

H. The Raising of Lazarus (11:1-57)

At some point after Jesus departed to Perea He received notification that a friend named Lazarus lay sick in the village of Bethany (11:1). John transitioned to this next episode with no explanation, making it impossible to know how much time elapsed between the confrontation during the Feast of Dedication and the news of Lazarus' sickness. John also didn't explain how Lazarus' family knew where Jesus was staying (v. 3), but He evidently remained in contact with His family and followers after He departed Israel. What John did do was provide some background on Lazarus and his sisters, especially highlighting the close and fond relationship which existed between them and Jesus; Jesus loved them deeply (v. 5) and they were aware of that love (v. 3). And they loved Him in return; John noted that Lazarus' sister Mary was the woman who would later anoint Jesus with expensive ointment and wipe His feet with her hair – an act of unreserved devotion and worship (ref. 12:1-3; cf. Luke 7:36-38 which episode involved a different woman). Mary was devoted to Jesus to the point that being with Him eclipsed other matters and interests. Her devotion had led her in the past to sit at His feet undistracted by the activity around her (Luke 10:38-42); before many months she'd be bowed down at His feet using her hair to wipe dirt-laden oil from them.

1. Lazarus and his sisters lived in Bethany, a small town about two miles from Jerusalem. Luke recorded that Jesus had stayed in their home when He was passing through the area, and John's treatment of their relationship suggests that they subsequently became very close. It's likely Jesus stayed with them when He was in the vicinity of Jerusalem, but John's only other mention of a visit is the anointing episode just before Jesus' death (12:1ff; also Matthew 26:6ff; Mark 14:3ff; cf. Matthew 21:1-17). In the present context, Jesus didn't come to their home, but they sent messengers to Him in Perea.

And when they arrived they informed Him that Lazarus was sick. John didn't identify the specific sickness, but his account suggests that it was deadly. This is indicated first by the sisters' urgency in sending word to Jesus. They believed He could heal their brother, but He needed to come right away or it would be too late (cf. vv. 21, 32). Jesus' initial statements to His disciples suggested otherwise and they heard Him saying that Lazarus would recover (vv. 4, 11-12). But He soon made it clear that Lazarus's illness was terminal; his sickness was "not unto death" in the sense that Jesus intended to raise him from the dead. Whatever the messengers told Him about Lazarus' condition, Jesus knew that if He lingered only a few days, His beloved friend would die in the interim. Indeed, this was His plan; He wanted to arrive in Bethany and find Lazarus dead for the sake of His Father's glory – in order that He, the Son should be glorified through it (11:4-6).

After a couple of days had passed, Jesus informed His disciples that He wished to return to Judea and they responded in expected fashion; why would He want to go back there when the Jews were seeking to kill Him? He'd retreated to Perea because of what happened during the Feast of Dedication; why would He even consider returning to Judea, especially to Bethany which was only a couple of miles from Jerusalem (11:7-8)? Jesus responded with a figure of speech drawn from a self-evident truth, namely that people walk while it is daytime (the Jews reckoned the period of daylight as being 12 hours) because they are able to see where they are going and avoid stumbling or falling.

This was the literal meaning, but Jesus obviously intended something more. He wasn't talking about how they should arrange their journey to Bethany, but was addressing the disciples' concern about returning to Judea. He was reminding them that His presence and work in the world were ordered by a predetermined plan (ref. 2:4, 7:6-8). So there was an appointed time for His death – specifically, it was necessary that He die at Passover in order to fulfill the prophetic meaning of that feast and the Exodus event it commemorated (ref. 12:20-23; cf. Luke 13:31-33). Therefore, no one would be able to take His life prematurely; had He not already eluded death several times (ref. again 7:30, 8:20; also Luke 4:28-30)? As long as the “daytime” continued – the time in which the light illumined the world, death posed no true threat; hence they were to “walk” while the “day” endured (cf. 9:4-5, 12:35). But the darkness was coming when stumbling and death would become a reality (cf. 12:27-36, 13:21-30; also Luke 22:39-53, 23:44-46).

Jesus' meaning ought to have been clear to His disciples, but their hearts remained dull. They didn't understand His statements about Lazarus (vv. 11-14), but, more significantly, they didn't grasp His figure of speech. When they realized that Jesus wasn't to be dissuaded from returning to Judea, they resigned themselves, under Thomas' urging, to accompany Him and die together with Him (11:16). Even Jesus' insistence that they would see their faith in Him nurtured by this episode was insufficient to persuade them (11:15); for all that they had seen and heard over the past years, the disciples still didn't really know this Man whom they embraced as the Messiah. Indeed, their present resolve to die with Jesus would flee along with their persons when the hour of His death arrived.

2. And so Jesus and His fearful, reluctant band of disciples departed for Bethany and, when they arrived, they found that Lazarus had been in his tomb for four days (11:17). Jesus had remained in Perea for two days after learning of Lazarus' sickness (v. 6) and the journey to Bethany – likely a distance of less than 50 miles – would have only taken a few days. This indicates that Lazarus died shortly after the messengers arrived with their news. However, the chronology isn't as important as the fact that Lazarus had been dead for four days when Jesus came to his tomb. The reason is that this interval allowed for decay to set in, thereby proving beyond all doubt that Lazarus was truly dead (ref. v. 39). For Jesus had come to restore his life, and the smell of death coming from the tomb when it was opened would be critical for substantiating the miracle to the witnesses.
 - a. Somehow word of Jesus' coming reached Martha and she left her sister and the assembly of mourners in their house and went out to meet Him outside Bethany. When she came to Him she expressed her anguish that He hadn't come sooner; if He had, He could have healed Lazarus before he died (11:18-21). Jesus had healed countless people as He traveled about; indeed He'd virtually eradicated sickness in Israel such that everyone was aware of His healing work (Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Luke 4:40). So Martha was convinced that her brother would be alive if only Jesus had not delayed coming. His delay was all the harder to understand since He'd sent the messengers back with the reassuring news that this sickness would not end in death (ref. again vv. 3-4). But that was precisely what happened, and all because Jesus did not return with them as the sisters hoped.

However Martha processed all of these things, John made it clear that she remained confident that Jesus enjoyed unique favor with God; even now, God would give Him whatever He asked of Him – even if His petition was that Lazarus be made alive again. After all, this was perhaps what Jesus meant when He said that this sickness would not end in death. We can't be certain that Martha was aware of the instances of Jesus raising people from the dead (Mark 5:21-43; Luke 7:11-16), but given the close relationship she and her siblings had with Him and the astonishing nature of those miracles, it's quite likely that she did. And if Jesus had raised others to life, He could do so again (11:18-22).

Whatever her personal convictions, Jesus told her directly that her brother would live again, which statement she connected with the resurrection of the last day (vv. 23-24). There are a couple of things to note here: First, Martha's response shows that her confidence that Jesus *could*, by God's power, raise her brother to life wasn't matched by equal confidence that He *would* do so. When He declared unequivocally that Lazarus would live again, her mind immediately jumped from the present to the resurrection at the end of the age. Secondly, her statement highlights the fact that the doctrine of a final bodily resurrection was widely held in first-century Israel. Rabbis differed regarding the specifics (the nature of this resurrection, who would be included in it, etc.), but, outside of the Sadducees and their disciples, most embraced the doctrine itself. And so, while Martha was convinced that Jesus had the ear and favor of Israel's God, she interpreted His words as promising Lazarus' share in the final resurrection; if her brother was to remain in the grave, it was only for a season; he would see life in the end.

Jesus responded in a way that brought together both of the truths which Martha articulated. Yes, God would give His Son whatever He asked, and yes, Lazarus would experience the resurrection of the last day, but as both are uniquely "yes and amen" in Jesus: *The power, purpose and work of Israel's God, as well as resurrection itself, are embodied in Him* (11:25-26). The Father would give life to those for whom the Son asked it, but by virtue of having invested life in Him (5:19-26); the Son isn't the conduit for life coming to men from God, but the very substance, and so the origin, of that life. Thus Lazarus would enjoy resurrection life by sharing in the One who *is* resurrection and life. And while this resurrection was indeed appointed for the end of the age, Jesus' presence in the world meant that this eschatological age had broken in. The Jews expected the resurrection of the righteous to occur at the end of the present age; Jesus' insistence that *He* is resurrection and life implied that the present age had come to its end with His coming in the *middle* of the present world scheme. Thus the resurrection of the righteous is an end-of-the-age phenomenon, but not in the way the Jews expected. Jesus was indicating that it is a *present* reality associated with His presence in the world – a present reality marking the *close of the old age* and the *beginning of the new age* of the new creation in Him. Resurrection is an "end of time" phenomenon, but in terms of climax and completion: *End* of time is first *fullness* of the time; it's as a present reality that resurrection is the sure pledge of future consummation (5:25-29; cf. Ephesians 2:1-6; 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 8:9-11).

This truth is critical to understanding Jesus' declaration that all who *believe in Him* have a share in this life. Given that resurrection and life inhere in Him, this "belief" amounts to an embrace of Him which, by the power of the Spirit, causes the believer to be taken up in His life; Jesus imparts life by imparting *Himself* (6:52-59; cf. Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-4). Thus biblical faith isn't remote, impersonal agreement with and adherence to a set of truths – even truths about the Jesus of the Scriptures; rather, it is the binding of oneself to the person of Jesus so as to be found in Him. All who believe in this way have passed out of death into life, never again to be subject to death's hold (5:24). They share in Jesus' own triumph over death (which He was very soon to experience); as the grave was to have no power over Him, so it is with all who share in Him: *Though they fall asleep in death, their bodies will yet live, and whoever shares in His life will never be separated from that life, but will see its full fruition. Their spirits have been raised to life in Jesus, and that share in His resurrection is the promise of full participation in the future resurrection of their bodies.*

This is the framework for interpreting Martha's confession. By affirming Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, she was saying more than that she believed He is the Savior who had come into the world to deliver people from their sin. *Messiah, Son of God, and Coming One* must all be understood in terms of the salvation history recorded in the Scriptures and John's own account and intent. Martha undoubtedly spoke better than she knew, but she would have understood that Messiah's coming into the world would manifest Yahweh's presence and power so as to accomplish His purpose to liberate His people, end their exile, purge their uncleanness and restore David's throne and kingdom. And at the heart of this work was the principle of *life out of death* (Ezekiel 37). She recognized that Messiah would bring life to Yahweh's covenant household and she believed that Jesus was that One. But how she must have marveled at Him using the tragic situation of her brother's death to enlarge her understanding and faith. She now had a whole new perspective regarding Jesus' declaration that Lazarus' sickness was not to end in death. Whether or not He raised him at that time, resurrection had come to Israel in Jesus the Messiah and Lazarus would yet see life in Him.

- b. After this conversation, Martha left Jesus there to return home and tell Mary. John recorded that she did so secretly, perhaps out of concern that some of the mourners were hostile toward Jesus. But the passage suggests another reason: Jesus had asked to speak with Mary alone (11:28) and so Martha didn't want to alert the others to His presence; she wanted Mary to be able to slip out quietly. But when the mourners saw Mary get up quickly and leave the house, they followed her, supposing that she was going to Lazarus' tomb (11:29-31). When Mary came to Jesus she fell at His feet and voiced the same agonized lament Martha had. And seeing her anguish and that of the other mourners who also loved Lazarus deeply, Jesus was Himself overcome and began weeping (11:32-34). Given His intent, His reaction may seem strange. But Jesus' anguish wasn't directed so much at Lazarus' death as the horror of *death itself*. The pathos on display that day was the pathos driving Him to the cross and its triumph.