

## **“Lazarus, Come Forth!”**

John 11:38-57 | Pastor Jason Van Bommel

<sup>38</sup> Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. <sup>39</sup> Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” <sup>41</sup> So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” <sup>43</sup> When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” <sup>44</sup> The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, <sup>46</sup> but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> 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.” <sup>49</sup> But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> 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.” <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.

<sup>54</sup> 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.

<sup>55</sup> Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. <sup>56</sup> 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?” <sup>57</sup> 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.

### **Introduction: The Details the Bible Doesn't Give & the Ones It Does**

It's often fascinating to me what God chooses to tell us in Scripture and what He doesn't say. For example, have you ever wondered why we never hear from Lazarus in this great and famous chapter all about his raising from the dead? Lazarus is the only man in history to lie in the grave for four days and then be brought back to life by Jesus, but we hear nothing from him, either before, during or after the miracle of his coming back to life.

Yet, on the other hand, God does tell us many of the things said by those witnessing this miracle. We're given the words of Jesus, of course, the disciples, of Thomas specifically, of Martha, Mary, the crowds, the Pharisees, the High Priest, and those who were looking for Jesus at the Passover. This singular remarkable aspect of this chapter should tell us something very significant: This famous chapter is not really about Lazarus. It's about Jesus and what He's doing, what He's teaching through what He's doing, and how people are reacting to Him.

The last words we heard last week were the mocking questioning of the crowd, “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*” Jesus responds to these words with a mixture deep grief and righteous anger, which is what is signified by the word translated as “deeply moved” in verse 38. As He moved to the cave-tomb, one probably very much like the one He will be placed inside, He asks that the stone be moved away.

## I. Practical Martha

Unsurprisingly, Martha is the first to speak, and equally unsurprisingly, she has an objection to Jesus' request based on practical concerns. In his sermon on this chapter, Dr. James White suggests a possible title for Martha as Patron Saint of the Practical Details. She approaches Jesus and says to Him, literally, "Lord, by this time, he stinks, for he is four days." (or "he is Day Four.") Perhaps she thought Jesus was unaware of how long her brother had been dead.

Just a few minutes earlier, Martha had expressed her strong faith in Jesus courageously, boldly, accurately, articulately – "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." Yet now her faith falters in the face of a seemingly insurmountable practical reality. Isn't that so realistic? Don't we do the same thing so often? "Yes, Lord, I believe . . . but Lord, You don't seem to understand . . ."

Jesus answers Martha, not by seeking to address her practical concerns, but by seeking to strengthen her faltering faith. *Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* It's a reminder to us that what we need in moments of crisis, in moments of hard practical realities, is to remember the words of Jesus and to believe the promises of Jesus again.

Now, when did Jesus say this to Martha? Perhaps it's unrecorded by John, but perhaps Jesus is referring to the two things Jesus has said to her so far in this chapter:

1. Verse 4 is probably a record of the word Jesus sent back to Mary and Martha via messenger in response to their initial message to Him: "*This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*" That's the reference to seeing the glory of God.
2. Then, Jesus says to Martha in verses 25-26: "*I am the resurrection and the life.<sup>[4]</sup> Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*" And then He asks her, "*Do you believe this?*" That's the reference to believing.

If we put these two together with what Jesus says in verse 40, we can see what he meant: God's purpose in Lazarus' illness was to manifest His glory through Christ to Martha and Mary, which they would see and understand, if they believed. It's not that the miracle depended on their faith; it didn't. But their ability to see the glory of God through the miracle would depend on faith, as becomes evident in the reactions people have to this most remarkable miracle.

## II. Powerful Jesus

In contrast to practical Martha, we see powerful Jesus. She is concerned about the details, but He is acting in sovereign power!

*So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup> I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." <sup>43</sup> When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." – vv. 41-43*

The first thing Jesus does is pray aloud publicly. It's a very unusual prayer for Jesus because it's a prayer meant to be heard by those around Him. Apparently, Jesus had already earlier prayed and asked His Father to enable Him to raise Lazarus from the dead, and Jesus knew that His Father had heard Him. But He wanted the eye-witnesses of the miracle to know that this work was not a trick nor something being done by Jesus alone, but this is one of those "works of the

Father” that Jesus said were evidence that He was the One sent forth from heaven by God to be the Messiah and Savior.

Then, having prayed, Jesus spoke. Someone once famously said, and it has often been repeated, “Jesus called Lazarus forth by name, because, if He hadn’t used the name of Lazarus, all the people in that cemetery would have arisen and come forth at the command of Jesus.”

Jesus’ words are as simple as they are powerful. Again and again, we see Jesus exercise the most powerful authority with such brief and simple words. Two words, “Peace. Quiet,” is all He speaks when He calms the storm. Two words, “I am,” is all He says to calm His disciples when they are terrified and think He is a ghost. Now, it’s just three simple words, “Lazarus, come forth” or “Lazarus, come out” or “Lazarus, come exit.”

### III. Raised Lazarus

We need to make sure we notice the obvious: Lazarus, the dead man, the man who had been bound and in the grave for four days, the man whose body would have begun decomposing, came to life because Jesus called him and came to life when Jesus called him. That is, the call of Jesus had been not just the cause of Lazarus’ resurrection and the effective agent of his resurrection.

We also need to make sure we tie the raising of Lazarus back to what Jesus had said about Himself when He said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” It’s clear Jesus is teaching us something about Himself and His saving power, for He connects this action to His words and John’s account so clearly demonstrates this miracle is about so much more than just Lazarus rising again.

When Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life,” He meant two things by it –

1. He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live – This is a reference to the physical resurrection from the dead into eternal, glorified life at the last day.
2. He who lives and believes in Me will never die – This is a reference to spiritual life and true saving faith which comes from this spiritual life and brings the promise of eternal life to the believer.

Jesus is the One who Himself does both kinds of raising of His people from the dead. He had already references both of these resurrections earlier, in John 5 –

In verse 25, He had said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”*

Then, in verses 28-29, He said, *“An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”*

Here, with three words, Jesus powerfully demonstrates the truth of His words from John 5:25-29 and His words from John 10:25-26. Lazarus was dead and the voice of Jesus made him alive. This is how we come to salvation and faith. We are born spiritually dead, laid out in the tomb of sin and its consequences, and we have no life in us until Jesus speaks and calls us to life. Then, when this life is over, our bodies will lie in the ground, cold and dead and decaying, until Jesus comes again and with His cry of command, we will live again forever.

In this way, salvation is truly and completely the work of the Savior. This is part of why we never hear Lazarus speak, because he doesn't need to speak. He's not the one at work here.

Lazarus does come forth in response to the call of Jesus, just as we come to Jesus in response to His call. But it's not in question whether he will come forth or not once Jesus has spoken. Once he is brought to life, his coming forth follows inevitably.

When Lazarus comes forth, his head and hands and feet are still wrapped in grace clothes. He is not yet ready to live again. So Jesus gives further instructions to those around him: *"Unbind him, and let him go."* This is a great picture of what must happen in the life of a believer when we come to Jesus in response to His call. Our grave clothes need to be removed, so we can see rightly, walk rightly and act rightly. And we cannot remove our own grave clothes. Part of the call of Christian community is the call to unbind each other, removing grave clothes, so we can be set free. This is discipling in community.

#### **IV. Provoked Pharisees**

Many people see Lazarus come forth and set free and they respond the way you would expect: *"Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."*

*"Seeing is believing"* is an old saying in our culture, dating back to 1639. But just because people have been saying something for almost 400 years doesn't make it true. In fact, Jesus already said the exact opposite in this passage: *"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"* Of course, we must come to life in order to be able to believe and to see. As Jesus had said John 3:3, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

These stubborn eye-witnesses saw Jesus raise a man who had been in the grave for four days, and their first thought was: We need to go and tell the Pharisees. How blind and dead indeed!

The Pharisees, provoked by the news the eye-witnesses brought them had to know now that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. How do they respond? Well, they get the rest of the council together, along with the chief priests from the family of Annas and Caiaphas - *So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. <sup>48</sup> 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 react with a desire to protect their place, their position, their security, from this threat. They are frustrated, they feel threatened, and they respond by meeting together to plot their response.

#### **V. Prophetic High Priest**

Into the midst of the fear and confusion of the gathered leaders of the Jewish people, *"Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. <sup>50</sup> 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." <sup>51</sup> He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, <sup>52</sup> and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they made plans to put him to death."*

John shows us God's sovereignty even in the midst of this angry gathering of Jesus' enemies. The words of the high priest, spoken in anger as part of a plot against Jesus, are actually words of prophecy, proclaiming the purposes of God in the death of Jesus for the people of God.

Even while God is accomplishing His purposes, the leaders are plotting to accomplish their purposes as well. The remarkable thing about God's sovereign rule over all things is that He can not only take tragedy and sorrow and use it as part of His unfailing plan and purpose for His own glory and the good of His people, but He can even take the evil actions of the enemies of God and use them perfectly in His purpose for His glory and our good, too.

Joseph famously expressed this truth about 1800 years before Jesus, in Genesis 50, when he told his plotting brothers who had sold him into slavery. After the death of their father, Jacob, Joseph tells his brothers, *"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."*

Jesus knew what they were plotting. To this point in John's Gospel, we've not seen a determined and organized effort to eliminate Jesus. We saw as early as John 5 that His opponents wanted to put Him to death. Then, in John 8 during the Feast of Tabernacles and again in John 10 during the Feast of Dedication, we saw crowds of angry opponents seeking to stone Jesus, but their efforts were spontaneous, disorganized and ineffective. With the raising of Lazarus, we now have an organized and determined plot to put Jesus to death.

But it's not yet time for Jesus to die. So, *"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."*

Jesus remains in full command and control of His own life, just as He said in chapter 10, *"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."* And, in the end, this is the main message and most powerful source of hope in John 11 – In sickness, in death, in grief, in life and powerful resurrection, in remarkable success and in the face of determined opposition, Jesus remains Lord of All, fully in command of it all. That's why we can find our peace in professing His name, worshiping Him, believing in Him. He can be trusted when he tells us, just as He told Martha, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"*

So, do you believe Him?