

# A TIMELY LESSON

## John 11:7-16

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

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“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 anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him” (Jn. 11:9-10).

**M**any of Benjamin Franklin’s sagest bits of advice dealt with time. He said, “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” “Remember,” he added, “that time is money.” Franklin also asked, “Dost thou love Life? Then do not squander Time; for that’s the stuff Life is made of.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible also takes a keen interest in time. Paul wrote, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15-16). Jesus also spoke about time: about his own time, about our time, and about the need to define our times through faith in God.

### THE TIME OF DEATH

**I**n keeping with this practicality, the Bible insists that in order to understand the time of life rightly, we must also understand the time of death. Unlike the philosophies, which either ignore death or offer only fanciful explanations, the Bible gives us definitive teaching regarding death. The French existentialist Albert Camus once said that death is philosophy’s only problem. But that is quite a problem! Ravi Zacharias notes, “Anyone who has watched a loved one die understands that philosophical problem well.”<sup>2</sup> So people

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<sup>1</sup> George Selde, *The Great Thoughts*, (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 142.

<sup>2</sup> Ravi Zacharias: *Can Man Live Without God*, p. 158.

wonder about death. What is it? To what does it lead? Some of the Bible's most important teaching is in answer to such questions.

In fact, the difference between Christians and non-Christians is seldom seen more clearly than in the face of death. This was certainly true in the time of the Bible. Leon Morris comments:

For the ancient world, death was a horror, the end of everything... The inscriptions on the tombs of antiquity may be impressive in their use of costly materials, but, rich as they are, they are full of hopelessness. By contrast, the roughly scratched inscriptions in the catacombs where Christians were buried abound in hope, the sure and certain hope of resurrection in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The same could be said today. For most people, a funeral is only a mournful, dreadful affair. But Christians sing songs of joy and hope, rejoicing amidst tears for the eternal life we have in Christ.

John 11 takes place in the context of death, the death of Lazarus, and provides some of the Bible's most elevated teaching on the Christian hope in death. Jesus presents this hope in memorable words centered on himself: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn. 11:25). But earlier, while still making his way to the scene of death in Bethany, Jesus spoke other words about death that are also important. Speaking of the recently deceased Lazarus, Jesus said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him" (Jn. 11:11).

This is one of several places where the Bible describes death for believers as "sleep." The Old Testament often speaks of "going to rest with your fathers" (Dt. 31:16, NIV). Luke says that when the martyr Stephen died, "He fell asleep" (Acts 7:58). Paul describes Christians who have died as those "who have fallen asleep in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:17). By the use of this term, the Bible distinguishes from that death which truly is death and that death which is not. Thus Jesus said, when a family summoned him to help their daughter who just had died, "The girl is not dead, but sleeping" (Mt. 9:24).

What does this term, "sleep," tell us about Christian death? For one thing, sleep does us no harm, and this can also be said about death in Christ. Although death is our great enemy, the Bible is clear that no

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<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 407

harm comes to the Christian in death. This is why the believer in Psalm 23 speaks of walking through the valley of the “shadow” of death. Matthew Henry writes, “There is no substantial evil in it; the shadow of a serpent will not sting nor the shadow of a sword kill.”<sup>4</sup> The reason is that Christ has removed the sting from death. “He underwent the full horror that is death and in doing so transformed death, so that for his followers it is no more than sleep.”<sup>5</sup>

But not only is sleep not harmful, it is actually beneficial. The same is true of death for the Christian. “Death,” says Arthur Pink, “is simply the portal through which he passes from this scene of sin and turmoil to the paradise of bliss.”<sup>6</sup> When Jesus told his disciples that Lazarus was sleeping, they thought only in natural terms. But what they said about sleep is true of death as well: “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover” (Jn. 11:12). The Bible echoes this, saying, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’” (Rev. 14:13).

Sleep is often the best prescription for those who ail from sickness or fatigue. Sleep restores the body, and the sleep of death does even more. It transforms us into glory, removing every vestige of sin and sorrow. John Owen explains:

When, at death, the soul departs from the body, it is immediately freed from all weakness, disability, darkness, doubts and fears. The image of the first Adam will then be abolished. All physical weaknesses and infirmities will have gone for ever. . . . It is by virtue of the death of Christ alone that the souls of believers are freed by death from the presence of sin and all the effects that sin had wrought on their bodies, and being freed their souls flourish and expand to their fullest extent.<sup>7</sup>

Like sleep, the death of a Christian is also temporary. Winston Churchill expressed this conviction through his own funeral. It was a sad occasion for Britain, the end of an era. Many eyes were weeping at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London as the bugler sounded the slow, mournful notes of taps. But no sooner had the last note drifted away,

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 3:259.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, *Reflections on the Gospel of John*, 407.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 583.

<sup>7</sup> John Owen: *The Glory of Christ*, abr. RJK Law (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1987), 124.

than the bugler played again. The tune was reveille, the notes with which soldiers are called to a new day. Churchill thus reminded his mourners that death leads to a new morning. Christians likewise can know that the sleep of our own deaths will end when a trumpet call summons us to the new day of unending glory.

Paul writes of the body that awaits us: “It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:43-44). And in these glorified bodies, God’s people will engage not only in joyful worship but also in joyful work forever. James Boice rightly comments: “Heaven will not be restful in the sense that there will be no work to do. But it will be restful in the sense that what we do will be done without toil; that is, without the strain, labor, and sorrow that work involves in this life because of sin’s curse.”<sup>8</sup> The Book of Revelation’s picture of heaven thus concludes, “They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:5).

When we compare death to sleep we do not mean that the believer’s conscious self is asleep between death and the final resurrection. When the apostle Paul expressed his conviction, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” he explained: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23). Thus we believe that in death our spirits are with Christ. As Jesus said to the believing thief on the cross: “today you will be with me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). Paul explained that for our spirits to be “away from the body” is for us to be “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the whole of the Bible’s teaching on our experience immediately following death: “the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies” (32.2).

These are all reasons why Christians experience joy in the face of their own death, and why our grief is lifted by hope when another believer dies. Jesus, too, rejoiced in death. He said to his disciples: “Lazarus has died, and... I am glad” (Jn. 11:14-15).

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<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:840.

There are two evident reasons why Jesus was glad, the first of which is his knowledge of the resurrection. Jesus knew that Lazarus would not remain long in the grave; he was on his way to raise him. This is something only Jesus can do. When a patient dies, doctors are helpless. But Jesus' ministry practically begins with death. He said, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him" (Jn. 11:11).

There is a second reason Jesus rejoiced in Lazarus' death: he explains, "For your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe" (Jn. 11:15). Had Lazarus not died, Jesus "would have been deprived of this opportunity... to give the mightiest display of His power that He ever made prior to His own death."<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Christians facing death should capitalize on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to give their most powerful witness. We should plan our funerals to testify to our hope and give glory to the God of eternal life. Thus wrote the famous mathematician John Venn to a friend: "I have some of the best news to impart. One beloved by you has accomplished her warfare, has received an answer to her prayers, and everlasting joy rests upon her head. My dear wife, the source of my best earthly comfort for twenty years, departed on Tuesday."<sup>10</sup>

But it needs to be emphasized that this is true only of the believer. For those who die apart from Christ, nothing that we have said about death is true. Death is not beneficial; it is not temporary; and it leads not to a new morning of everlasting light, but to an endless night of wrathful darkness. Why is this? Jesus said, "Unless you believe [in me] you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life," Jesus said. But "whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (Jn. 3:36).

## THE TIME OF LIFE

If we understand the time of death, we will be equipped to understand the time of life. Another Christian mathematician, Blaise Pascal, understood this, saying that he had learned to define life backwards and live it forwards. He meant that he first defined death

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<sup>9</sup> Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 587.

<sup>10</sup> Cited from J.C. Ryle: *Holiness*, p. 190.

and arranged his life accordingly. This is probably why Jesus gives instruction about both life and death in this passage from John 11.

Jesus had departed Jerusalem to minister beyond the Jordan, when news came that his friend Lazarus was deathly ill. But instead of racing to his side, Jesus waited for two days. Only then did he say, “Let us go to Judea again” (Jn. 11:7). It is noteworthy that he spoke of returning to the country, Judea, instead of the town, Bethany. It seems that Jesus was testing his disciples, since it was the national leaders who sought his life. The disciples replied, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” (Jn. 11:8). They had yet to understand fully who their Master was, so they feared the danger against him and, of course, themselves. Christians are similarly tested when the Lord calls us to follow paths that seem hazardous to our self-interest. But if we realize who it is who sends us, and what wisdom guides his commands, we will set off down the path without fear.

In reply, Jesus instructed them about his own perspective about the time of life. His response took the form of a rhetorical question: “Are there not twelve hours in the day?” (Jn. 11:9). The ancient Jews divided the day up into halves, corresponding to day and night. Therefore, by saying, “Are there not twelve hours in the day?” Jesus reminded them that there is an allotted time for life and work.

This prompts at least two reflections, the first of which is that the times of our lives are granted to us by God. This was a point made by the apostle Paul when he told the Athenians that God not only created all of mankind, but he “determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26). It is God who has determined when we should live and when we should die. The great Confederate general and fervent Christian, Stonewall Jackson, made this point after the First Battle of Manassas, when one of his aides commented on his lack of fear amidst the flying bullets. Jackson replied, “I am as safe on the battlefield as I am lying in bed. It is God who has determined the time of my death.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cited from Burke Davis, *They Called Him Stonewall: A Life of Lt. General T. J. Jackson, C.S.A.* (New York: Fairfax Press, 1988),

This was Jesus' very point in speaking to his disciples. How are we to avoid being driven from our course by the fear of human enemies and worldly threats? The answer is to realize God's sovereignty over all our affairs. We must surely exercise prudence and care, but we should never avoid doing what is necessary or right out of fear. The writer of Hebrews made this point to the early church as it faced Nero's deadly persecution: "For he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5-6).

But there is a corollary to this principle, namely, that we *only* have the time that God has allotted. For this reason, Christians should be diligent and bold, wasting neither time nor opportunity. This was another point Jesus was making. His cross was fast approaching and there was work to be done. He must do it!

We, too, have a brief time to live for God. If we are to tell others the soul-saving gospel, now is the time. If we are to display the power of Christ in our marriages, in our families, or at work, we need to do it now. If we plan to raise godly children, now are the years of their upbringing. The great French conqueror, Napoleon, once remarked: "It may be that I will lose a battle. But I will never lose a minute!" Christians should not be frantic about life, but understanding the time of our lives, we should approach all the work that God has given us with godly urgency.

Jesus amplified this statement, adding, "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world" (Jn. 11:9). Christians should be fearless, he means, not only because God has appointed our times, but because we live in the light of his presence.

In Jesus' time, as in much of the world today, people did not go out at night. There were no streetlights to guide them, so walking at night risked stumbling or falling. This principle remains true when it comes to living in light of God's will. When we seek our own way we often stumble. God has revealed his Word, and if we make up our own rules it is like walking blindly in the night. But if we take God's Word as our guide, our steps will be sure. Psalm 119:105 wisely says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

The same can be said when it comes to God's calling on our lives. Many Christians have a real sense of what God is calling them to do. They see a need and they can meet it. They see an opportunity for the gospel and they can fill it. Yet how many do not! They have their own plans, their own dreams, their own path. But when they follow them they stumble, because the path of blessing for a Christian is always the path of obedience to God's Word and of faithfulness to God's clear calling.

Jesus said, "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world." On a spiritual level, the truest meaning is found in our need to see, believe, and follow him. Do we have reasons to fear in this life? We certainly do, just as the disciples feared to return to Judea. They would have been foolish not to recognize the real threat to Jesus and themselves, just as only fools ignore the real threats to their well-being in this life. The only true answer is to walk in faith with Jesus Christ.

If we walk in the light of Christ, we find God's blessing for all the times of our life. We look to the past and our record of sins against God. What can preserve us from God's judgment? The answer is our *justification*, that is, our righteous acceptance with God through faith in Christ. Romans 3:24 says we "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Our sins are forgiven through the blood of his cross, so that we look upon the time of our past and know that "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7). Knowing that we are justified in Christ, the Christian can face life without fear.

The time of our present lives also finds meaning through faith in Jesus. What is life all about? The Bible answers with our *sanctification*. This means the process by which God is growing us in holiness. People want to know God's plan for their present lives, and the Bible tells us the first thing we need to know: "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3). Realizing this, the disciples would have known that if Jesus called them to Judea, any trials there would be for the sake of their perfection and growth as Christians.

Jesus also provides the answer for the time of our future. What does the future hold? Christians ask. The Bible answers with our



*glorification*. Whatever path we tread in this life and whatever trials or dangers we may face, if we walk with Jesus we travel into an eternal life of glory. Paul said, “For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

If we will really live in the light of Christ, delighting in his presence, following wherever he leads, knowing and trusting our justification, sanctification, and glorification in him, it will transform our approach to life. The disciples preferred to remain at ease, to use the time for their own benefit and enjoyment. They wanted to shrink from hardship and danger. But Jesus would have us approach life with a holy zeal, not fearing man or wasting our lives in selfish, vain pursuits, but living and sharing his gospel, serving his kingdom, and seeking his glory.

## THE TIME OF CHRIST

Jesus knew his times. He knew that when he arrived in Bethany, Lazarus would be found dead. But he planned to raise Lazarus as a display of his saving power. He also knew what then would result. While many would believe and be saved, his enemies would harden their resolve against him. The next stop was Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus was moving towards *his* death, yet that was his most fervent desire. Death for him would not be the blissful rest of peace; his death involved anguished torment, as the holy Son of God took upon himself the righteous wrath of God for the sins of all his people. But he would do it for our sakes, as the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And through the cross, Jesus knew he would receive the crown of eternal glory and a kingdom that will never fail.

The disciples did not yet understand. But at least one of them, Thomas, knew enough to say that even if it meant death, he wanted to be with Jesus: “So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him’” (Jn. 11:16).

How truly he spoke. For while Jesus would take up the cross alone, it remains true that everyone who trusts in him must take up their own cross and follow. To be a Christian requires us to die to many things

we have loved. We must die to self-righteousness, to sinful pleasure, to worldly esteem, comfort, and our own cherished plans for life.

Why would anyone do this? Because we know that God has not only allotted us our times in this life, but he has also willed that everyone who lives and dies with Jesus, trusting in his blood and living by his light, will be saved. He said when he got to Bethany: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25). And then he asked the question that above all else will define the time of our death and the time of our life: “Do you believe this?” (Jn. 11:26).