

Lesson 10

The Therapy of Thankfulness

Lesson Setting

Scripture: John 11:1-57.

John 11 divides naturally into two parts. First, there is the story about the death and resurrection of Lazarus (John 11:1-44). This astounding miracle proves that Jesus is truly the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25, 26). In reaction to the same miracle, however, the religious leaders lay specific plans to kill Him in order, they feel, to save the nation from destruction (John 11:45-57).



God gave us faces; we create our own impressions.

Emotions—can you trust them? Feelings—do they give a reliable picture of reality? They certainly seem to. I am what is known as a “night person.” That means I’m wide awake in the evening but in another universe in the morning. If you call me at 5:30 in the morning, I’m likely to snarl, and I may even bark. But even more likely, I will put the earpiece to my mouth and the mouthpiece to my ear and wonder why we have such a lousy connection!

Along with this zombielike condition comes a feeling of depression some mornings. I feel like I’m no good to anybody, I’m a failure at all that I do, and nobody loves me. The amazing thing is that if I get out of bed and get going, these feelings will pass in a few minutes. Were those depressed feelings a picture of reality? No, they are only the product of chemicals in the brain that follow a daily cycle. Feelings can be as fickle as

the weather in Seattle. They can, nevertheless, be very convincing.

A good example of a highly emotional person is Mary of Bethany. Her life, as we glimpse it in the Bible, is one of many ups and downs. Her feelings sometimes mirror reality and sometimes do not. Her relationship with Jesus has ups and downs too. Things didn’t start out too well. Her first encounter with Jesus is not mentioned in Scripture, unless it is portrayed anonymously in John 8:1-11. But the Bible tells us that Mary was a “sinner” (Luke 7:37-39). In its context, the term *sinner* implies sexual sin, probably prostitution. But at some point Mary came face to face with Jesus. I picture her falling down at His feet. Her feelings? Humiliation, guilt, self-hatred. But she sensed in Jesus a man she could trust. He knew her sinfulness, yet He loved and accepted her. A healing process began.

The second encounter finds her, again, at

Make a list of five things you are thankful for right now. List them in order of importance to you. Share the top two items on the list with a classmate.

the feet of Jesus, this time basking in His presence. Martha is in the kitchen, and Mary is listening to Jesus. Here the emotions are upbeat. The scene is one of joy and contentment. Why? She had that one thing that is needed, a close personal friendship with Jesus (Luke 10:42). Her feelings were under control and in tune with Jesus. Now that she had accepted Jesus—she would never be depressed again, right? Wrong!

One day her brother Lazarus got sick. . . .

Bible Search

(John 11:1-44)

Read John 11:1-44 and then answer the following questions:

1. What message do Mary and Martha send to Jesus?
2. How does Jesus respond?
3. What is the situation when Jesus finally arrives in Bethany?
4. How do the two sisters react to the news of Jesus' arrival outside town?
5. What do the sisters know about Jesus that tried their faith?

Jesus' action in staying away from Bethany may seem cruel and unusual. But in the Gospel of John, Jesus never does anything apart from the direction of God. His whole mission in life is to bring glory to God (John 11:4).

There may have been a hidden motive in Jesus' action. In popular Jewish belief at that time, the soul of an individual hovered over the body for three days after death, hoping for resuscitation to take place. After that, there was no more hope of resurrection. Had Jesus come earlier, His raising of Lazarus from

the dead might not have had the impact that it came to have. But this outcome was not discernible to Jesus' friends in advance.

Looked at from the perspective of Mary and Martha, the death of Lazarus was not the worst thing. The worst part about the situation was that Jesus delayed in coming! Suppose your brother (or sister or best friend or parent) was dying, and your doctor had the ability to save his life; but he refused to come until after the Super Bowl—causing your brother to die. How would you feel? Angry? Resentful? Depressed? All of the above and more?

Martha "went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home" (John 11:20). Perhaps Mary didn't *feel* like seeing Jesus just then. Fragile Mary was certainly feeling hurt. The Man she had trusted seemed to have let her down. Why? Maybe He had rejected her. Maybe He was tired of her moods. Maybe their entire friendship had been a mistake!

Had Christ been in the sickroom, Lazarus would not have died; for Satan would have had no power over him. . . . Therefore Christ remained away. He suffered the enemy to exercise his power, that He might drive him back, a conquered foe. He permitted Lazarus to pass under the dominion of death; and the suffering sisters saw their brother laid in the grave. Christ knew that as they looked on the dead face of their brother their faith in their Redeemer would be severely tried. But He knew that because of the struggle through which they were now passing their faith would shine forth

with far greater power (*The Desire of Ages*, 528).

6. What does Martha say that made it clear that she had not lost hope?

The expression in verse 27 matches what the writer of the Gospel sought to elicit from his readers as expressed in the Gospel's statement of purpose in John 20:31.

7. When does Mary finally go to Jesus?
8. When Mary finally meets Jesus, does she offer similar expressions of faith to those that Martha expressed?
9. How does Jesus respond to Mary's arrival statement?

Relationships are such fragile things. Jesus is in the park outside of town; Mary is in the house. Both seem to be waiting for some kind of signal. This is a picture of reality. Jesus is always there, standing in the shadows of our lives, waiting to be invited in. Sometimes, like Mary, our eyes are so blinded with tears that we can't see Him standing there with arms outstretched. Sometimes our ears are so deaf with anger, grief, or pain that we can't hear Him inviting us to come. At such times He sends a representative, someone with feelings and flesh who can press home the invitation.

Fragile Mary falls again at the feet of Jesus. She repeats Martha's complaint, but without any affirmation of continued faith. As a result, she receives no revelation from Jesus, and He draws no expression of faith from her (compare with John 11:25-27). Instead, He is deeply troubled at her apparent lack of faith and that of those with her.

Jesus has come to invite them to behold the resurrection and the life, but their minds are fixed on their loss instead.

But Jesus speaks no words of rejection. Mary is back where she belongs, accepted at the feet of Jesus. She is apparently still resentful, still insecure, still a raging sea of turbulent feelings. But Jesus doesn't walk away. He doesn't chide her for her feelings. He accepts her as she is. Her feelings do not in any way cause Him to change course. He doesn't refuse to perform the wonderful surprise that He has planned for her.

Journaling (Experience)

Recall times in your life when God delayed answering your prayer requests. How did each delay affect your faith at the time? In what way is your current faith still colored by those events?

Journaling (Insight)

In what ways are you like Mary? Martha? The disciples in this story?

Gaining Control Over Our Emotions

Why do our emotions have such a powerful effect upon us? One very important reason is that by nature human beings are absorbed in themselves. As important as it is to spend time in thoughtful reflection on our lives, there is a dark side to concentrating on one's own needs and feelings. This was brought home to me one day when I paid a visit to a mental hospital in New York City. The ward that I visited was filled with

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people in various stages of detachment from reality. But there was one thing that all of the patients who could communicate had in common. Every sentence was centered around the word *I*. Every conversation had one subject and only one. The common denominator of mental illness seems to be an extreme focus on self. Self-centeredness is the path to self-destruction. A self-centered person will always be a prisoner of his or her own emotions.

There is, however, a scientifically proven way to gain control of our feelings that is also compatible with the Bible. Ellen G. White describes it well in *The Ministry of Healing*, 251. "It is a law of nature that our thoughts and feelings are encouraged and strengthened as we give them utterance." Talk doubt, and you will have more doubt. Talk discouragement, and you will have more discouragement. But the reverse is also true. Talk faith, and you will have more faith. Talk thankfulness, and you will have joy. To quote Ellen G. White again from the same page: "Nothing tends to promote health of body and of soul more than does a spirit of gratitude and praise."

A spirit of gratitude and praise is the ideal antidote to self-absorption and the depression that comes with it. Words of thankfulness and praise take our minds off ourselves and direct them toward Jesus.

Gail was having major difficulties with a classroom full of young children. Her life had been an unending series of disappointments. She felt like a failure and was in a state of continual depression. A preacher named Glenn Coon suggested a remedy for

both the class and her depression.

He encouraged her to each morning think of, and write down, a list of ten things that she was thankful for or should be thankful for. She was to take the list with her throughout the day and review the list as often as possible, preferably every half-hour to an hour. The objects on the list were to be practical, everyday-type realities like air, sunlight, forgiveness, the color of the carpet, the cat, etc. She was to incorporate each item into a sentence prayer, such as "Thank You, Lord, for air. Thank You, Lord, for forgiveness. Thank You, Lord, for the cat, etc." The secret to the system, Coon suggested, was to say these sentences out loud whenever possible. The next best thing would be to say them in the mind. Expression would deepen impression.

Now when Gail first heard this suggestion, she thought the idea was pretty stupid but decided to try it out on the class anyway. If it worked for them, it might work for her as well. So she offered a special prize to each child who would bring a list of ten things they were thankful for each day until school closed. With twelve weeks of school left, that meant they would have to find 600 different things to be thankful for. She did not even ask the children to repeat the lists or pray sentence prayers using them. They were just to bring a new list every day. Soon the whole atmosphere in the school changed. Problem children began working like honor students. The classroom became a pleasant place.

Something else happened. Parents began to help their children find and write up their lists day by day. The parents them-

selves, including a number of grumpy men and women, became happier and more cooperative. The school and church were becoming a little bit of heaven on earth.¹

At first hearing, this "thank therapy" may sound simplistic, but it really works. Try it; you'll like it. But what if you run out of things to put on the list each morning? Open a dictionary and you will find items on every page, sometimes dozens, for which to be thankful. It is amazing how many things God has done for us, and yet we rarely take the opportunity to thank Him, to our own physical and mental loss.

I'll never forget the time I was preaching a sermon entitled "Dealing With Depression." The day before I was to preach, I experienced what in my career has been the ultimate betrayal. A leader in the church threatened my career in a way that to me seemed unjust. I was forced to call all my hopes and dreams into question. This sent me into a huge emotional tailspin that made the very act of preaching a painful physical challenge.

When I got up to speak, I was depressed. It was as if a gray Michigan cloud had settled over my head, blotting the congregation from my view. But I spoke of the power of gratitude and praise. I showed how we can thank Jesus in every circumstance, no matter how trying. As I taught the people how to praise Him for life, breath, water, and mercy, my own cloud lifted as the Son of Righteousness filled my own soul. It is impossible to estimate the power that gratitude and praise have on our emotions. Expression deepens impression. As we learn

to praise and thank God for everything, our emotions become more and more harnessed in devotion to Him.

Journaling (Prayer)

Make a list of ten specific things that you are thankful to God for. Incorporate these into a series of sentence prayers as illustrated in the above narrative.

Bible Search **Sometimes It Takes a Miracle**

While thankfulness and praise can make a huge difference in the way we feel, no amount of thankfulness and praise, in themselves, could have brought Lazarus back from the dead. The only hope for one who had been dead four days was the Godlike, life-giving power of Jesus.

Answer the following questions on the basis of the texts cited:

10. What does Jesus command as He approaches the tomb? John 11:39.

Although Martha had expressed faith in Jesus earlier, even her faith wavers as she comes face to face once more with the finality of the tomb.

11. With what words does Jesus perform the miracle? John 11:43.

Lazarus responds by shuffling out in his grave clothes, the only "mummy" who ever truly walked. In a scene garnished by John with a little humor, Jesus orders them to "untie the prisoner and let him go."

12. Do the religious leaders believe in the reality of what Jesus did? John 11:47.

13. How do the religious leaders respond?
John 11:53; 12:9-11.

An atheist, commenting publicly on this text, noted that Jesus called Lazarus by name "in a loud voice." He suggested that Lazarus was not really dead and that he and Jesus staged the resurrection to substantiate Jesus' claims for Himself. Jesus used the loud voice and mentioned Lazarus by name as a prearranged signal that it was time for Lazarus to come out.

A little old lady in the crowd stood up and offered a different interpretation. "If Jesus hadn't called Lazarus by name," she said, "every dead person in that entire cemetery would have come forth."

The bottom line of Christian faith is that there is real power in the gospel. That power that raised Lazarus and Jesus from the dead is real, and it is still available today. Even today, there are times when only a miracle can clear away the clouds. We will all have

the John 11 experience at one time or another. Death, betrayal, loss, and destruction may leave a real sense of loss that cannot be explained away. No amount of thankfulness and praise may at times be able to undo a reality that cannot be glossed over or explained away. But at such points we can remember that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can still create something out of nothing. Even when all seems hopeless, we can still put our trust in Him.



Anchor Text

"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies' " (John 11:25).

Endnotes

1. The story about Gail and the principles of thank therapy (tested by the author of this unit for over twenty years) can be found in Glenn and Ethel Coon's book *The Lovely Lord of the Lord's Day* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1976).

Reaction

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the two women in John 11 would the second generation of Christians be more likely to identify with, Mary or Martha? Why?
2. How do you think Jesus' delay in going to Bethany affected His disciples? The other Jews in the story?
3. Based on the evidence of this chapter, how would you describe the personalities of Mary and Martha respectively?
4. Since Jesus knows that He has come to raise Lazarus from the dead, why do you think He is so troubled and sorrowful in verses 33-38?
5. Would the concerns of the religious leaders in John 11:45-57 have been legitimate if Jesus had been a fraud? Explain your answer.

Expanded Horizons

1. Make a list of ten new things to be thankful for each class day during the next two weeks of this unit. At least two times during these two weeks, take time to review and pray over your lists. Write in one or two paragraphs any changes you experience as a result of this "therapy."
2. In the Bible, at least ten different individuals were raised from the dead. As a whole class (with the help of concordances and/or Bible dictionaries, as needed) find and list all these resurrec-

tion accounts. How many eras of biblical history experienced resurrections? Study the biblical

texts gathered by the class and then write a paragraph or two describing the significance of

those features of the Lazarus narrative that you consider special or unique.



CREATIVE PROJECTS

1. Start a "Good Stuff" club at your school (come up with a better name for it too), designed to celebrate all the "good stuff" that God does for us day by day. Challenge your friends and teachers to practice listing ten things they are thankful for every day. Have club members identify themselves by a signal and/or a logo. Whenever club members meet, they can snap, "What are you thankful for right now?" or "Gimme the Good Stuff" and expect an immediate answer. Rewards (for having thankfulness on the mind) and "punishments" (for forgetting to) can be part of the fun. At the end of the unit, write a two- to three-page essay on the benefits of being part of a group of thankful people.
2. Briefly describe a strategy for elevating feelings of depression.