

John 11:1-45 – The Sovereignty of God

Imagine the following situation. A loved one of yours is on their deathbed, but you have a good friend, a doctor, who can cure the deadly disease. So you naturally call your friend and ask for their help. The doctor, without even seeing the patient, assures you that the disease is not fatal in this case and that your loved one will recover. After a couple of days your loved one dies. Finally, four days after the funeral, your friend, the doctor, shows up at your house. What would you say to your friend? Would this doctor still be your friend?

John 11:1-45 gives a great behind the scenes look at the sovereignty of God. Many people view God's sovereignty as impersonal or theoretical. Being told that God is in control when a loved one dies or when you are sick sometimes is not very comforting. But God's sovereignty is practical and personal. In these verses we will see sovereignty promised, sovereignty questioned and sovereignty fulfilled.

Read John 11:1-4. Sovereignty Promised

Lazarus, Mary and Martha were siblings. They were friends of Jesus and had probably seen Jesus heal many people. When Lazarus was deathly ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus that "he whom you love is ill." If you were Martha or Mary, what response would you have expected from Jesus? What did Jesus say about Lazarus' illness?

Notice that Jesus said that the illness was for God's glory. He didn't say that God would be glorified in spite of the illness. God would be glorified through the illness. Does that sound strange or contradictory? Here we have the promise of sovereignty. **Lesson #1** – *God not only works his purposes in spite of our difficult circumstances; he works his purposes by means of our difficult circumstances.*

Read John 11:5-16. Sovereignty Questioned (Part 1)

Jesus did love Martha, Mary and Lazarus and yet he did not rush off to heal his friend. He did not even speak the word like he did for the centurion to perform a long distance healing. He lingered two days longer in the place where he was. Is that your idea of how you love a friend? What problems can occur when a Christian only focuses on God's love while ignoring God's other attributes? **Lesson #2** – *When God says he loves us, it does not mean that he does whatever we want whenever we want him to do it. God's goal is not to make our lives easier; it is to bring glory to himself.*

When Jesus told his disciples it was time for them to go to Lazarus, the disciples were reluctant. Lazarus was only two miles from Jerusalem. The last time that they were in Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders tried to kill Jesus. The disciples questioned the wisdom of Jesus' decision to go near Jerusalem. Why did the disciples question Jesus? Did they think that Jesus didn't remember what happened the last time they were in Jerusalem? **Lesson #3** – *Listen to God, he knows what he is talking about.*

Jesus told the disciples that he was glad that he was not there when Lazarus died. The reason he was glad was because as a result of what was going to happen, the disciples were going to believe.

Read John 11:17-27. Sovereignty Questioned (Part 2)

By Martha's reaction I assume that if Jesus had immediately gone with the messengers, he would have arrived in time to heal Lazarus. Otherwise Martha's comment would have been more along the lines of, "If only we would have sent for you sooner" and not "if you had been here, my brother would not have died". Jesus had said that the illness would not result in death but Lazarus was dead and buried. How do you think Martha understood Jesus' words "This illness does not lead to death"? The only way Martha could reconcile Jesus' character, as one full of truth, with his word was to interpret it in a heavenly sense. Lazarus' body was dead, but his spirit was alive and he would receive a new body at the end of time. But that is not what Jesus meant. Jesus really did mean that the illness would not result in the end of Lazarus' earthly life. **Lesson #4** – *God always fulfills his promises even when it seems impossible. We don't need to make excuses for him.* See Hebrews 11:17-19 concerning Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

Read John 11:28-37. Sovereignty Fulfilled (Part 1)

I believe that Mary, like Martha, was hurt and confused. Jesus was emotionally upset at the sight of his beloved follower weeping over the lose of her brother – a lose he could have prevented. When Mary came and spoke to him, Jesus simply asked where Lazarus was buried. It was time to end the pain. When they told him to come and see the tomb, Jesus broke down and cried. Why did Jesus shed tears? Just because God can prevent suffering and yet declines to do so does not mean that God is unloving or uncaring toward us. Jesus' tears give us a window into the heart of God. Jesus shed tears with Martha and Mary and God will sometimes weep with us when we are hurting. **Lesson #5** – *God's sovereignty is not impersonal. God is not callous or flippant when it comes to the suffering of those he loves.*

The sensitive ones in the crowd said that Jesus' tears showed that he really did love Lazarus. The cynics in the crowd said that Jesus had the power to heal Lazarus and yet did not. Both observations were right, but their implied conclusions were wrong. The sensitive ones thought that even though Jesus loved Lazarus, he was not able to save him. They believed, "God loves us and doesn't want anything bad to happen to us, but sometimes he just can't do anything to stop it. God is love, but God is not all-powerful." The cynics thought that even though Jesus had the power to save Lazarus he did not save him because he did not really care about him. They believed, "God could help us, but he likes to see us suffer. God is all-powerful but he does not love us." **Lesson #6** – *God can love us and still allow us to go through difficult circumstances even though he has the power to prevent it. His love and his power are not contradictory.*

Read John 11:38-45. Sovereignty Fulfilled (Part 2)

Everything that Jesus had done was according to God's perfect plan. The goal was to prove that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and that the Son of God has power over death. As a result people would believe in him. **Lesson #7** – *God is glorified when people believe in him.*

Accepting God's sovereignty is not always easy. It does not always make us feel warm and fuzzy. But, when we encounter difficult circumstances in life we must hold on to the promise that God is in control and believe that he will work his purpose in the circumstances to bring about his glory. Jesus' tears for his friend Lazarus give us a window into the heart of God and put a face on the sovereignty of God.