentary] 18:1 [on Lv. 15:1]; for other references *cf.* SB 2. 544f.). At that point death is irreversible. Though Lagrange (p. 307) doubts that this belief stretches back to the time of Jesus, it seems to be presupposed here. Together with v. 39, this verse establishes the awesome character of the sign about to be performed.

11:18-19. The text specifies that Bethany was fifteen *stadia* from Jerusalem. One *stadion* is approximately 202 yards 9 inches; fifteen *stadia* are therefore equivalent to 3033.75 yards, or just over 1.72 miles (hence NIV's *less than two miles*). The implication is that the *many Jews* who came to comfort Martha and Mary were from Jerusalem, which in turn suggests that the family was rather prominent. Although comforting the bereaved was almost universally regarded as a religious and social responsibility (on the customs, *cf.* Edersheim, 2. 320-321; SB 4. 592-607), not every villager would have been consoled by 'many' Jews from the nearby city. The same suggestion of prominence is supported by the expense of the perfume lavished on Jesus by Mary (12:1ff.). The *many Jews* (on the term, *cf.* notes on 1:19; there is no negative overtone here) become witnesses of the resurrection of Lazarus (vv. 45ff.). Mention of the proximity of Jerusalem also heightens the reader's awareness of the immense risks Jesus is taking by coming so close to the capital, and thus anticipates his death.

11:20. The picture of Martha as more active and perhaps more aggressive than Mary is in striking accord with the cameo found in Luke 10:38-42.

11:21-22. Martha's opening *Lord* is probably to be taken as in v. 3. Her first words to Jesus are not a rebuke, as if she were saying that Jesus ought to have been there. Rather, they are words of grief and of faith: she is confident that if Jesus had been present while her brother lay ill, Jesus would have healed him. Verse 22 has been taken by many to mean that Martha's faith runs deeper yet: she is confident that if Jesus asks his Father to raise her brother from the dead, his prayer will be answered. That is not quite what the text says, and the unbelief reported in v. 39 stands dramatically against that interpretation. Verse 22 must be taken more generally: Martha is not only persuaded that her brother would not have died had Jesus been present, but even now, in her bereavement, she has not lost her confidence in Jesus, and still recognizes the peculiar intimacy he enjoys with his Father, an intimacy that ensures unprecedented fruitfulness to his prayers.

11:23-24. Verse 23 is a masterpiece of planned ambiguity. At one level Jesus' words *Your brother will rise again* could be taken as no more than a devout, orthodox attempt to provide Martha with solace by drawing her attention to the resurrection at the end. Death will not have the last word: *at the last day* (v. 24), the resurrection will take place and her brother will be restored to bodily life. That is the way Martha understands Jesus' words (v. 24). She shared with Jesus and with Pharisaic Judaism a belief in the resurrection (*cf.* Acts 23:8; Jos., *Bel.* ii. 163; Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 10:1), a view roundly denied by the Sadducees (Mk. 12:18-27; Acts 23:8). But at another level, Jesus is promising more immediate resurrection for Lazarus. That point escapes Martha; only the unfolding drama will disclose this meaning in Jesus' words.

11:25-26. On *I am (ego eimi)* with a predicate, *cf.* notes on 6:35. Jesus has repeatedly mentioned resurrection on the last day (5:21, 25-29; 6:39-40). In this he has been in line with mainstream Judaism. But these references have also insisted that he alone, under the express sanction of the Father, would raise the dead on the last day. The same truth is now repeated in the pithy claim, *I am the resurrection and the life*. Jesus' concern is to divert Martha's focus from an abstract belief in what takes place on the last day, to a personalized belief in him who alone can provide it. Just as he not

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only gives the bread from heaven (6:27) but is himself the bread of life (6:35), so also he not only raises the dead on the last day (5:21, 25ff.) but is himself the resurrection and the life. There is neither resurrection nor eternal life outside of him.

Assuming the firmness of the text, the question is whether (1) *resurrection and life* refer to the same thing, making the mention of life a mere pleonasm, a preacher's way of reinforcing a point, or, better (with Schnackenburg, 2. 331), the word *life* adding little new meaning but nevertheless elucidating what is meant by *resurrection*; or (2) *resurrection and life* refer to two complementary things.

The second option is more credible (cf. Dodd, *IFG*, pp. 364–366), and it appears that the two components, 'I am the resurrection' and 'I am the life', are successively elucidated in the two ensuing clauses. The plain reference of *resurrection* is to the final resurrection of believers at the last day, through Christ whose power effects it. This part of Jesus' claim is elucidated by the next clause: the one who believes in Jesus will 'come to life' (neb; this is the obvious meaning of the verb in 5:25 and elsewhere), *even though he dies*. These words ensure that it is the final resurrection that is in view. The elucidation of *I am ... the life* appears in the clause after that: *whoever lives and believes in me will never die*. The verb *lives* cannot simply mean *is alive*, as the triteness would be unbearable; obviously only those who are alive can believe! We have repeatedly noticed that the background for these verses is 5:21ff., and there the notion of *life* is invariably the life of God, saving life, eternal life, the life of the kingdom. So also here: we might paraphrase, 'whoever has eternal life and believes in me will never die'. The two descriptions 'has eternal life' and 'believes in me' are not tautologous. The first stresses the internal change that must come about, wrought by the power of God (*viz.* he lives, he has eternal life); the second underlines what stance the individual must adopt (*viz.* he believes). In Greek they are lumped together (*pas ho zon kai pisteuon*), suggesting that both descriptions refer to one individual. This clause, then, is the elucidation of the truth that Jesus is the life. Doubtless it is theoretically possible to see this life as exclusively post-resurrection life, life lived in the resurrection body. But this is surely promising something more. If the last half of v. 25 stipulates that the believer, even though he or she dies, will nevertheless come to life at the resurrection, the first half of v. 26 stipulates that the believer, the one who already enjoys resurrection life this side of death, will in some sense never die. That is a recurring theme in this Gospel. In anticipation of Jesus' resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit, there is the repeated promise that those who believe in him will immediately possess eternal life. 'I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death' (8:51; cf. 3:15, 16; 5:24). Ordinary, mortal life ebbs away; the life that Jesus gives never ends. It is in that sense that whoever lives and believes in Jesus will never die.

Such a degree of realized eschatology prompts Käsemann at one point (p. 75) to suggest that the Fourth Gospel displays the heresy of Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17–18), who taught that the resurrection had already taken place. That misunderstands John rather badly. Although John lays stress on the present experience of the life only Jesus can give, it is never at the expense of denying the prospect of ultimate resurrection—and in this instance, as in ch. 5, the two themes are juxtaposed. All the major New Testament writers maintain some sort of tension between futurist eschatology and inaugurated or realized eschatology. John lays more stress on the latter than some; unlike the heretics of 2 Timothy 2, he nevertheless insists that the resurrection will take place, and that the locus of both resurrection and eternal life is in Jesus.

When Jesus asks Martha *Do you believe this?*, he is not asking if she believes that he is about to raise her brother from the dead, but if her faith can go beyond quiet confidence that her brother will be resurrected at the last day to personal trust in Jesus as the resurrection and the life, the only person who can grant eternal life and promise the transformation of resurrection. If she answers positively, the raising of Lazarus becomes a paradigm, an acted parable of the life-giving power of Jesus. It is not *more* than that, *i.e.* it is not of a piece with the resurrection that takes place at the end of the age (cf. notes on vv. 43ff.), nor with the infusion of the life of the kingdom (since that is not normally accompanied by the reversal of the death of our mortal bodies).

11:27. Martha's *Yes, Lord* (cf. notes on v. 3) introduces more than a confession of the points Jesus has

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raised, but a personal confidence in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God (cf. 20:30–31). Her confession is neither mere repetition, nor the pious but distracted and meandering response of someone who has not followed the argument. Her reply carries the argument forward, for she holds that the one who is ‘the resurrection and the life’ must be such by virtue of the fact that he is God’s promised Messiah. Her firm *I believe* (Gk. perfect, *pepisteuka*) reflects the state of her confident trust (cf. notes on 6:69). Her faith is a rich mixture of personal trust (*fiducia*) and of confidence that certain things about Jesus are true (*assensus*), viz. that he is the Christ (cf. notes on 1:41), that he is the Son of God (cf. notes on 1:49), and that he is the one who was to come into the world (cf. notes on 1:9; 6:14).¹

JOHN 11:17–27

Colin Kruse, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, highlights Jesus’s conversation with Martha upon the death of her brother:

17. After telling his disciples that Lazarus was dead, Jesus made his way back to Judea. *On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.* Lazarus was still alive when news reached Jesus of his sickness (11:4), though he must have died very shortly afterwards. Jesus waited two days before heading back to Judea, a journey of two days, arriving when *Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.*

18–19. *Now Bethany was less than two miles [3.2 km] from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.* Bethany lay to the east of Jerusalem on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, *less than two miles* (lit. ‘fifteen stadia’) away, which indicates the danger Jesus might face from the Jewish leaders there.

Keener comments:

Palestinian Judaism required burial of the deceased on the day of death, but six days of mourning (for a total of seven) followed, in which the bereaved family members would remain at home while others came to supply food and express sympathy. Such intense mourning for at least a week after death is common to various traditional cultures.

Martha and Mary must have been well off and well known, for *many Jews* came from Jerusalem to comfort them. It is important to note that here Jews are presented in a positive light, coming to comfort those who were followers of Jesus in their loss. It is a reminder that the Gospel of John is not anti-Semitic, as it is sometimes suggested, and that its presentation of Jews is not monochrome.

20–22. *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.* Why the sisters’ response to the news of Jesus’ approach was so varied is not explained, though it has been suggested that while Martha went out to meet Jesus, Mary stayed at home to receive visitors.

*‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died—*a sentiment expressed three times: by Martha (v. 21), Mary (v. 32) and the Jews who came to comfort the sisters (v. 37). Martha’s words expressed disappointment: Jesus had failed to appear before her brother died. Despite her disappointment, she continued: *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.* Whatever Martha’s expression of confidence in Jesus meant, she was not expecting him to restore her brother to life straightaway, as her subsequent response to Jesus makes clear (11:24). She seems to be expressing a general belief in Jesus’ relationship to God and that God listened to his prayers.

¹D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 411–414.

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23–24. Overlooking Martha’s disappointment and maybe even her reproach, *Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’* These comforting words could be taken to mean either, ‘Your brother will rise again in the general resurrection on the last day’ or ‘Your brother will be restored to life immediately’. She did not realize that Jesus was speaking of an immediate restoration to life, so *Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’* This was orthodox Pharisaic (but not Sadducean) belief (see Matt. 22:23/Mark 12:18/Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8), a belief shared by Jesus (5:21, 29; Luke 14:14; 20:35–36). For Martha to make this statement probably reflects the sort of consolation offered by those who came to support her in her grief, but it showed no understanding of what Jesus meant. He was about to restore her brother to life, a symbol of resurrection on the last day.

25–26. To move her beyond the orthodoxy of the Pharisees, *Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.* This statement contains the fifth of seven ‘I am’ sayings with predicates in the Gospel of John (6:35, 48, 51; 8:12; 10:7, 9; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). It involves three claims: (1) Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life—that is, the Father has given him to have life in himself and to bestow resurrection life upon whomever he will (5:21, 26). (2) People who believe in him, even if they die (as Lazarus had done) will live: Jesus will raise them from death on the last day. What he would soon do for Lazarus would foreshadow the resurrection of the last day. (3) People who live and believe in him will never die. This will be literally true of the last generation of believers. Of other believers it is true in the sense that not even death can break their relationship with God. With these claims, Jesus made himself central to the Jewish hope of the resurrection and eternal life, and by asking Martha *Do you believe this?* he encouraged her to recognize it.

27. Martha’s response took the form of a confession: *‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’* She had moved beyond her previous beliefs (11:22: ‘I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask’) and Pharisaic beliefs (11:24: ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day’). She was now affirming Jesus’ central role in bringing about the resurrection on the last day, adding that she believed he was the Messiah, the Son of God, the one whom the Father sent into the world. The title *the Son of God* is known to have been used as a messianic title among first-century Jews (see commentary on 1:34). Martha’s confession echoes Nathanael’s confession (1:49) and is an example of the faith the evangelist hopes will be evoked by his Gospel in the hearts and minds of his readers (20:31).²

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*
Richard D. Phillips, *John*, Reformed Expository Commentary
Colin G. Kruse, *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Gerald Borchert, *John*, New Application Commentary
Jey J. Kanagaraj, *John*, New Covenant Commentary Series
Rodney Whitacre, *John*, IVP New Testament Commentary
Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, The Bible Speaks Today
Grant Osborne, *John*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*, UBSH

²Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 287–290.