

John 11:1-16 | “When God’s Plans Don’t Make Sense”

Please turn in your Bibles to John chapter 11. *[pause]*

And as we begin the new year, we will continue to study the Gospel of John, tackling verses 1 through 16 this morning. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever had plans that didn’t quite work out?

How do you feel in those moments?

What are your thoughts when God’s plans don’t quite make sense?

Those are some questions that we will look at as we work through this text together. *[pauseeee]*

If you remember a couple weeks ago, Jesus had a discussion with the Jewish leaders and he made them very angry.

They picked up stones to stone him and then they tried to arrest him, but he escaped and left the area.

That’s where we left off back at the end of chapter 10, and now in chapter 11, Jesus will be called back into Judea. *[pause]*

Let’s first go through the story, and then I’ll bring out 2 major points from the text.

READ JOHN 11:1-4

There’s this man named, Lazarus, who was from Bethany and he had two sisters, Mary and Martha.

Lazarus becomes very ill - I mean he is seriously on his deathbed.

So Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus, so that the illness is reported to Christ.

These 3 siblings seem to be really good friends of the Lord, for its brought out that Mary is the one who sat at Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair.

So there’s this close friendship that Jesus had with them, for the sisters say, “he whom you love is ill.”

And in their message, they seem to be implying that this is urgent and they back up the urgency with noting how much he loves Lazarus. *[pause]*

After the illness is reported to Christ, he gives the result of the illness.

It doesn’t lead to death, but it’s for the glory of God.

His point isn't that Lazarus won't die, but that the illness will not ultimately end in death, but God's glory. *[pause]*

The next movement in the story involves purposeful waiting.

**READ JOHN 11:5-16.**

Jesus hears the report and decides what to do.

Part 1 of Jesus' plan is to wait and part 2 of the plan is to go.

So instead of going to Lazarus immediately, he waits 2 days and then tells his disciples that they are going back to Judea.

The disciples are, of course, astonished at this because if you remember, the Jews just tried to stone Jesus back in Judea.

Now he wants to go back.

It's like they're saying, "Go back to Judea? Hello?! They just tried to kill you back there!"

And Christ responds by talking about how walking in the light lets us see so that we do not stumble...

...but walking at night makes us unable to see and therefore we stumble. *[pause]*

Jesus' time of ministry is like the daylight, so Jesus must not slack during the daytime, but do the works that the Father has appointed him to do.

And as long as he follows God's will, he will be safe. *[pause]*

This also shows the disciples (and us) that with Jesus with them, they can go to even dangerous places because the light is shining in Jesus.

Essentially, there's no need to worry because they are always 'walking in the day' with Jesus, the light of the world, leading them. *[pause]*

The next part seems funny because the disciples mistake Christ's words.

He says, 'Lazarus is asleep and I go to awaken him.'

The disciples are kind of confused and are like, "OK...if he is asleep, then he will be fine."

But Jesus finally speaks plainly to them and tells them that Lazarus is dead and they must go to him.

Right after this, Thomas, who we usually see as a doubter, is bold and courageous as he says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

You can tell how serious the situation was back in Judea, as Thomas still thinks they will all die by going back. *[pauseeee]*

That's just a very brief summary of the story this morning, but let's look deeper.

*Let's see what it shows us. First...*

### **I. Our plans are (often) focused on the here and now.**

When I was about 16 years old I had a good friend named Joel, who was 15.

Joel was a great guy, he lived for Christ and shared Christ with many people.

He was full of life and always a happy person.

Joel had great plans for his life, he wanted to be an EMT for his career.

In the summers, Joel would work for a Christian camp in North Carolina.

This camp had a white water rafting place that they would take kids to and go rafting regularly.

Well one day as Joel was rafting in the water with a friend, Joel fell out of the raft into the water and his foot got stuck between two rocks.

He was now fully underwater with his foot caught between two rocks, unable to get it loose.

He struggled to get it loose, but to no avail.

That day, Joel drowned in that river. *[pause]*

Now I was back home on that summer day when I heard the news, and I was devastated.

I didn't know how to respond or what to do.

I soon became angry with God - "How can you let this happen?"

"Joel was so young and living for you! God, you don't seem loving to do this."

"What did he do to deserve this! Joel could have accomplished so much in his life if he lived longer!"

I also thought that God was not in control of the situation.

I didn't understand why God would take him.

My plans were that Joel would live, that we would be long-time friends, but God's plans were different. *[pause]*

What do you do when God's plans don't make sense?

What do you do when your plans are wrecked?

Maybe you have had times like this where your plans just don't pan out...

You lose a family member, something tragic happens, or you become seriously ill.

At these times we don't quite understand what is going on and we can easily become discouraged and feel like things are getting out of control.

Maybe you feel like God doesn't have a plan, and that God doesn't love you or love the person going through the hard time.

Maybe you had plans for your future that have been totally messed up.

Maybe your plan to get that job failed.

Maybe your plan to have a baby didn't work out.

Maybe you planned to retire earlier, but circumstances have changed that plan.

Maybe your plan to go to this event or that get-together didn't come to pass because of something unexpected. *[pause]*

We all make plans and desire for them to happen, but sometimes our plans fail and God's plans don't quite make sense to us.

And in the first section of John 11, we see this kind of thing happen as Jesus does some things that at first glance don't make sense...

...But when you look deeper, you see that God's plans don't always line up with our plans, but they are always better. *[pauseeee]*

Throughout this passage, you see a conflict in plans.

The sisters of Lazarus and the disciples have plans, but Jesus doesn't follow their plans. *[pause]*

And when we look harder at the plans of those in this passage, we notice that their plans are often focused on the here and now. *[pause]*

One mark of our plans is that our plans involve instant answers.

Mary and Martha send this urgent message to Jesus and implied in their statement is, "Come now!"

Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting Jesus to come right then to heal their brother.

They are desperate and desire Christ to do something.

But the problem lies in how Martha treats Jesus when he finally does come.

She says, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

*She kinda gives him a rebuke for not coming immediately.*

The sisters wanted instant action from their Lord, but when he didn’t act according to their plan, they became upset. *[pause]*

*Isn’t this how we often act?*

We are going through a hard time, maybe an illness or trial, and we want the healing or suffering to end right *now*.

*And like I said, there’s nothing wrong with that.*

But the problem comes when we become angry with God when he doesn’t instantly do what we request. *[pause]*

*By becoming upset over His timing, we demonstrate that we believe that our plans are better than His.*

That if only he would follow our plan to a ‘T’, everything would be fine.

*We act as though we were God and he was us.*

But do you see the ridiculousness of that thinking?

*Who are we that we would dare to question the Lord of the Universe’s timing?*

Who are we to think that He must submit to our agenda?

*We want instant answers, but God doesn’t always work instantly. [pause]*

But also, our plans focus on trouble-free paths.

*Let me ask you this question...*

Have you ever made a plan that involved a great amount of trouble and suffering?

*Think about it for a minute.*

Who thinks, ‘My plan is to struggle for 10 years to have a child, and then finally have a child.’

*Or, ‘My agenda is to wait a hard 40 years before I get married.’*

Or, ‘My intention is to get cancer and suffer for years.’

*Or, ‘I’m going to bounce from job to job all my life.’*

No one makes those kinds of plans.

Instead, our plans always seem to be trouble-free.

A lot of times, we envision a life of pain-free ease.

Our imagined future tends to look like the path of least resistance. *[pause]*

In verse 8, we see this reality come out in the disciples' plan.

Christ tells his disciples that they are to go back to Judea.

And the disciples of like, "WHAT?! GO BACK THERE?! YOU JUST ESCAPED FROM A STONING!"

And Christ's answer is essentially that as long as they are with him and he is guiding them, they are right where they belong. *[pause]*

You see, their plan is to stay far away from Judea until the threat of death subsides, but Jesus' plan is to go back into the heart of the threat.

And we, like the disciples, like to question God's plan whenever it involves hardship.

When God's plan for our lives entails ease, comfort, and painlessness - we jump on board.

But when it involves suffering or trials, we are the first to question God.

Like, "God, are you sure this is the way?"

"God, you didn't *really* call me to this, did you?"

"Lord, this must be a mistake, right?" *[pause]*

Our plans focus on trouble-free paths, and also, we often misunderstand God's plans.

The disciples keep misunderstanding what exactly Christ's plan is in this passage.

First, Jesus tells them that Lazarus is asleep and needs awoken, and they think he's talking about snoozing.

They think that Jesus is just going to wake him up from a deep sleep, but little do they know, he will raise him from the dead.

And then in Thomas' statement, you see that they misunderstood once again what was going on.

They think they are on their way to the grave, while Jesus just told them that they will be walking in the light. *[pause]*

But don't we do the same?

We often misunderstand God's plans.

We see suffering and think that suffering is an end in itself, but God's plan is much bigger and better than that. *[pause]*

What it comes down to is this: our plans are limited in foresight and flawed.

We don't know everything and can't see the big picture.

Mary and Martha wanted immediate healing, but what would come would be so much better.

The disciples wanted a trouble-free path away from Judea, and what they got to see in Judea was worth it in the end.

If God always let us follow our own plans, what looked promising to us would end horribly.

Yet, we often believe that our agendas are best and get upset when God's plans don't line up.

*We look at the tiny details and fret, but...*

## **II. God's plans are focused on the big picture.**

V. Raymond Edman gives this illustration in one of his books...

"Samuel Brengle was a worker with the Salvation Army in Boston many years ago.

As he passed by a saloon, some men threw a brick at his head.

Their aim was good, and Brengle nearly died.

As it was, he spent eighteen months in recovery.

During that time he wrote a little book entitled *Helps to Holiness*, and thousands of copies were published.

After he was able to begin preaching again, people would often thank him for the book.

And he would respond by saying, "If there had been no little brick, there had been no little book."

We don't see the big picture, but God does.

His plans are always focused on the big picture because he sees the big picture, and is in control of the big picture.

We look at the discomfiting small details and recoil, but he sees the magnificent big picture and rejoices. *[pauseeee]*

From this passage, we see that God's plans aren't always on our time schedule and they don't always follow our pain-free paths.

Instead of going to Lazarus instantly, Jesus waits.

His timing was different than Mary and Martha's. *[pause]*

Instead of avoiding Judea, Jesus goes.

His direction was different than the disciples.

But that's because he knew the big picture.

And sometimes the big picture doesn't mean the easiest, trouble-free, or pain-free route.

Sometimes God's plan makes us wait, and wait, and wait.

Sometimes God's plan takes us directly *towards* trouble.

And sometimes God's plan involves pain and discomfort.

But here's the deal: it may not be easy, it may not be comfortable, or pain-free - but it's good.

That's because following God's plan is the best place to be in.

We see that in verses 9-10.

When questioned why he's going back to Judea, he explains that they are walking in the light and therefore able to see.

Walking in the light involves walking in fellowship with Christ, believing and obeying his words.

That is the best place to be in.

As we have seen, it will not always be the easiest place, but it's the best. *[pause]*

God's plans also show great love for his people. *[pause]*

In the midst of suffering or hardship, a thought that comes to mind is whether God loves me.

Does he even care?

Imagine the sisters' thoughts as time went by and Jesus didn't show up until 2 days later.

They probably kept looking out the window or going outside, thinking, "Where is he?!"

It may have seemed like he didn't care.

But notice something.

Look at verse 5, "Now Jesus *loved* Martha and her sister and Lazarus. *So*, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer..."



Jesus loved, so he waited.

Wait a second...how it is loving to wait!?

Wouldn't love compel him to go instantly?

Doesn't waiting show someone unloving and uncaring?

In our minds, this is not love.

In fact, it actually seems cruel for Jesus to wait. *[pauseee]*

Many of us would say that ease, comfort, and painlessness is what we need the most.

So if Jesus were loving he would have healed Lazarus because that is what he needed the most, isn't it? *[pause]*

Maybe you think, "If God were loving, he would heal my mom."

"If God were loving, I would be done struggling financially."

"If God were loving, I wouldn't have this illness."

But we must understand this concept: love is not what is most comfortable, but what is most good.

Let me give you an example.

Think of the parent-child relationship.

Is it loving to give your child the easiest, most comfortable thing in every situation? No way!

If we did, where would be the place of discipline? Because you know, that's not the most comfortable for the child.

If we did, where would be the place of parental authority? Because isn't the easiest thing for the child to get everything he or she wants? *[pause]*

Let's say the child wants to sleep in everyday and never go to school.

That's the easiest and most comfortable thing from their perspective, but because the parent loves the child and wants them to succeed, then they make them go to school.

As you can see love doesn't always mean whatever is easiest, but whatever is *best*.

So also, that's how Christ loves us. *[pause]*

Lazarus and his sisters were deeply loved by Jesus, even though he waited two days.

And instead of seeing God's delays as delays of callousness, what if we saw them as delays of love?

Christian, you are deeply loved by Jesus, no matter what you go through! *[pause]*

So then the thought that comes to mind is this: how is this loving then?

Because God's plans give us what we need most: to see more of God's glory.

We observe this truth in two places in this passage.

First in verse 4, he explained that this illness would not lead to death, but it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.

The point of this illness is not death, but God's glory.

There is more to this illness than meets the eye.

It was serving a larger purpose, for God uses sickness and death for his purposes. *[pause]*

Edward Klink said, "The threat and experience of sickness and death for the Christian cannot (must not!) be viewed as a betrayal or contradiction of the love of God for them." *[pause]*

When we see sickness and death, we feel like God is not in control and doesn't have a purpose in it, but this passage shows the exact opposite.

His death was for the purpose of God to display the glory of His Son. *[pauseeee]*

Our first reaction to these verses is, "If he loved them, wouldn't he go before he died?"

That is because we are not looking at it from the plan of God, and we do not see the end of an event.

We only look at events with an earthly perspective, and believe that there's no point to suffering.

But God is doing so many things behind the scenes that you may not even be aware of. *[pause]*

Here's the key to understanding Christ's actions here...

The display of the glory of God through Lazarus' death was a greater act of love towards all in the story than the healing of Lazarus would have been.

Because they got to see Christ raise him from the dead.

They got to see more of Christ. They got to know more of Christ. And they got to grow deeper in their faith.

That would have never happened without Lazarus dying at that exact moment. *[pauseeee]*

Listen to what a woman said after the death of her husband...

“One thing that I’ve become convinced of is that God has different definitions for words than I do.

For example, He does work all things for my eternal good and His eternal glory.

But his definition of good is different than mine.

My “good” would never include cancer and young widowhood.

My “good” would include healing and dying together in our sleep when we are in our nineties.

But cancer was good because of what God did that He couldn’t do any other way.

Cancer was, in fact, necessary to make Bob and me look more like Jesus.

So in love, God allowed what was best for us ... in light of eternity.” [pauseeee]

Our definitions of love and goodness are sometimes different than God’s.

We think goodness and love only mean pain-free, trouble-free relief instantly from suffering.

But God’s view of goodness and love is more of Himself.

That’s what we need! We need more of God! We need more of Christ! [pauseeee]

An author said this, “God doesn’t simply want us to *feel* good. He wants us to *be* good. And very often the road to *being* good involves not *feeling* good.” [pauseeee]

Now look back at what Jesus said to his disciples in verse 15, “and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.”

Wow, now that’s a shocking statement!

He is pretty much saying, “I rejoice, for your sake, that I *didn’t* heal Lazarus.”

Why is this loving?

It is loving because it will lead his disciples to deeper belief in Himself. [pause]

What we need most is to experience the greatness of the glory of God and to treasure Christ.

Christians, we need to understand this.

We need to see that above all else, that is the priority.

Why? Because the more you see Christ for who He is, the deeper your faith will become, and the more joy you will receive.

God focuses on what *eternally* matters.

*If only we understood this concept, how differently would we see the difficult circumstances that we face? [pauseeee]*

**God's loving, all-knowing plans are way better than our plans.**

Mary & Martha's plan for Jesus was, "Come now!"

The disciples' plan for Jesus was, "Don't go there!"

But Jesus' plan was, "Let's wait, then go there."

Sometimes Jesus does not respond the way we want him to.

It seems like God is always late, as he does not heal our family member or friend when we want him to.

Maybe you lost someone close to you.

Or maybe he took that job opportunity away. *[pause]*

What we find in these verses is that just because it seems like Jesus comes late or doesn't show up, doesn't mean that he doesn't love you.

For He created us, and we have sinned against him.

Yet he came to earth in love to die for our sins.

He has come to restore that broken relationship, so that we can have life and freedom in Him.

He has come to give us life, that is, eternal life.

We can't say he doesn't love us, for look what he has done in the cross and resurrection.

If it weren't for him, we would still be dead in our sins. *[pause]*

We need to trust Him and treasure Him above everything else.

Just like Jesus later in this chapter raises Lazarus from the dead and shows he has power over death, so Jesus died and was raised by his own power.

And just like Lazarus found life in Christ, so we find new life in Christ. *[pause]*

Maybe you feel scared of different circumstances in life like sickness, money issues, your security, or death.

Maybe you are sad like Mary and Martha because you know someone sick.

Maybe you just went through a death of a friend.

Maybe you are struggling in life right now.

Maybe you are going through a trial.

Trust him and trust that He is doing good, and that he is doing everything for your eternal good and his eternal glory. *[pause]*

A song called “It’s Good” goes like this..

‘Love’s not safe at all - Love might let you fall  
Love’s not easy - But it’s good.

Love will take your time - Love might feel unkind  
Love will break you - But it’s good.’ *[pause]*

God loves you because he wants you to see his glory and either come to know Him or continue to believe in Him and grow in Him.

So when you are struggling through difficult circumstances in life, trust the one who loves you and does good no matter what.

Yes it will feel unkind at times, it will take your time and energy in sorrow and pain, but Christ is always good and we can trust Him.

Give your worries and sadness to Christ, who knows sadness and pain.

Know that whatever happens, God is in control.

And rest assured that God’s loving, all-knowing plans are way better than our plans. *[pause]*

Let’s say after Lazarus was raised from the dead, you went to each person and asked them what they would change about what happened. *[pause]*

This is speculation, but I imagine the conversations might go something like this...

“Mary and Martha, would you change anything?”

“No way! Christ showed us that his timing was better than ours, and we got to see our brother walk out of the tomb alive!” *[pause]*

“Disciples, would you change anything?”

“Nope, that event is engraved in our minds and we will never forget it. It was a *major*, faith-deepening time that brought us to where we are now in our faith.

We are glad we didn’t avoid Judea, but went with our Master.” *[pause]*

“Lazarus, what about you? Would you change anything? I mean, you were the one who went through the pain of suffering and dying.”

“I wouldn’t change a thing. The Lord brought me back from the dead, and showed off his glory.

I may have believed Jesus before, but I *really* believe him now. That illness was the best thing to ever happen to me.

And what a better way to die? To be used by God in your death. To display God’s glory. And to bring others to Christ.

What is better than God working through your life to show off his glory? Nothing.” *[pause]*

God’s loving, all-knowing plans are way better than ours.