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LIKE THE HUMMINGBIRD’S WINGS

John 11:1-16

I want to start today with a few riddles. David’s father has 3 sons, Snap, Crackle, and what’s the name of the third son? David. A cowboy rode into town on Friday, stayed there 3 nights, then rode out of town on Friday. How is this possible? His horse is named Friday. A monkey, a squirrel and a bird are climbing up a coconut tree. Which one will get a banana first? None of them, because it’s a coconut tree. There is no banana.

You stand in front of a fork in the road. You know one path leads to your desired destination and the other to a barren desert, but you don’t know which is which. There are two guides by the two paths. You know one guide always tells the truth and the other always lies, but, again, you don’t know which is which. You are allowed to ask one question of one of the guides. What question should you ask? I will let you think about that and will give you the answer at the end of this talk.

Those are not too mysterious. But there are some real puzzles in life. Things happen in our lives that confuse us, perplex us, vex us, because we can’t see how they could be the result of a good God having a loving plan for us. We grapple with trying to understand these things, but fail to come up with a satisfactory answer.

We should remember that the universe itself is a big riddle that we have been trying to unravel, but the more we learn, the more we realize we don’t understand. A Greek philosopher named Democritus is credited with coming up with the idea that all matter is made up of tiny particles that he called “atoms” around 2500 years ago. He thought these atoms were solid, indivisible particles. However, scientists have learned that atoms aren’t solid, and they aren’t indivisible. It has been learned that atoms contain smaller particles called protons, electrons and neutrons. Not so long ago it was taught that protons were featureless balls with one unit of positive electrical charge. But research has now discovered that protons are bundles of elementary particles called quarks. Most recent research has found that the proton contains traces of particles now being called “charm quarks” that are heavier than the proton itself.

How is that possible? Mike Williams, a physicist at MIT, has said of the proton, “This is the most complicated thing that you could possibly imagine…The proton has been humbling to humans. Every time you think you have a handle on it, it throws you some curveballs.” Nature holds mysteries that we can’t completely understand. Oxford professor of astrophysics, Pedro Ferreira, says, “We’re at a complete loss at how to explain some of the most fundamental but baffling observations of how our universe behaves. There is a tremendous, even cosmic, chasm between the physics we know and love, and some of the phenomena that we observe, but simply can’t make head or tail of. We have no idea how to bridge this chasm.” He says physicists are constructing ever more expensive experiments to try to figure it all out. But he says, “There’s no guarantee we’ll succeed, and we might end up never really grasping how the universe works.”

Given this reality about our inability to truly understand how the universe works, it should be no surprise that we don’t understand all about the one who made all of it. Today we are going to look at a passage from John in which Jesus seems to do something inexplicable. But we will see that he had a plan all along, which suggests perhaps we might experience the same thing. Let’s look at John 11:1-16.

JESUS HAD A PLAN

We have seen in the last couple of chapters of John that the conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment of his people had reached a boiling point. The leaders of Judea hated Jesus, and were determined to eliminate him. Jesus knew how that was going to end, but he had a timetable for it, and he wasn’t quite ready for the end of that story. So he left Jerusalem and went across the Jordan River to an area where he would not continually encounter his opponents. He turned down the heat on the burner and let the pot simmer for a bit.

John 11 is a turning point in this gospel. The first 10 chapters of John were about Jesus’ public ministry and they covered close to 3 years of his life. The second half of John, from this point all the way to the end, covers the last few weeks of Jesus life. It begins when one of Jesus’ best friends, Lazarus, became seriously ill. Lazarus and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, were some of Jesus’ most loyal followers. They lived in a town called Bethany, which was sort of a suburb of Jerusalem, less than 2 miles away. Lazarus became gravely sick. Verse 3 says his sisters were so concerned about him that they sent word to Jesus saying, “Lord, the one you love is sick.” They were appealing to Jesus to come heal him.

They knew how serious their brother’s condition was. Jesus had left Jerusalem because it was dangerous for him to stay there. Martha and Mary knew that coming back to the area would entail serious risk for Jesus. But they appealed to him anyway, likely because they knew Jesus was their brother’s only hope. If he didn’t come and help, then Lazarus was going to die.

Jesus’ comment when he heard about Lazarus was a bit odd. He said in verse 4, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through this.” Did Jesus think Lazarus was going to get better, that his illness was not going to end his life? No, Jesus knew Lazarus was going to die. Though his disciples likely didn’t understand it, he was saying the incident was not going to end with Lazarus in a tomb forever.

In verse 11 Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him.” That elicited an understandable response from the disciples. “Hey, Lord, going back to the Jerusalem area would be risky. If he’s just asleep it is also unnecessary because he’s going to wake up.” I think it’s kind of funny that the disciples thought they should point this out to Jesus. Did they think Jesus wasn’t aware of the fact that when people go to sleep it’s not forever, that they will wake up? It seems to me they should have assumed he knew that. Jesus responded, “Dudes, do you really think I don’t know that? Connect the dots. When I say Lazarus is asleep I mean he’s dead, and he’s not going to wake up from that. That’s why we have to go there.”

In verses 5-6 we run into what seems like a puzzle. “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days.” Wouldn’t you expect it to say, “When Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he immediately saddled up and headed back to Bethany as fast as he could go”? That was certainly what Martha and Mary thought was going to happen. Why did Jesus wait 2 days before responding to the request that he come? The most common reconstruction of the time line is that it took one day for messengers to get word to Jesus that Lazarus needed his help. Then Jesus stayed where he was for 2 days. Finally after the delay he made the 1 day trek to Bethany, so it was a total of 4 days between the time the message was sent and the time he arrived. Verse 39 says when Jesus told them to open Lazarus’ tomb Martha objected, “But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there 4 days.” So that’s the 4 days it took Jesus to get there.

However, I think that chronology is not right. I think Jesus was farther than a one day trip away. For that time line to work Lazarus would have had to die as soon as the message was sent to Jesus. I suspect Jesus was several days travel away from Bethany. Even if Jesus had immediately responded to the request he might not have made it to Bethany before Lazarus died.

Whatever the case, his response of just staying where he was seems strange. Why would he do that unless he had a plan that explains all this? The disciples must have been saying, “Uh, so what are we going to do, Lord?” He did have a plan. He said the whole thing happened “For God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Indeed, this incident powerfully brought glory to God and to his Son, Jesus through what transpired. Had Jesus healed Lazarus from a potentially fatal illness it would have been awesome, but it would have been one more healing among many. What actually happened was orders of magnitude more powerful.

Our trouble is with that statement that Jesus loved that family, so he stayed where he was 2 more days. We can clear that up by not ending the sentence there. He loved the family, so he stayed where he was 2 more days then he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” In other words, loving the family was what motivated him to choose to go back to Judea, even though it seriously put him in harm’s way.

THOMAS SHOWED GREAT LOYALTY

When Jesus said, “Let us go back to Judea” in verse 7 his disciples pointed out that the religious leaders had already tried more than once to kill him. They had seen what had to have been tense confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus had openly talked about how the religious leaders of Israel were trying to kill him. As long as they stayed away from Jerusalem Jesus was relatively safe, so why would he choose to return to that area?

Jesus answered somewhat enigmatically, saying, “Are there not 12 hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.” Yeah, okay, got it Jesus. Wait, no I don’t. What did he mean? That’s one of those “Ah, grasshopper” type sayings that sound profound, but are hard to understand. What was the point of this saying?

We get the most plain meaning. When you are walking in the daylight you can walk without tripping over obstacles because you can see them. When you walk in the dark you stand a good chance of tripping on something or stubbing your toe because you can’t see objects that might be in the way. I have learned through painful experience not to leave things on our bedroom floor at night, because if I have to get up for some reason during the night there’s a good chance I might trip on anything in the way. More than once I have stubbed my toe on furniture in the bedroom because I couldn’t see where I was going in the dark. The point is, make the most of it while it is light out. This is kind of like some familiar sayings in English, like “Make hay while the sun shines” or “Strike while the iron is hot.” Those are actually some odd sayings, because I’ve never made hay in my life, sunshine or not. And what am I supposed to be striking while the iron is hot? Plus, what iron is hot and what does that have to do with me striking something? I don’t know. But we all understand the point of those sayings is when you have an opportunity, make the most of it.

Jesus was saying that his opportunity to do work in this world was not unlimited. His time on the planet was quickly going to come to an end, and he knew it. He needed to keep doing the Father’s work while he had the chance, even though in this case it was going to expose him to serious peril, and in the end would result in his final ordeal.

In this case, the opportunity had to do with bringing glory to the Father by helping his good friend, Lazarus. Jesus finally had to lay out for the disciples exactly what he meant. Lazarus was dead, but Jesus needed to go to Bethany and do something that would build their faith. Jesus was determined to go, regardless of the risk and the opposition.

That’s when Thomas responds, “Let us also go that we may die with him.” I feel for Thomas. He is known in history as Doubting Thomas, because he didn’t believe the other disciples when they said they had seen Jesus following his resurrection. He insisted on seeing with his own eyes. Some people criticize him for this statement too, but I find what he said here, while maybe lacking in faith, to also be admirable.

I think a better name for Thomas would be Pessimistic Thomas. I think he didn’t believe the reports of Jesus being alive again after his execution because it was just too good to be true. Thomas had believed in Jesus and had gone all in on following him. When Jesus was arrested and executed it crushed him. His heart was broken, his faith shattered. I think he could not bear to take the risk of believing that Jesus was alive because he didn’t see how that was possible, and because he couldn’t stand the pain of being devastated again when it turned out not to be true.

In this case, we see his pessimism coming out. He has seen the hostility the leaders of the Jewish people had toward Jesus. He had seen Jesus call them hypocrites and worse. He knew how much they hated Jesus. He had seen them try to arrest him or kill him on several occasions. He knew what was going to happen if Jesus went anywhere near Jerusalem. This time they were going to get him. And in Thomas’ mind, they wouldn’t stop with Jesus. They’d go after his followers too, because they’d want to totally stomp out this Jesus movement. So for Thomas to accompany Jesus back to Judea meant he was putting his own life in serious jeopardy.

This is where we have to admire Thomas. Yes, it would have been good if he had more faith. He had seen Jesus heal many people, walk on water, calm a storm, miraculously feed enormous crowds. He should have known that Jesus had divine power to deal even with whatever they faced in Judea. But he felt sure that going back would end in disaster. What impresses me is, he didn’t back away from it. He was going to follow Jesus, no matter the cost. If it meant he was going to die, so be it. Better that than abandoning Jesus. He showed remarkable loyalty and commitment in that instance.

Daniel 3 tells the remarkable story of Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. They were living in Babylon and were actually serving in the government there. King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that everyone had to bow down and worship an idol he had made. They refused to do so because one of God’s commandments was that they must never worship idols. The penalty for refusing to bow down to the idol was to be thrown into a furnace and burned to death. The three men still refused, no matter how much the king threatened them. In Daniel 3:17-18 they said to the king, “If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” They said if their fate was to be burned to a crisp, so be it. They would never compromise obeying their God. Thomas made that same kind of statement. If following Jesus means I’m going to be killed, then let’s go and die with him.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER JESUS HAS A GOOD PLAN FOR US

Jesus’ delay before going to Bethany is strange. Why did he do that? Was he debating what to do? To go back to Judea inevitably meant more confrontation with the establishment leaders, and quite likely would result in their finally succeeding in their efforts to kill him. But to do nothing was to callously abandon some of his most faithful followers, and to let one of them die. Was he struggling with what to do? That clearly was not what was happening. We know that because of what he said in verse 4. The sickness was not going to end in death, and what was happening was going to be for the glory of God. Jesus knew what was going to happen and what he was going to do all along.

His delay, though, would have been very confusing to his disciples. Did Jesus care about Lazarus and his illness? Had he decided to not do anything about it? But the people who would have been most confused were Martha and Mary. Why didn’t Jesus come immediately? If he really cared about Lazarus and about them, wouldn’t the situation have called for a fast response? Didn’t his delay send the message that he didn’t think responding was all that important? My guess is that had to hurt.

Some scholars suggest that Jesus delayed because he wanted to make it clear that Lazarus was good and dead. There are some indications that there was an ancient belief that it was entirely possible that within a couple of days of the death of a person they might conceivably be resuscitated. That would make sense because they may not have had medical technology that would definitively determine if a person was actually dead. So it is possible that Jesus delayed because he wanted there to be no doubt when Lazarus came out of his tomb that this was a true miracle, not a remarkable resuscitation.

What is not in doubt is that Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from his tomb. That was his plan all along. His statement in verse 4 that this would not end in Lazarus being dead shows that. The same thing can be seen in verse 11 when he said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.”

I believe that had you asked Martha and Mary after this was all over if they wished that Jesus had been there when Lazarus became so ill and had healed him, they probably would have pondered that for some time and then said no. That would have been great, but how much greater it was that they went through the horror and sorrow of losing their brother, and then were given unlimited joy when Jesus gave him back. The joy was far greater. They could have imagined Jesus healing their brother. They could not have imagined in a million years Jesus bringing him back to life. When he did, their joy as magnified, and their awareness of the glory of God and the power of Jesus grew by quantum leaps.

I am quite certain that if we were able to ask Lazarus if he would have preferred that Jesus heal him so that he never died, he would emphatically say, “No way.” Lazarus experienced death. He truly went to a place no one had ever returned from, then Jesus brought him back. How do you suppose that affected him? I’m pretty sure that he was never much afraid of dying after that. Can you imagine what that must have been like for him? This experience set him free in a way that no one other than him has ever been free.

The point here is that what Jesus did made no sense to people. But he had a plan, and it was a plan that turned out to be for their good, even though they could never have thought that possible until it all worked out. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of those famous verses that we all love. “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” We like that idea. God has a plan for us and it’s a plan to prosper us. Sounds good. But we forget the context. The historical context was that Jeremiah was telling Israel that God was going to judge them, that they were going to be conquered and many would go into exile in Babylon and live the rest of their lives there. It wasn’t a plan they wanted to hear about. But it was a plan they needed. It was for their good.

This incident in the life of Jesus reminds us that there are going to be times when things happen in our lives that we absolutely do not want. We will have a hard time understanding how it could be God’s plan for this to happen. Yet what we need to remember is that God may have a plan that is mystifying in the short run, but it is for our own good in the long run.

Singer and songwriter Sandra McCracken reflected on how a hummingbird wings beat so fast they are invisible. She said, “Our plans are not like God’s plans. As the hummingbird moves, his wings are invisible to us. So too the work of God is often hard to see in the moment, but nevertheless something remarkable is happening. This is what the Lord says, ‘Look, I am about to do something new. Even now it is coming. Do you not see it?’” (Isaiah 43:19).

David was hounded for years by an only semi-sane King Saul. His life was made miserable and he cried out, “How long, O Lord?” Yet God had a plan for him to become Israel’s greatest king. And he had a plan to have David pour out his heart in songs during those years of trial, songs that would make up much of the Psalms today. The disciples of Jesus, as we have seen, feared what would happen to Jesus if he returned to Jerusalem. In their minds, what needed to happen was for Jesus to continue preaching, teaching and healing people for many years to come. The worst that could happen would be for his life to be cut short. Yet that was exactly what happened. The thing they feared occurred when Jesus was arrested and executed. But Jesus had a plan. It was a plan that was the best thing that has ever happened to the human race.

Paul was arrested due to patently false accusations against him. He was thrown in prison and kept there by a corrupt judge. He spent years in chains, unable to go about his church planting ministry. Writing from prison he wrote in Philippians 1:12, “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.” What does that tell us? That Paul believed God had a plan for his good, even in that awful situation. He’s looking around for the good God had in his plan.

Years ago Laurie and I were dealing with concerns that I was going to be fired from my role as a pastor of a church I had led for many years. The previous few years had been difficult, as some staff members that I had considered friends were trying to get rid of me. It felt like the worst would be for me to be fired at an age when it would be difficult for me to find another job as a pastor. Then the very thing we were concerned about actually happened. It felt really bad. It hurt, and it introduced some fear and uncertainty about our future. We were faced with the question of whether we would trust God’s plan in our lives. It has been fascinating now to look back on those events. In the years that have passed since then we have experienced more joy in ministry than we had in years. I would never want to go back to what we thought we wanted to hang onto most of all. Life has been much better without it.

Life doesn’t always go that way. God doesn’t always do a miracle and turn the horrible thing into a huge, miraculous victory like he would do with Lazarus. But what we can know is that God does have plans for us, plans for hope and for a future. We may not see how it all works out in this life. But some day we will. And in many cases we will even see it in our days on this planet.

When my son played football in high school his team ran an offense that was highly structured. Players had to learn on each play exactly where to step and how far to step. The offense was designed to take advantage of opposing players lack of discipline. Players on the opposing defense were given assignments for what they should do on each play. Toby’s team’s offense was designed to fool them into leaving their assignment because they thought they could make a big play. Every time they did that they would be surprised when the offense would exploit an opening they created by failing to do their assignment. God has a system, a plan for us. Our assignment is to trust him, regardless of how things look. When we fail to do our assignment we invariably end up being exploited by our opposition. We need to stick to the system and trust in God’s plan, even when we don’t understand how it is going to work.

STAY LOYAL TO JESUS

This passage challenges me to remember Thomas saying, “Let’s go with Jesus that we may die with him.” It reminds me of those 3 young Jewish men saying to Nebuchadnezzar, “Our God can save us, but even if he doesn’t, we will not bow down and worship your idols.”

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:10, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus might be revealed in our body.” He said he was committed to Jesus even to the point of carrying around his death, no matter what.

In his book, *The Road To Reality*, K. P. Yohanan wrote, “Where are the believers who will make a deliberate calculation to accept sacrifice and suffering for the sake of following Christ? Casualties, discomfort and injury are part of the program for victory.” Martin Luther said “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”

Philosopher and college professor Phillip Haille wrote several books about what he called institutional cruelty. A prime example was the Nazi regime in Germany. He expressed admiration for the French Resistance to the Nazis in World War 2, especially for the town of Le Chambon Sur Lignon. This French village was unique. Out of fear of the brutality and cruelty of the Nazis most people just tried to take care of themselves as the Nazis were proceeding with the Holocaust. But the people of this town hid and protected Jews even though that brought great risk to themselves. Haille interviewed these people after the war and was surprised that they were quite ordinary. There seemed to be nothing special about them. These seemingly brave, heroic people who had risked their own lives to help others, were just regular people. The one thing that stood out was their faith. Every Sunday they went to church and heard about following Jesus. Haille concluded this was what led to them be people who quietly knew what was right and did it. He cited one elderly woman who faked a heart attack when the Gestapo came to search her house. She told him, “Our pastor always taught us that there comes a time in every life when a person is asked to do something for Jesus. When our time came, we knew what to do.” Her pastor was right. There comes a time when we are asked to do something for Jesus. In fact, there will be many such times. When those times come, we know what to do. We must follow Jesus no matter the cost.

The answer to the riddle I began with is, ask either guide what the other guide would tell which path to take to get to your destination, then do the opposite of what he says. If he happens to be the liar, he will lie about what the honest guide would tell you is the right path, so by doing the opposite you will find the right path. If he is the honest guide he will tell you what the dishonest guide would say, which is a lie. So again, by doing the opposite you will be sure to find the right path.

We don’t have to worry about that. Jesus is always honest and tells us the truth about the path to life. Let’s take that path.