

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE

John 11:17-26

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“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (Jn. 11:25-26).

In addition to being a book of divine revelation and astonishing theological depth, the Gospel of John is also a work of great literary art. And, as is true of the Bible generally, John’s craftsmanship is not at the expense of truth. Instead, it is in part through John’s craftsmanship that God’s message about Jesus is conveyed.

Such is the case as John records Jesus’ arrival at Bethany, where the family of Lazarus was deep in mourning. John writes: “Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother” (Jn. 11:17-19). There could hardly be a more potent setting for the message Jesus came to reveal, a message about himself as the giver of resurrection life. There was Jesus’ friend Lazarus, dead and buried for four days. There were the sisters, who had trusted Jesus to come and save their brother, but now mourned in bitter grief. But this was not just a private affair, for a multitude of Jews had come from nearby Jerusalem to participate in the mourning rites.

If any of them had known what Jesus intended to do, they would have agreed that this was a perfect setting. But Jesus knew that there was one more feature of this scene, for in a few days he would enter Jerusalem for his last time, beginning a week that would end with his

own death on a cross, which in turn would lead to his own resurrection from the grave.

MARTHA'S ANGUISHED PLEA

Jesus came to Bethany at the urging of Martha and Mary to come and heal their brother. They put all their trust in Jesus, and during the desperate hours of their vigil their eyes must often have wandered to the road, looking for Jesus' appearance. Finally Jesus came, but too late. For Lazarus was dead

When Jesus arrived, the two sisters each responded in accordance with their character: "So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house" (Jn. 11:20). This matches the picture given in Luke 10:38-42, where Mary sat quietly at Jesus' feet while Martha busied herself with chores. On that occasion, Jesus applauded Mary for her quiet devotion. Here, however, it is Martha's passionate activity that is rewarded by Jesus' revelation. There is a time for quiet reflection, but there is also a time for action; by failing to go to Jesus, Mary missed out on the glorious declaration Martha received.

Martha greeted Jesus with words that many commentators have taken as a rebuke, but which more likely simply reflect the frustration of her grieving heart: "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'" (Jn. 11:21). Surely, this repeated words Martha and Mary had said to one another many times in the previous days. "When will Jesus get here?" they asked as Lazarus declined. "If only Jesus had been here," they must have wept over his dead body. It was with this in her heart that Martha raced down the road to meet Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." William Barclay writes: "When Martha met Jesus, her heart spoke through her lips... Martha would have liked to say: 'When you got our message, why didn't you come at once?'"¹

Christians sometimes think it wrong for a believer to speak so frankly with the Lord. But God invites us to pour our hearts out to him. "[Cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you," the Bible

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:105-106.

says (1 Pet. 5:7). This includes our burdens and our griefs, our questions and our frustrations. The Psalms are filled with such expressions, and many a faithful prophet cried out, “How long, O Lord, how long!” God’s willingness to receive the grieving complaints of our hearts is proved by Jesus’ tender ministry to Martha on the road into Bethany.

One thing I have discovered about grieving Christians is that they often lose hold of truths that they ought to know about the Lord. As believers, their broken hearts reach out to the Lord, but their grieving minds grope in shadows. We see this in Martha’s words: “if you had been here.” When she cried that if only Jesus had been present Lazarus might live, she was forgetting that Jesus’ divine power is not limited by space. Earlier in John’s Gospel, an official came for Jesus to come and heal his ailing child. But Jesus did not even bother to make the trip: “Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live” (Jn. 4:50). When the official returned, he learned that his son recovered at the very time Jesus had spoken. Martha might have known that, but her anguished mind lost hold of this truth. Understanding this helps us minister to those who grieve. When eyes that are clouded by tears fail to see, and when trembling hands lose their grip on faith, our calling is not to rebuke them for unbelief but to remind gently them of the grace and truth of the Lord.

Martha displays another tendency of unbelief, namely, that of presuming on God’s promises. When Martha said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,” she assumed that the Lord willed that her brother recover. But John has informed us that this was not Jesus’ intention. In verse 6, John wrote that “when [Jesus] heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was” (Jn. 11:6). Jesus arrived exactly when he intended to, on the fourth day of mourning. The significance of this may be revealed by an ancient Jewish tradition that the soul lingered near the body until after the third day, when the body began to decay. By arriving on the fourth day, Jesus intended “that there might be no doubt that Lazarus was dead and that there might therefore be no cause for doubting the miracle”² he intended to perform.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:851.

In a similar way, Christians sometimes think that God has failed them when a loved one dies, or when some other grievous event takes place. But God has not promised to preserve us from death or any other trial. “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,” says Hebrews 9:27. So, until Jesus returns, it is God’s will for each of us to die, suffering the curse of our race for Adam’s sin (see Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12). The same is true for sickness, poverty, injustice, and sorrow. Jesus assured us, “In the world you will have tribulation” (Jn. 16:33). Our faith will stand up better to grief if we remember what God has and has not promised, resting our faith where it belongs, on the teaching and promises of God’s Word.

What we can be sure of is that all of our trials are apportioned by the hand of a holy, good, and loving God. Paul writes, “We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). It is precisely because we do not always feel that this is true that we need to know that it is true.

We know that Martha had not lost her faith in Jesus, not only from our insight into grief but also because of what she went on to say: “even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you” (Jn. 11:22). It is unlikely that Martha was thinking specifically of a resurrection, because later, when Jesus approaches the tomb, she tries to stop him: “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days” (Jn. 11:39).

So what did Martha mean when she blurted out that God will give Jesus anything he asks? I think that Martha’s grieving heart simply reaches out with the faith that she still can lay hold of. She simply asks him to help as only he can do. D. A. Carson states it well: “Even now, in her bereavement, she has not lost her confidence in Jesus, and still recognizes the peculiar intimacy he enjoys with his Father, an intimacy that ensures unprecedented fruitfulness to his prayers.”³

³ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 412.

THE BEST KIND OF COMFORT

It is always good to turn to the Lord, and Jesus ministered to Martha's grief with the best kind of comfort, a promise of salvation for Lazarus: "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again'" (Jn. 11:23).

We always want to give comfort to those who grieve, though our mouths often stumble over what to say. But Jesus has true comfort to give. We offer the important comfort of sympathy, fellowship, and love. But Jesus offers something better. He offers the comfort of a solution for that which grieves our souls: Lazarus will rise again. Mark Johnson writes, "The immediacy and the seeming finality of death are such that comfort of a unique order is needed to begin to banish its shadow."⁴ This is the comfort that Jesus, and only Jesus, can give.

This means that the highest form of Christian comfort is to direct the suffering heart to Jesus. This is what Paul did in one of his letters: "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:13-14). The best ministry to those who grieve is the ministry of God's Word, and his promises of a resurrection for those who believe in Christ. Our knowledge of life beyond the grave does not remove the grief from death, but it does restore the hope to grief.

Martha was struggling through this, and she replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn. 11:24). This shows that she, along with many Jews in that day, believed in a final resurrection. This was the main distinction between the Pharisees, who believed in a life to come, and the Sadducees, who did not.

You will sometimes hear it said that the Old Testament faith did not include a hope of life after death. William Barclay states this, writing: "One of the strangest things in scripture is the fact that the saints of the Old Testament had practically no belief in any real life after death... In the early days, the Hebrews believed that the soul of every

⁴ Mark Johnson, *Let's Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 157.

man, good and bad alike, went to Sheol... [where] they lived a vague, shadowy, strengthless, joyless life, like spectres or ghosts.”⁵

It is hard to imagine any hope from a faith like that! But in fact, the Old Testament frequently reveals a hope of life with God in the end. One of the earliest of all books, Job, includes this triumphant hope in the resurrection: “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26). David likewise expressed a fervent hope of glory and joy after death: “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:10-11). In Psalm 73, Asaph expressed the same hope: “I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:23-24). The thought of glory with the Lord has always been the hope of God’s people, and the comfort of this hope is given to sustain us amidst all the griefs of life.

JESUS’ STAGGERING REVELATION

Jesus is the master minister, and his purpose all along had been to strengthen the faith of his disciples through Lazarus’s death. The first to benefit was Martha, who wisely raced to meet him as he arrived. With this in mind, Jesus continued with the fifth of the seven “I am” statements of the Gospel of John. Seven times, Jesus uses the great “I am” name of the Lord to reveal the greatest truths of his salvation. “I am the bread of life,” he told the hungry crowd in John 6. “I am the light of the world,” he cried to the revelers at the Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 8:12). When those false shepherds, the Pharisees, cast one of Christ’s sheep out from the synagogue, Jesus replied, “I am the door. Whoever enters by me, will be saved” (Jn. 10:9), and “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11). Now, at the scene of Lazarus’s death, he gives this staggering revelation to grieving Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live,

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2:106.

and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25-26).

These are among the most precious and important words ever to fall from Jesus’ lips. J. C. Ryle comments that Jesus “tells [Martha] that He is not merely a human teacher of the resurrection, but the Divine Author of all resurrection, whether spiritual or physical, and the Root and Fountain of all life.”⁶

There are questions as to how to take Jesus’ statement, especially since in verse 25 he says that those who believe in him will live, even though they die, while verse 26 says that believers will never die. The best way to understand this is that Jesus first identifies himself as the source of resurrection and life. He next explains his resurrection, following death, and then he treats the eternal life that follows the resurrection. We might say that Jesus lays out resurrection life at the beginning in himself; in the middle, after death; and then at the end, in a life that will never again experience death, forever and ever.

First, Jesus reveals himself as the source of “the resurrection and the life.” We may hope in the resurrection because Jesus himself has entered into death and risen from the grave. “The whole human race is plunged in death,” writes John Calvin. “Therefore, no man will possess life unless he is first risen from the dead. Hence Christ teaches that He is the beginning of life.”⁷ “In him was life,” John said in chapter 1, “and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4). Therefore, “All who face the recurrent death situations of life and wrestle with questions of death and life can find an answer only through faith in him.”⁸ To believe in Jesus is to receive the benefit not only of his life and death, but also of his resurrection; from him through faith, Christians are entered into glory through the light of his open tomb. “Because I live,” Jesus said, “you also will live” (Jn. 14:19).

If the resurrection’s beginning and source rests with Jesus himself – with his divine person and saving work – then the middle of Christ’s resurrection promise deals with his answer to death: “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25). Here is

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:297.

⁷ John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 5:8.

⁸ Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2.

the answer – the only true answer – to the problem of death. By trusting in Jesus, we gain the promise of resurrection life. “Your brother will rise again” (Jn. 11:23), he told Martha, and so he says of all who believe.

Some argue that Jesus is speaking here of spiritual, not physical death, an analogy the New Testament certainly makes. But Jesus speaks of believers who die, and the context strongly favors a reference to physical death. J. C. Ryle therefore explains his meaning: “As surely as I, the Head, have life, and cannot be kept a prisoner by the grave, so surely all my members, believing in Me, shall live also.”⁹

Jesus’ second statement elaborates on the resurrection he gives, and the third statement refers to the life that believers gain from him: “Everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn. 11:26). This is the end awaiting all who trust in Jesus Christ, a life that will never end: Jesus adds, literally, that we “will never die forever.” Benjamin Warfield therefore writes, “Whatever Death is, and all that Death is... that is what we shall be saved from in this salvation. And whatever Life is, and all that Life is... that is what we shall be saved to in this salvation.”¹⁰

RESURRECTION LIFE

The Gospel of John is sometimes called the Gospel of Belief. And if there is one place above all where this Gospel most powerfully summons us to faith in Jesus Christ it may be here. Can there be a greater reason to believe on Jesus than his claim to hold the key to the problem of death? Jesus promises life: abundant life, and eternal life. And within a handful of days after this promise, he would prove his claims and seal his promises by himself rising from the grave in resurrection power. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25). This means that Jesus gives the meaning of life and the answer to death. He promises, “Whoever believes in me” will live even though he dies. And “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die” (Jn. 11:26).

⁹ Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 2:298.

¹⁰ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Savior of the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, ?), 47.

No wonder, then, that Jesus concluded with Martha by asking the all-important question: “Do you believe this?” It is still the all-important question, the great question confronting everyone who hears his words even today. How you answer this one question determines nothing less than the great question of life and the unavoidable question of death.

Indeed, to believe in Jesus is to start living this resurrection life even now. We do not have to wait until we die to receive new life from Christ; his resurrection begins in us the moment we believe. This was Paul’s explanation of what it means to enter into new life through faith in Christ: “You were dead in the trespasses and sins... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive [that is, resurrected us] together with Christ” (Eph. 2:1, 4-5). This is the gift that God offers to anyone who will come in faith to Jesus. Those who believe in him are freed from the power of death even before they die, and they receive his never-ending life even now, to live in this world as those who have everything to gain and nothing to lose.

This is what Tokichi Ishii learned after two women came to his prison cell to talk about Jesus Christ. He had an almost unparalleled criminal record, having murdered men, women, and children in the most brutal way, and was awaiting his just execution. As the Christian women spoke, Tokichi glowered at them like a savage animal. Eventually, they gave up trying to talk with him, but they left a Bible in his cell. He picked it up and began to read. And he kept reading. He could not put it down. Finally, he came to point in the Gospel where Jesus, hanging on the cross, spoke aloud: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). Tokichi later recalled, “I stopped. I was stabbed to the heart, as if pierced by a five-inch nail. Shall I call it the love of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that I believed, and my hardness of heart was changed.”

Believing in Jesus, through the Word of his Gospel, Tokichi Ishii received the beginning of resurrection life. Later, the jailer came to lead him to the scaffold. “He found, not the hardened, surly brute he had expected, but a smiling radiant man, for the murderer had been

born again. Literally, Christ brought Tokichi Ishii to life.”¹¹ And by believing in Jesus, though he died, yet shall he forever live.

In every kind of prison cell that sin can devise, whether pleasure or pain, pride or despair, and with the threat of death facing every man, woman, and child, Jesus offers the same to everyone who believes. “I am the resurrection and the life,” he declares. And he asks, “Do you believe this?”

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2:109.