

April 27, 2025 by Steve Brandon



Seeing the Signs

John 11:45-57

1. Seeing and Believing (verse 45)
2. Seeing and Plotting (verses 46-53)
3. Leaving and Looking (verses 54-57)

I know that your Bibles naturally open to the gospel of John, But this morning, I want for us to begin in the gospel of Luke, particularly, Luke 16. So, if you will, I invite you to open in your Bibles to Luke 16. The reason we are going to this chapter is that it gives a good perspective on our text this morning.

As you are turning there, I want you to know that there are two people in the Bible who are named, "Lazarus." The one, we looked at last week. He was the brother of Mary and Martha, and Jesus commanded that he come out of the tomb. And he did. He was raised from the dead.

The other Lazarus is found in Luke 16. Let's begin reading the story, in verse 19, where Jesus introduces the two main characters of the story.

Luke 16:19-21

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The two characters of the story are the rich man, who is unnamed, and the poor man, who is named Lazarus. These men are about as far as you can go on the economic scales. On the one hand, you have a very rich man, who is adorned in expensive clothes, and can afford the finest of foods. On the other hand, you have a very poor man, who is covered with untreatable sores, who is hungry, longing to eat what a dog might eat.

Now, we don't know whether or not these characters were real, or whether Jesus was merely telling a story to make a point. But we have no reason to doubt that something like this could very well happen.

The story continues in verse 22 with the death of both of these men, and they experienced a complete reversal of outcomes in their afterlives.

Luke 16:22-23

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

The poor man was carried by angels to Abraham's side, wherever that is, and whatever that means. As the story progresses, we can only assume that this was a place of great blessing. The rich man was in Hades, and in torment. Somehow he could see the contrast between his situation and the situation of Lazarus.

In Verse 24 we get the first dialog as Lazarus speaks.

Luke 16:24

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'

The desire of the rich man, to merely have a drop of water on his tongue, shows the complete torment that he was facing. Abraham responded in verse 25,

Luke 16:25-26

But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'

This is the point of the story, everything that was experienced in life, was exchanged in the afterlife. The rich man experienced all that life could offer, but came to experience the torments of hell after he died. The poor man, on the other hand, suffered a very difficult life, but came to be comforted in death. Furthermore, their fortunes were impossible to change.

Upon hearing this, the rich man thinks of his family.

Luke 16:27-28

And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' He wants Lazarus to rise from the dead, and go back and speak to the rich man's family, and tell them of the torment that their brother is facing, and the torment that they may face as well, unless they repent.

Abraham responded in verse 29,

Luke 16:29

But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'

They have the Scriptures, which make things clear enough. Abraham says, let them listen to what the Bible tells them, of how God called people to live for him, and how he will receive those who repent. There are a bunch of Scriptures that Abraham could have mentioned here. I'll mention two:

From Moses, during his last sermons to Israel: Deuteronomy 30 records him placing a choice before Israel.

Deuteronomy 30:19

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,

From Isaiah, in the first chapter of his prophecy:

Isaiah 1:18-20

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.
If you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be eaten by the sword;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Many more passages like this could be quoted. Abraham said, to the rich man, "Your brothers have the Bible. Let them read the Bible. Let them repent, and they will avoid the torment that you are facing."

But that wasn't good enough for the rich man. He knew all too well how he, himself, had not listened to what Moses and the prophets had said, So, he repeats his request in verse 30,

Luke 16:30

And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

The rich man thought that a resurrection from the dead would be the very thing that his brothers needed to repent, and avoid the agony of hell. Then Abraham says these shocking words:

Luke 16:31

He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Did you catch what Abraham said? Even a miracle as great as a person rising from the dead, is not enough to convince someone of the reality of the afterlife, and the importance of repenting before it's too late.

Which, by the way, ought to convince us all of the power of God's word. We hold it in our hands. We consider it every week here in this place. We encourage you to read it in your homes everyday, that you would believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you might have life in his name.

Further, when you are trying to convince a friend to believe in Jesus, it's not the great signs and wonders that you try to do that will convince your friend. It's Moses and the Prophets. It's the Scriptures that has the power to persuade!

That's why at Rock Valley Bible Church, we are relentlessly Biblical in all that we do. We preach through books of the Bible, We encourage you to read your Bibles, We gather in groups to talk about the Scriptures, because, we believe that if someone is to believe, it won't come through wonders. It will come through believing the Bible.

This is the whole point of the story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus: As great a sign as it is, that someone would rise from the dead, it is powerless to convince someone to repent, if they won't listen to the Scriptures.

And there is no greater illustration of this in all of the Scripture, and we see in our text this morning: John 11:45-57. Last week, we considered the first portion of this chapter, looking at the story of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. when Jesus came to the tomb, and ordered the stone to be rolled away, and cried out to him, "Lazarus, come out." And Lazarus came out of the tomb! He was raised from the dead!

As far as John's gospel goes, this is the seventh of the signs that John put forth in his gospel. Let me remind you again of these signs:

The first sign happened in Cana of Galilee, when Jesus was at a wedding, and they ran out of wine. and at the prompting of his mother, Jesus turned the water into wine, like more than 100 gallons worth of wine.

The second sign again at Cana, when a royal official left his dying son in Capernaum, and made the day long journey to see him, to request Jesus to come and heal his son. Jesus healed the man's son from 20 miles away, saying, "Go, your son will live" (John 4:50). and when they pieced together the narrative, they found out that it was a that very moment that the boy was healed.

The third sign happened in Jerusalem at the pool of Bethesda, where invalids were often gathered during the feast, hoping to experience the healing power of the water. Among the invalids, Jesus saw a man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk" (John 5:8). John 5:9 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

The fourth sign was near the Sea of Galilee, When a large crowd had followed him, numbering some 5,000 men. Jesus ordered his disciples to sit the people down. And taking the five loaves of bread and the two fish, Jesus blessed them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the crowds. And everyone was fed that day. Everyone ate "as much as they wanted" (John 6:11).

As a result of this sign, the people were about to take Jesus by force to make him king (John 6:15). so Jesus withdrew until the evening came. Now, his disciples had left in a boat across the sea. But Jesus came to them, walking on the water (John 6:19). a fifth sign.

The sixth sign of Jesus again took place in Jerusalem, during one of the Jewish feasts. Jesus encountered a man who was born blind. Jesus stooped down, and "spit on the ground and made mud with his saliva" (John 9:6). He then anointed this man's eyes with the mud and told him, John 9:7 "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam." The man did, and his sight was restored.

Finally, he seventh sign took place in Bethany, out by the tombs. A friend of Jesus, whose name was Lazarus had died. He was wrapped and placed in the tomb. With a crowd of mourners all around, Jesus "cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out'" (John 11:44). Lazarus came out of the tomb, wrapped like a mummy.

These are the seven signs of the gospel of John, which he wrote with a purpose:

John 20:30-31

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

My message this morning is entitled, "Seeing the Signs" because, that's what the last half of John 11 deals with. John tells us of the reaction of those who saw the signs that Jesus did.

In verse 45, we see the Jews responding as we would have expected them to respond, in faith. This is our first point this morning:

1. Seeing and Believing (verse 45)

John 11:45

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him,

"Many of the Jews" who saw the sign of Lazarus raising from the dead with their own eyes, believed in Jesus. It's no wonder that they did, as the sign that Jesus performed was a miraculous sign. A man who had been dead and in the tomb for four days, came to life again. For them, "seeing was believing."

As for the number of those who believed, John identifies them as those mourners who had come with Mary to the tomb. Who knows how many this is? Perhaps 20, 50, or even 100 people witnessed this event. We don't know.

But we do know that "many" of them believe in Jesus because of this sign. But not all of them believed. There were "some" who didn't. Look at verse 46,

John 11:46

but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Picture the scene. The "some of them" were with Mary in her house, mourning with her, following her to the tomb, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep (John 11:31). But as they followed her out, they saw that she met Jesus, who was calling for her to come (John 11:28). The "some of them" witnessed all that Jesus did in raising Lazarus from the dead. Rather than believing and following Jesus, they go and report what happened to the Pharisees.

Look at the response of the Pharisees in verse 47,

John 11:47

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

Instead of believing in Jesus, they are plotting against Jesus, as to what they might do. This is my second point,

2. Seeing and Plotting (verses 46-53)

The amazing thing here about the response of these religious leaders, is that they also, saw the signs that Jesus was doing. Oh, perhaps not with their own eyes, but they acknowledged the signs that Jesus was doing: Look again at what they said in verse 47, "This man performs many signs."

They had seen the signs. Just think about the two miracles that happened in Jerusalem where the religious leaders were. They had seen how Jesus healed the lame man (in chapter 5). They had seen how Jesus healed the man born blind (in chapter 9).

In both of those instances, they were able to speak with those who were healed. In both of those instances, there was no doubt that they had been healed. Further, there was no doubt that Jesus had done the healing.

Then, in this case, a man had been raised from the dead! Those who saw it brought report back to the council. Can you imagine what they said? "Guys, Jesus is at it again. This time, he raised Lazarus from the dead. You know Lazarus. He comes to the temple often to worship. He lives with Mary and Martha his sisters in Bethany, just a few miles from here. Anyway, he was sick and died. That was four days ago. And Jesus came. And he ordered the stone to be rolled away from the tomb. Then, he called to Lazarus who was in the tomb. And Lazarus came out alive! There are many who are believing in him. I have just come to tell you about what this troublemaker just did."

Upon hearing these words, we get no sense at all that the Pharisees doubted what Jesus did. Instead, they "gathered a council" to figure out what to do. In our day, there is a crisis in the Catholic Church, so the Cardinals have 'gathered a council." Over the next few weeks, they will elect a new pope.

In the case of these Jews, even the miracle of a man being raised from the dead was not enough to bring them to repentance and follow after Jesus. just like Jesus foretold with the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Rather than believing in Jesus, they plotted against him.

Now, at this point in the narrative, the council didn't have clear plan of what they were going to do. That's why they asked themselves "What are we to do?" (verse 47).

Their question was a question of self-serving preservation of power. They reasoned,

John 11:48

"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

They foresaw all of the Jews believing in Jesus. They believed that this would spell disaster for them, as the Romans would see a rising rebellion among the Jews. This would bring the Romans to in with their military might to crush the Jewish people. Or so they reasoned.

John doesn't include all of the debate in his narrative, but surely there was some back and forth as these Pharisees took the floor and debated the issue, plotting what to do with Jesus. Then one of them came up with a plan that ruled the day.

John 11:49

But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all."

In other words, all of the debate until this point was futile. If you read between the lines, they were suggesting that they deal with Jesus in various ways. Perhaps by arresting him and putting him in prison. Perhaps by banning Jesus from the synagogues. Perhaps by discrediting him somehow. Perhaps by monitoring his movements more closely. Perhaps by warning his followers. But none of them included actually killing Jesus, until Caiaphas recommended it.

John 11:49-50

"You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."

Caiaphas was thinking about killing Jesus, and preserving Israel. In other words, he saw that if Jesus would continue on, it would mean death to the "whole nation." As verse 48 indicates, they believed that the Romans would come and take away their temple and destroy the nation. So better to kill Jesus, than the entire nation be destroyed.

Bottom line? Caiaphas said that Jesus should be executed to avoid political disaster. In other words, "Sacrifice the one to save the many." How ironic, because, this is exactly what Jesus did. He was sacrificed that the many would be saved.

Oh, but not like Caiaphas thought. Caiaphas thought that Jesus should be sacrificed, to that the nation of Israel would continue to exist under the rule of the Romans. But little did Caiaphas know that Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of the people, that we all could be saved!

This is the core of the gospel: John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, [to come and die on the cross as our sinless substitute to die in our place] that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

This is what Caiaphas was saying! He was preaching the gospel! But Caiaphas didn't know the gospel! He preached the gospel unknowingly.

How is that possible for Caiaphas to speak better than he knew? It was God who stepped in and gave him the words to say: Look at verse 51.

John 11:51

[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord,

Caiaphas didn't say this out of his own wisdom. Caiaphas didn't say this because of his own discernment. God revealed it to him, in such a way that Caiaphas thought that he was saying on thing, (and he was) but God was having him say another thing as well.

Be comforted with these words. Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." Just know, that whatever political trials are coming in this world, that whatever is bringing you anxiety about the state of the world, that God has the heart of the kings in his hand, turning their hearts wherever he wills. That's true of Democrat or Republican. That's true of Russia or China or Israel. That's true of the cardinals in the coming weeks as they meet to elect a new pope. "History" is "his story" that God is writing.

In Jesus' day, God was writing the history by placing these words in the mouth of Caiaphas, "It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (verse 50).

John 11:51-52

[Caiaphas] did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

We find out from verse 52 that the words of Caiaphas went beyond the people of Israel. It wasn't just Israel that Jesus would die for, it was for the children of God who were in other nations as well.

With these words, John is expanding the scope of mission of Jesus, beyond merely the Jewish people, but for all who would believe, even us, in Loves Park, some 2,000 years after the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus has reached us! Never let that grow old in your thoughts. That when Christ died, it wasn't merely for the people of Israel as promised in the New Covenant. it was for all who would come to faith in Jesus, all across this planet!

Do you believe this? The religious council in that day didn't. Look at verse 53,

John 11:53

So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

This is my second point, "Seeing and Plotting (verses 46-53)." That is, they were plotting the death of Jesus. This plot will carry through the rest of John's gospel.

My last point will go very quickly. I'm calling my last point,

3. Leaving and Looking (verses 54-57)

In verse 54, we see Jesus leaving the scene. In verses 55-57, we see the Jews looking for Jesus. Look at verse 54,

John 11:54

Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.

The days of the ministry of Jesus to the Jews was essentially finished. From this point on, Jesus had very little to do with the Jews. He "no longer walked openly among the Jews."

Note where he was. He was "with the disciples" (verse 54) in a remote town called Ephraim, a safe distance away from Jerusalem, where he would be safe from the plotting Jews.

Putting things together, it was probably a few months that Jesus was with the disciples. The events of chapter 10 took place during the "Feast of Dedication" (John 10:22), which is Hannukah, which takes place during the winter months. Jesus will enter Jerusalem again at the Passover.

Jesus was spending this time in training his disciples. Surely he was teaching them the Scriptures. Surely he was showing them love. Surely he giving them comfort, that all was in God's hands as Psalm 31:15 says, "My times are in your hand;"

Now, it wasn't that Jesus was scared of the Jews, so he was in hiding. It's that his hour hadn't yet come. It wasn't time for him to be found out. That would come at the Feast of the Passover.

In John 13:1 we read, "Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." It's at the Passover that the hour of Jesus would come, which is mentioned in our last section, beginning in verse 55.

John 11:55-57

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?" Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him.

We see the Jews looking for Jesus at the feast. This is where I get the phrase in my third point, "Leaving and Looking." This sounds a bit like

chapter 7, when the Jews were "looking for him at the feast" (John 7:11).

Certainly, some were looking for him for curiosity's sake, as it seems as if Jesus does something unique at every feast. Whether that's overturning the tables of the moneychangers in chapter 2, or performing some healing (chapters 5 and 9), or merely teaching in the temple (chapter 7), something always seemed to happen when Jesus was at the feast. Certainly, some were looking to see what Jesus would do this time.

Yet, we know that some were looking for Jesus to arrest him, to kill him. That's really the point of the text, which tells us of how the Jews responded to Lazarus raising from the dead! So rid yourself of the idea that all people need is signs and wonders, and then they will repent. Don't think that unbelievers need some big, miraculous thing for them to believe. No. We have the Bible. If they don't believe the Bible, they won't believe when they see signs.

This was what Jesus said in the story about Lazarus and the rich man. Jesus said, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31). Even witnessing someone rising from the dead was not sufficient for the Jews to repent. They responded badly enough that their time of visitation was over. "Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews" (verse 54).

Think about that, for three years, Jesus had been walking among the Jews. God was with him as he went about "doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). But here, their time had run out.

For you, the time may run out just as quickly. You have no idea what tomorrow will bring. Believe in Jesus while there is still time. Trust in the Scriptures to open eyes and open hearts, because even here, seeing a miracle of the resurrection from the dead is not helping them at all.

We do see that their fears were realized. Look at John 12:9, "When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead." The risen Lazarus was causing a ruckus with the religious leaders, just as Jesus was. The narrative continues, "So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus" (John 12:10-11). The resurrection was persuading some, but there were many whose hearts were stirred in hatred. Their hard hearts were similar to the heart of the rich man who ignored the sufferings of Lazarus, not thinking of the afterlife.

So let's be people of the book, who bring a message of grace and repentance to others. And let us trust that God will use his word to do his work in the hearts of his people.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 27, 2025 by Steve Brandon.
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