

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The raising of Lazarus - He shows power

The Judean headline may well have declared, "BACK FROM THE GRAVE!" The article could have read, "It was the stuff of which nightmares are made. The corpse, still wrapped in bandages, staggered from the tomb. Bystanders gasped in awe. Lazarus of Bethany, having been in the tomb four days, should have stunk with decomposition. Instead, he was brought back to life by Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter. Is a man with such power, the Messiah of our scriptures?"

The amazing details of the resurrection of Lazarus are recorded in the Gospel according to John 11. The first verse identifies which Lazarus is meant here. It was distinctly, Lazarus of Bethany. This village was less than two miles away from Jerusalem. There was another Bethany in existence, so that the Spirit of God states the names of the family members to prevent any confusion.

Interestingly, Bethany means: "House of Dates" which expressing fruitfulness. Today, Christians are to be marked by the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. We know that fruitbearing does not come without some suffering. This is shown by the illustration of the vine in John 15. It is often when a Christian's faith is tested by God that he or she becomes more fruitful for Him.

In Verse 5, we read that Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. The Greek word for "love" here is "agapao". It is used to describe the nature of God. Hence, it may be defined as that nature which always seeks the best for the good of its object. It is a selfless love. It always gives – and that unconditionally. The fact that all three are listed as individuals shows that the love of Christ falls upon each one of them equally. If you have faith in the Son of God, then you could add your name to such a list of those who are loved by Jesus.

Verse 3 tells us that Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus to inform Him that Lazarus was sick. The words of the message began with the word "Lord". The Greek word is "*Kurios*" and speaks of one who has control. It is used as the Greek equivalent of Yahweh or Jehovah. The sisters recognised the amazing power and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lazarus is described as "he whom thou lovest" which shows that the sisters recognised the deep affection that the Lord had for their brother. Note that they did not invite an action from Him. They simply informed Him of the situation which, as the Omniscient One, He already knew. This reminds us that God wants to hear our voices in prayer expressing our needs even though He may have already sent an answer before we utter the words. It reflects the dependence of faith.

The answer of Jesus to those present is given in verse 4, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby". This meant that physical death would not be the end of the matter, but that God and the Son of God would be honoured through the anticipated event. This was evidently uttered in the presence of the messenger who brought Jesus the word of Lazarus' sickness because it was later reported to the sisters (John 11:40).

Verse 6 indicates that Jesus did not act immediately. It would have taken the messengers at least a day to reach Him. It therefore seems reasonable to say that Jesus knew that Lazarus had died during their journey. However, He stayed on for two days to complete His work in that area before suggesting they return to Judaea. The disciples were surprised by the thought because they knew the risk involved because the Jews wanted to kill Him. They said, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone thee: and goest thou thither again?"

Jesus would walk in the light. Nothing would prevent Him from doing the revealed will of His Father. Hence, in verses 11 to 15, we read: "And after this he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep; but I go that I may awake him out of sleep. The disciples therefore said unto the Lord, If he is fallen asleep he will recover. Now Jesus had spoken of his death: but they thought that he spake of his taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus therefore said unto them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.'"

At first, the disciples did not understand Jesus. They thought that sleep followed an illness and was part of the process of recovery. Jesus made it plain that Lazarus was dead. It is in the Lord's words that we see that death for a

believer is only sleep. Sleeping is a temporary state; and so, by His words, our Lord revealed that death is itself only temporary. Sleep refreshes and rejuvenates; thus in the resurrection this mortal shall put on immortality and this corruptible shall put on incorruption. From sleep, we awake; and the promise is secure in the Master's words that all in the tombs "shall come forth" (John 5:29). Sleep is also a time of rest; and the dead also "shall rest from their labours" (Revelation 14:13). The respect of mankind for this word of Jesus Christ is revealed on the tombstones of thousands in the words, "Asleep in Jesus".

So, recapping, the purpose for Jesus going to Judaea was to glorify God and Himself as the Son of God by raising Lazarus from the dead. There was no other course to follow. Jesus said, "And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him." He knew that had He been there while Lazarus was sick, He would have healed him; but the proof of His Sonship lay in the fact that He could raise the dead. He was glad that the disciples would then understand that He was indeed the Son of God. They would all go to the tomb of Lazarus even though the disciples were filled with fear at the prospect of it.

Now when Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days already (verse 17). The matter of four days was significant to the Jewish leaders because they believed that the soul of the deceased person remained in the vicinity of the body for three days before decomposition set in. Four days of delay left rabbinical tradition void of any excuse that the person was not dead.

It was Martha who first heard that Jesus was coming. She went out to meet Him. Mary, who is later told by Martha that Jesus had come (verse 28), sat still in the house. Her personal grief for Lazarus must have been so overwhelming that Martha did not want her to be disturbed. On the other hand, Martha seems to have risen above personal grief to assume the duties of hostess. But, more importantly, the trust she had in Jesus is proved by her opening words to Him: "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." This shows that she knew that Jesus could have healed Lazarus had He been there. It does not go so far as to recognise that He could have healed with a word from a distance. Nonetheless, she continued, "And even now I know that, whatsoever thou shalt ask of God, God will give thee." Clearly, Martha was confident that Jesus was so close to God that He only had to pray and God would raise her brother from the dead. It may well have been that the words of Christ passed on by the messenger still rang in her ears: "This sickness is not unto death." However, she doesn't seem to realise that Jesus had the power of life in Himself.

There was comfort in the reply of Jesus, "Thy brother shall rise again." Yes, the Pharisees themselves believed in the resurrection of the body. A couple of thousand years before Christ, Job believed it also. In Job 19:26 he said, "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God..." Martha believed the same because she stated, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Martha's faith was genuine – she knew! She knew that ultimately there would be a resurrection. She knew that Lazarus would rise again.

It is then that Jesus reveals Himself as the Resurrection and the Life. Listen to His wonderful words, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

On many occasions, Jesus uses the term "I Am" in a very special way. The force of the words is seen in John 8:58 where He said to the critical Jews, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am." It would seem, initially, that He was claiming to be pre-existent to Abraham; but the Jews realised that He was claiming to be eternal - God Himself. Why? When we turn to Exodus 3:14, we find God revealing Himself to Moses: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." The self-existent God revealed Himself to Israel's leader as "I AM". So we see when Jesus uses the words, "I am" in certain contexts, He is indeed claiming to be God. It was no wonder that the religious Jews took up stones to cast at him. They knew that a man who made such a claim was worthy of death.

There are a number of "I Am's" in the Gospel according to John. In John 10:36, we read His own words: "Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?" The clause, "I am the Son of God" emphasises, firstly, that there is more than One Person in the Godhead; and, secondly, that He is the Son of God who is none other than God Himself. Just as a man is made up of spirit, soul and body, three yet one - in a similar way, God is three, yet one, because He is the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Colossians 1, we read that the fullness of Godhead was pleased to reside in the Son of the Father's love. In chapter 2 of the same epistle, we read that the same fullness resided in Him bodily (that is, in Jesus as a man). So the Son of God never ceased to be God.

Hence, we find the words "I am the Resurrection and the Life" absolutely marvellous! As the self-existent One, He had life in Himself. This is life in its fullest sense. It is the spiritual life that quickens a soul. It is that eternal life which is seen in both longevity and quality in the One who said to John, "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation

1:17-18). Furthermore, as the resurrection, He is able to impart physical life to that which was dead. Both are found in His words, "...He that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." The first expresses resurrection. The believer in Christ who dies shall live. This is the physical side. Here the believer will receive a new body – one that is glorious, heavenly, incorruptible, powerful, spiritual and immortal (1 Corinthians 15). The second expresses that the living believer in Christ shall never die in the sense of suffering the second death. The latter is an eternal separation from God. At the present time all men owe their existence to Him. The goodness of God is poured out upon everyone. However, those who do not believe will find their final destiny is Hell - a place or condition of ruin for body and soul. They will be banished eternally from God and His blessings. Instead, they will suffer the kind of torment listed for the devil and his angels. What a solemn truth!

Jesus then progressed the faith of Martha with the question, "Believest thou this...?" The same question is asked of each one of us individually. Do we believe the words of the Son of God. Those who do shall not see death.

The answer of Martha is delightful, "Yea, Lord, I have believed that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, even he that cometh into the world" (Young's Literal Translation). She acknowledges His Lordship – the One who must control her life. She recognises Him to be the Messiah – the Chosen One of God whom the Old Testament scriptures predicted. But, by revelation from the Father, she like Peter, recognises that He is the Son of God. She had believed this and she continued to believe it. What a magnificent confession! What is your declaration of faith like?

Verses 28-31 indicate that Martha was instructed by Jesus to fetch Mary for: "She went away, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Teacher is here and calleth thee." Mary's response was immediate and she hurried to Him outside of the village. Those who were her comforters followed. Finding Jesus, she fell down at His feet and said, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." These were similar words to those as uttered by Martha, but they rose up from a heart bowed before Him in worship.

In verses 33-34 we read, "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping who came with her, he groaned in the spirit and was troubled, and said, Where have ye laid him? They say unto him, Lord, come and see." It was the distress that death brought that moved Christ to groan in the spirit. He was deeply moved by the sorrow around Him and fully identified with it. Some would point out that the word for groaned may mean "being moved with anger". If this were the case, then it would have to relate to the root cause of suffering, death and distress, namely, sin. However, the word is probably better expressed by the word "troubled". Literally, it is "He troubled Himself". If the first touched the emotions of His soul, then the self-generated concern for His own touched His spirit as He was affected by what sin had brought in. How He suffered in the bearing of griefs and carrying of sorrows in His lifetime!

Interestingly, Jesus asked, "Where have ye laid him?" As Son of God, He would have known this; but He invites them to take Him to the place. It is all part of the communion and work of faith. The reply was, "Lord, come and see..." It was at this point that Jesus wept. He shed tears! Christian, has there been the loss of a loved one in your life. Don't be afraid to weep. We weep over many circumstances that touch our lives and we should not be embarrassed about doing so. Joseph Scriven knew such a loss. The evening before his wedding day, his fiancée was drowned. Yet, he found God in it all and, later, when his mother was ill, he sent her the words of the hymn: "What a friend we have in Jesus." The first verse reads:

*"What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!"*

We, like those moving towards the tomb of Lazarus, can only speculate as to the reason for the weeping of Jesus. Like the Jews at the time, we might exclaim, "Behold how he loved him!" Others there expressed unbelief in the words, "Could not this man who opened the eyes of him that was blind, have caused that this man also should not die?"

It may have been this attitude of unbelief that caused Jesus to groan within Himself a second time as He arrived at the tomb. Nonetheless, He ordered that the stone be removed. He again develops the faith of those present. Martha said, "Lord, by this time the body decayeth; for he hath been dead four days." We are so much like Martha. We hear marvellous truths concerning the Lord Jesus, but we don't really fully apprehend the wonder of His Person and power and its application.

Jesus had to remind her of the message sent back to the sisters as was recorded in verse 4: "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou believest, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" Martha was soon to learn that in every doubt or temptation, in sorrow, suffering, or in death itself, the redeemed can say in faith, "If I trust in Christ, I shall see the glory of God."

The stone was removed and Jesus thanked His Father for hearing Him. He must have prayed already about this matter. Such was His dependence upon the will of the Father. Maybe He had prayed in the groanings that could not be uttered. His prayer was a witness to the bystanders that the Father had sent Him and was to promote faith in them.

Only then did Jesus shout those words, "Lazarus, come forth." This was a public command to one in death whose body had started to decompose. It reminds us that all in the graves shall hear His voice! Some will come forth to the resurrection of life. Others come forth to that of judgment. Furthermore, it was a specific Lazarus who was addressed by the Lord. That Lazarus alone responded. In a day to come, the Lord will come into the air and shout. The sleeping saints will be raised and those believers alive at the time will have their bodies changed in the twinkling of an eye and go to be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15). It would be a thousand years later when the wicked dead are raised to face the judgment at the Great White Throne. These are cast into the torment of the lake of fire.

The movement of Lazarus was limited by the binding grave-clothes and his sight was hindered by the napkin covering his face. Nevertheless, Lazarus came out from the cave alive and well. Jesus ordered the bystanders to release him. How would you have felt if the job had fallen to you? Has the Lord asked you to do a work for Him of which you have been fearful?

Lazarus did not rise "through the tomb" as Jesus did later, but came out of it through the entrance to the same life he had before. He was still cumbered with mortality and subject to all the conditions of earthly life.

Many of the Jews, who came to Mary and saw that which Jesus did, believed on Him. God had indeed been glorified and the Sonship of Christ confirmed. Others who were there went and reported the event to the Pharisees. Rather than believe their witness, the Pharisees drew together a council with the chief scribes and conspired to be rid of Jesus, believing that if such miracles continued all would believe, provoking the Romans to come and take their place and their nation. This they would do anyway in AD 70 under Titus. The high priest, Caiaphas, made a statement of political expediency; but there is little doubt that the Spirit of God was prophesying through him to state the truth that Jesus would be the one man to die for the people and, therefore, the nation. The chapter ends with these sad words, "Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew it, that they might take him."

*"What think you of Christ?" is the test
To try both your state and your scheme.
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of Him.*

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