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When Jesus Is Off Script

John 11

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It is great to be here. As Bryan mentioned, I pastor at North Pointe Community Church. Many of you know the story, but many of you are new, so for those who don't know...I was on staff here from 2002 to 2005. It had long been the intention of the leadership of Lincoln Berean to plant a church up north because it fit with the mission of reaching people. The thinking was…if you're living in the Highlands or 20th & Superior or at Fallbrook, it's a long way to invite a neighbor to come across town to Highway 2 & 70th. So after years of praying and giving, I felt like I struck gold, because I got to be a part of this. And many of you were part of praying and giving for that, and were doing that long before I was on the scene. So on behalf of the people and staff at North Pointe, thank you for doing that.

The mission was to reach people. I remember when Bryan Clark was talking about this shortly before we launched, he said, "If you're just looking for a smaller church, please, please don't go to North Pointe, because it's not about a smaller church; it's about reaching people. It fits with the mission of what we're trying to do with Lincoln Berean." I just kind of took a snapshot of the last couple of weeks. A week ago we had our Vacation Bible School. I saw one lady there—their family is third generation. In other words, somebody came and they invited somebody, and they invited this family. And what I noticed was, she had signed her kids up while this other family was on vacation. So they no longer needed that family to come. North Pointe was enough of their home.

Last Sunday (we have one place where you can go out and greet people as they go), I greeted two people and I thought…*You came because someone else invited you. In fact, one of you is third generation, and the people who invited you are not here this Sunday. So this has become your church, even though the folks that you invited aren't here.* In each of these cases, these families that were invited had been out of church a while or hadn't been to church. I just share that to say that what you gave for and what you prayed for is working, and is happening. So thank you for being a part. Thank you for commissioning us to go. We're with you in heart and soul with the mission of reaching people for Jesus because, at the end of the day, that's what matters.

Before I was a pastor, I worked fifteen years with a ministry called Campus Crusade…college campuses primarily in Colorado and some overseas. Some of my most painful and now humorous memories involve skits. In this particular meeting, early in the second semester, this skit was supposed to be a parody of the long registration lines the students have faced. It was supposed to be one of those late night TV things you can enter with this fold-up chair. And what you need to know is when the skit was delivered, the lines that were clearly designed to draw a laugh were met with [quiet] uncomfortable silence. We knew that was supposed to be funny, but it wasn't. The skit went on a little bit more, and the second line was supposed to be a zinger, but it was met with [quiet] uncomfortable, awkward silence. At this point, the one person who was driving the skit up front—he was the pitch man for the chair—kind of freaked out! He went *off script*! He decided to *ad lib* a couple of lines. They went worse than the original lines! *(laughter)* The staff and I were writhing! It seemed like thirty minutes, but it was only thirty seconds! We were thinking, *Please sit down and be quiet*! *(laughter)* And he finally did.

You know, there are times that it seems to us that Jesus goes "*off script*". We have what we think He ought to do. This is particularly true when life is hard, when it's not going well. We have a script. We think Jesus ought to be doing this and, instead, He's doing that! What I want us to think about this morning is: What do we do when Jesus gets off script? I want to think that through this morning. If you have a Bible, turn to John 11. We're going to work our way through this chapter and into a couple of verses in chapter 12. We're going to wrestle with the question: What do we do when Jesus gets off script? As you're turning there, let me set the stage.

Jesus was very human. As a result, He had many close relationships with people He loved and with people who loved Him. One of those groups of people was a family that consisted of at least three people—two sisters (Mary and Martha) and a brother (Lazarus). In this case, Lazarus was sick. That sets the context. Then, in verse 3, the sisters let Jesus know what's going on with Lazarus. It says this:

> **So the sisters sent word to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he** (being Lazarus) **whom You love is sick."** (*NASB, John 11:3)

I think most of us think, *boy, if there's someone we love that's sick and we can do something about it, we're going to go do it as quickly as we can*. We're going to do what we can to help this person out. If you turn back two chapters, Jesus healed the blind man. He's been healing the sick; He's been casting out demons; He's been doing all kinds of stuff! There's every reason to think He could handle this situation. But when Jesus gets the word in verse 4, he doesn't respond the way it, necessarily, follows *our* script:

> **But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death,** (well, that's good news) **but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it."** (Vs. 4)

So God's greatness is going to be on display, and certainly we've got a way to do that—go in and heal it and cast out the sickness. And, boy, that'd be great to see. Verse 5 affirms the love that these people have for one another. In verse 6, it says this:

> **So when He heard** (Jesus heard) **that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was.** (Vs. 6)

I think at this point we can officially say that Jesus was *off script*. We know You've got power! We know You can do stuff with the sick! You got word that Lazarus is sick and You're just going to stay there two days? You oughta follow what *we* think You ought to do! It seems like You're off script!

In verse 7, after two days, Jesus decided to go to Judea. His disciples asked him in verse 8, "Do you think that's a good idea? They wanted to stone you the last time you were there!" In verses 9 and 10, Jesus uses the metaphor of day and night to say, "We've got a season to work. We've gotta do it!" So in verse 11, he then speaks to Lazarus' situation:

> **This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."** (Vs.11)

And the disciples are thinking, *Wow*, *If he's asleep, that's good news! He's going to wake him up! That's good news.*

The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." (Vs. 12)

But they didn't get the metaphor. So Jesus is going to explain it to them: Verses 13 and following:

Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, … (Vs. 13-15a)

Really? I'm thinking I would have liked to have had you there! You're *off script*! But Jesus has a reason:

… so that you may believe; but let us go to him." (Vs. 15b)

You want faith, but I'd like to have life! In verse 16, Thomas expresses his concern that we're all going to die! Jesus decides to go anyway. And in verse 17, it says:

So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. (Vs. 17)

Now, Jewish tradition held that the soul stayed around three days. After three days, it took off. Whether or not Jesus waited the fourth day, we don't know. But one thing we do know is that Lazarus is really, really, really, dead. There is no doubting that at this point. In verses 18 and 19, people are traveling to console Mary and Martha. In verse 20, Martha finds out that Jesus has showed up. In verse 21, she goes to meet him and the conversation goes like this:

Martha then said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, (there's her script) **my brother would not have died.** (Vs. 21)

Her expectation was that Jesus would show up and heal him. He's *off script*! At least he's off Martha's script! She puts it in statement form, "**If you'd been here**..." I'd put it in question form, "Jesus, where were you?" Or if it's present text, "Jesus, where *are* you?" We sure heard those words in the horrific shooting at Sandy Hook, didn't we? Where was God? That's Martha's question. "Where were you?" Or, in statement form, "If you'd been here, if you'd followed the script, my brother who's dead would still be alive!"

In verse 22, Martha makes a statement that she's convinced of Jesus' relationship with the Father. In verses 23 and 24, Jesus, I think, uses intentional ambiguity to say, "Your brother will rise again". A little cryptic, but we'll come back to that. Verse 25 and 26:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." (Vs. 25-27)

A strong statement of faith of her trust and belief in Jesus—I want us to hold on to that. We'll come back to visit that statement of faith again. Verses 28 and 29, the scene shifts to Martha's sister, Mary:

When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. (Vs. 28-29)

In verses 30 and 31, Mary goes to meet Jesus, but people think she's grieving, so this is going to be a public conversation that Jesus has with Mary. It starts in verse 32:

> **Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."** (Vs. 32)

Have we heard that before? "**If You'd been here, my brother would not have died**." Not only did Jesus not follow Martha's script, He didn't follow Mary's script either! So we get the statement again. "Where were You?" or "Where are You?" I think it's a very human response when things go wrong. "God, where were You?" Or, "where are You?" You're loving; You're good; You're powerful! What's going on? In verse 33, Jesus reacts to the situation in this way:

> **When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, …** (Vs. 33)

Scholar D.A. Carson said, "There's an anger or a visceral reaction." Why? This isn't the way it was supposed to be! This wasn't His design for the world! But individually and corporately, we pushed back on God. He wanted to lead us in relationship and be our Lord and we end up saying, "No, I don't think so!" Some of us shook our fist at Him. Some of us were more passive, "You go your way and I'll go mine." But in the end, we walked away. We'll do a self-directed life. Boy, have we been bearing the consequences of those choices for a long, long time. This grieves Jesus, and it angers Him. And so He has this reaction in verse 34:

> **… "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.** (Vs. 34-35)

One of the questions we wrestle with when things go wrong and we're taking it out of this text is "Where are You? Where *are* You?" Well, *here's* where Jesus is when things go wrong … *He's right beside us!* He's weeping *with* us! He *loves* us! He hurts *with* us in the midst of that! He's not a distant Savior who's wound the thing up and spun it and let it go! In verse 36, people recognized that:

> **So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!"** (Vs. 36)

We serve a personal Savior who *loves* us! He understands our pain.

I go back to my days of campus ministry. We had a young lady who was a freshmen and a leader in our ministry. She was dating a guy who was still a senior in high school. She came back after Thanksgiving break and told me, "Andy, I broke up with him." I said, "Well, why was that? It seemed like it was going so well." And she said, "You know, he's in high school. I don't hold it against him, but he just doesn't understand my world! College is different than high school. I understand his, but he doesn't understand mine." Aren't you glad we serve a Savior who's lived in our world? He's not so far out there! He *does* understand! "Oh, Jesus, you don't know…!" Oh, yeah? He *does*! "Oh, Jesus, you've never hurt like this!" Oh, yeah? He *has*! "Oh, Jesus, you've never lost a loved one!" Oh, yeah? He *has*! Where is He? He's right there...weeping...hurting. He *loves* us. The question, "Where are You?" *That's* where He is! But, whenever there's hurt, whenever there's pain, it brings the skeptics out. It brings the cynics out. It brings the doubters. And here they come in verse 37:

But some of them said, "Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?" (Vs. 37)

He looked good back there when He opened the eyes of the blind, but now…this Lazarus…he's dead! Can we be sure He's God? Any chance to doubt…they'll take it. Let me go back to the shooting at Sandy Hook. The doubters, the cynics, the skeptics…they come out with the question of what? "Where's God?" Well, we've got the same question. Where does that go back to? It goes back at least this far! How come You couldn't do *this,* Jesus?

You know the question I've got—the question I wonder about the most? What happened with these skeptics and cynics and doubters when Jesus called Lazarus back from the dead? Do you think they believed? I hope so. But my suspicion is that they found another reason to doubt, to question, to continue in their skepticism.

In verse 38, Jesus is going to begin to move. So he moves to have the stone taken away. In fact in verse 39:

Jesus said, "Remove the stone." (Vs. 39a)

At this point, Martha goes, "Oh, wait a minute! After four days in there, it's gonna smell really bad, Jesus!"

… Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he *has been dead* four days." (Vs. 39b)

Isn't this the Martha that said, "Yeah, I believe You're the Christ, the Son of the Living God, even He who has come into the world."? Isn't that the same Martha who, just a few minutes ago, made that statement? Do you see yourself in Martha? I sure see myself! You asked me if I believe Jesus is coming back to set the world straight some day? Oh, yeah! I believe that! But trust Him in something in the *immediate*? Something in the *local*? Something in the *personal* where it hasn't gone like I expected? Where I haven't gotten the answer I asked for? Where I haven't gotten my desired outcome? That's when my faith begins to wobble. Jesus wants to move, and its, "Oh, I don't know!" I think we all see some of ourselves in that. The incongruity of, "Yeah, I believe Jesus is Lord, but to work in this situation? Well, I don't know!"

I want you to catch the order of Jesus' response to Martha in verse 40 because I think the order is important:

Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

That's the greatness of God. The order is significant. I need you to **believe!** I need you to *trust* in me! If you'll do that, you'll see the greatness of God on display. But you see, I want to turn the order. I want to say, "Jesus, show me your greatness and *then* I'll believe!"

I mentioned I worked with Campus Crusade for fifteen years. I had to raise my own financial support. I came to faith in college. I didn't have a home church. It was always a challenge. God was always faithful, and more than met my needs. But there were many times when I thought, "God, I'm out of contacts! I don't know what to do! I need you to do something!" **"***Well, Andy, I*

*need you to trust Me.***"** "Well, why don't You *do* something and then I'll trust You!" *(laughter)* "*That's not how it goes! I need you to believe in Me!*"

So I'm wondering, is your heart breaking right now? Have you been praying for healing? Have you been praying for a job? Have you been praying for a baby? Have you been praying for a spouse? Have you been praying that your child's grades would come up in school and they haven't? Would you keep trusting that you might see the greatness of God? In verses 41 and 42, Jesus prays for the benefit of those around him:

> **So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me."** (Vs. 41-42)

In verses 43 and 44 he calls Lazarus to come forth. He comes forth and Jesus says, "Unbind him".

> **When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."** (Vs. 43-44)

And look what happens in verse 45:

> **Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him.** (Vs. 45)

See, Jesus had a script for this whole deal with Lazarus. He had an idea what He was going to do. He was going to show His greatness through this sickness and death that others might believe in Him. I would suggest to you that's Jesus' script for your heartache and my heartache.

I think the problem I have, and maybe it's yours, is that I've got a different script. I want an outcome! I want an answer! I want resolution! I want a solution! That may or may not be part of Jesus showing his greatness in calling others to believe. So what do we do when Jesus gets "off script"? I suggest we need to change our script to follow Jesus' script. That's a nice way of saying we need to change our understanding of what Jesus' priority is. Ultimately, He wants to show His greatness through our difficulty. Our script is—we want an answer! We want a solution. We want healing. We want a job. We want a child. We want… Jesus says, "I want to use your heartache to put your greatness on display so that others might come to faith. Would you get on board with My script?"

This example from my life falls short so miserably because the consequences are so minimal compared to a death or a sickness or no job or kids struggling or no child or being single. But it illustrates my script so clearly of what I want from Jesus in hard times.

It was about five years ago during the winter. It was a Friday night. We did a family game night. We had a rousing game of *Apples to Apples*. We finished and I went into our computer room. I had lost track of the weather and for the first time I found out there was a major snowstorm coming Saturday afternoon, which was going to wreck church. So I come out of the room and I spit out the words, "All I've gotta say is, 'Thank you, Jesus'!" At that point, our youngest son, who was eight, says, "Mom, I think Dad's being sarcastic!" *(laughter)* You've got that right, son! Kind of a low

point for me in modeling faith for my kids! And I won't tell you what I said next because I would be embarrassed and you would be offended. But my wife said to our kids, "Why don't you guys go your room. Andy, I'm going to read. You can stay out here and do what you're going to do." So it sat that night. The next morning she said, "You know, I don't want to hear it, and I sure don't' want our kids to hear what you just had to say. You were way out of line." I was convicted. This wasn't a gray area. I was wrong. And so I got to practice modeling humility with my kids. I apologized to them and I apologized to my wife. But I thought about it later. I thought, "*What do I want with this snow storm*?" Honestly? Here's what I want. "Jesus, I'd like you to take that snowstorm and move it 50 miles east." So in a sense, it's, "God, snow out somebody else's church service, just not ours!" *(laughter)* Well, that's self-centered, isn't it? Andy, that's bad. That's bad! What do I really want? Well, I don't want to snow out somebody else's church service, so could you move it to Monday? So, in other words, put 30,000 kids out of school and 9,000 employees so you can have your church service?

See, my script is, "Jesus, You're all powerful, so never ever, ever, ever, ever let me hurt or have discomfort." That's *my* script. But that isn't Jesus' script. And I find myself angry with God because His script and mine don't match up. I need to flip my script to follow His because He wants to do something far greater than to save me from hurt or discomfort or pain.

Now, I think this will encourage you. Since that time, you know, snowstorms still happen! So how do I pray now when a snowstorm comes? I don't pray, "Move it 50 miles east," because that's really selfish. And I don't pray, "Move it until Monday," because that's selfish, too. That puts 30,000 people out of school. So here's what I pray. When a snowstorm is coming, I pray, "Oh, Lord God, who opened the Red Sea and parted the Jordan River, would you just keep the snow south of O Street!" *(laughter)* Isn't that a great prayer? Isn't that cheery? Let's keep it south of us!

I'm wondering about your script, when hard times come. You know, when the diagnosis is cancer and the treatment has been going on and on and the numbers seem to keep going the wrong way. Or you're searching for a job, and they say the economy is getting better and the market's improved, but you couldn't tell by what *you're* doing. Or that you and your spouse have been praying for a baby and you and your spouse are getting birth announcements left and right, but nothing's happening. Or you're 20-something or 30-something and you thought you'd be married five years ago, and you're in three weddings this summer! The only trouble is that you're a groomsman or a bridesmaid. Or you are working with your kid and you've got a tutor and you got your LPS report card a month ago and you're still struggling...your kid's struggling.

What's your expectation? What are you demanding of God to do? Will you be satisfied to know that God is right there with you weeping and hurting? He promises to use this to draw others to Himself. Is it okay to pray for healing or to get a job? Absolutely! That was part of God's plan here in showing His greatness in healing Lazarus. He might do that! The job may come! The spouse may come! The baby may come! But if the baby or the spouse or the job or the healing *doesn't* come, can you be satisfied and confident in the fact that God is going to show his greatness and call others to faith through your hard time? Will you believe Him? Will you embrace Him in that? Let's ask Jesus, the one who, on the night He was to be crucified and asked that the cup could pass, and He said, "Father, not My will but Your will be done." Let's ask Him to build that kind of conviction—that kind of spirit in us—that kind of trust in the Father.

Some of you may be here and you're investigating God. You don't know what to think about this Jesus. Let me say it...we're so glad you're here! You are *welcome*. You take the time you need to think this through. But when it comes to pain in life, I've got to tell you, if you decide to follow

Jesus, there's not a guarantee that things are going to get better, necessarily. But I want to suggest to you, that if there is no God, and if God is far, and we're just a product of chance, then your cancer, or your job loss, or your infertility, or your singleness, or your child struggling—well, that's just bad luck. You're just a victim of *chance*!

I have friends who were draft age during the Vietnam War. Every year they would put all the birthdays in a hopper and they would pull out numbers. You would just hope your number didn't get pulled early. Well, if there is no God, and you got cancer, or you became unemployed, or your child is struggling, or you're not married—well, *sorry*! Your number got picked! Tough luck! So sorry! Wouldn't you rather know there is a God who is in charge of this situation and who's right there with you, walking with you through it, and promises you this: He will redeem your pain to draw others to Himself. I think I'll take that choice rather than being a victim of dumb luck. Your number got pulled—so sorry. Well … "Andy, I'm there, and can I pray for you?" Absolutely!

About three weeks ago I had a friend and his wife come visit. I go back 25 years with him. We were on church staff together in Colorado. He had just come through lung cancer on his left side. He'd never smoked. We had a great weekend together. This week I talked to him and he said he had a scan and there was something on his right lung and it's growing. He said it was either infection or cancer and I'm showing no signs of an infection. They're going to do one of those high-tech biopsies. I'm praying. I'm going to pray with everything I've got for his healing. But ultimately, I believe that what I'm holding onto is that God will show His greatness through this man's condition. That's what we're invited to do.

We'll finish up this chapter. The Pharisees are in a tizzy! I mean, they're really upset! And this Jesus thing is getting going. And in verses 46 to the end of the chapter they hatch this conspiracy that Jesus has to die. And Caiaphas, who's the high priest, says one man needs to die for the sake of the nation. He doesn't realize he's speaking prophetically. But these guys are so desperate over in chapter 12, verses 10 and 11, here's what they say about Lazarus:

> **But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also;** (Why?) **because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.** (John 12:10-11)

Wouldn't you like your life to count? Wouldn't you like to have that kind of testimony—that the enemies are saying that because of *that guy*, so many people are believing? Isn't that a life of purpose? Isn't that a life worth living? That the way we handle our hard times, the way we embrace Christ and His script draws and attracts other people to Jesus and points them in *that* way to the Savior! That's a life of significance. That's a life of eternal purpose—that we would embrace *that* life.

About six weeks ago I was in a waiting room. The TV was on and they had Nicholas Cage talking about his new movie *Joe*. They said, "Why did you pick the movie *Joe*?" Nicholas Cage said, "I read the script and I fell in love with the script. And then I went to meet the script writers and I fell in love with them. And here we are."

Well, we've just gotten Jesus' script for hard times. Would you fall in love with His script? But more importantly, would you fall in love with the script *writer*, that you might know Him and embrace His plan for your life and my life and our hard times? One more time, let me ask you this question. What do we do when we get *off script*? We need to change our script to follow Jesus' script. Would you pray with me?

Father in heaven, we are grateful for Your Word. And it's hard because we want things fixed, or at least I do. But you've got a different script, and I pray we'd embrace that, that we'd embrace the significance, that we'd embrace the purpose You have for us. And that is broadcasting Your greatness through us that others might believe: "What a life", "What a way to live". And, Father, that we'd hold onto that and we'd live with that kind of faith. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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