

# *Signs of Glory*

Studies in John's Gospel

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Study 8

The Seventh Sign (John 11:1-57)

## *Jesus and the Last Enemy, Death*

### **Introduction**

Jesus had returned to the place of His baptism, commissioning and empowering by the Spirit. From there that He would return to Jerusalem for His final 'baptism' into death and resurrection by which every enemy, including death would be conquered. The previous signs had revealed Him as God's 'new wine' the bread of life, the water of life and the light of life. With the raising of Lazarus He revealed that He Himself was the resurrection and the life.

*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?" (John 11:25).*

We must remember that in all these signs Jesus was revealing the works of the Father. Without seeing the Father and submitting to His work and ways the Leaders saw these signs as simply blasphemous claims of deity. The opposition had been mounting from the beginning. The resurrection of Lazarus galvanised the Leaders into a frenzy to destroy Christ (Vs 53).

God's Messiah was Israel's hope of new life for the nation (Ezekiel 37, cf. Hosea 13:14). This new life it seemed would be like Israel being resurrected from death.

*The hand of the LORD was upon me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; and it was full of bones. He caused me to pass among them round about, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley; and lo, they were very dry. Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope has perished We are completely cut off' (Ezekiel 37:1, 2, 11).*

However, for the leaders of His day religion had supplanted their hearing of God's prophets. Where religion purports a self-willism (as all religions do) then there will never ever be any need to be raised from death. Sin will be seen as a moral blip able to be corrected by the exercise of the will and changed behaviour. Jesus had seen no capability to extricate themselves from their sin in the humanity He embraced. Nowhere was this more obvious than in their fear of death. Now as He raised Lazarus the world was shown that it takes the sovereign work of the Father to break the power of death.

Since Eden we have tried to separate physical and spiritual death. This is not helpful. When the couple sinned they died. The fact that their physical death was postponed doesn't contradict this. So when God tells us that we are dead in our sins that is a terrifying statement of hopelessness. If we believe the lie of Satan that this is not so then like the Leaders of Jesus day we will see no real connection between the cross and the grace of God. It was through the resurrection of her brother Lazarus that Martha fully submitted to grace. Something in that event took the 'fidgets' out of her. Maybe we live with the fidgets. Always seeking never finding; often unsettled and discouraged about the ways of the Lord in His church yet never prepared to rest in His love; always driven or driving others by our expectations.

### **Lazarus is Dying Lord!**

Bethany was just a few kilometres south east of Jerusalem. It was the home of His good friends Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Mary and Martha we have met before when Jesus went to their home (Luke 10:38-42). On that occasion Mary had demonstrated her reception of grace by quietly sitting at Jesus feet. Martha, on the other, was still bound by the driven-ness of self justification. Lazarus is simply introduced as the one who Jesus loved. This gives an intriguing insight into the 'private life of Jesus.

With Jesus across the Jordan it would have taken a messenger at least two days to reach Him. The sisters simply informed Jesus that Lazarus was sick. It was Jesus who revealed later that he had died. The point being that at least four days elapsed between the between the sending of news and the eventual arrival of Jesus.

The Lord's response to the news was unexpected on two fronts. He pronounced that the sickness was for the glory of God, and then He waited another two days before setting off for Bethany.

*But when Jesus heard this, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it" (Vs. 4).* Jesus was not saying that Lazarus wouldn't die, but that his death would not be the final outcome. Jesus spoke in a similar way about the blind man in the last sign (John 9:1-12). Jesus linked directly the glory of the Father and His own glory. Resurrecting a decaying human body was glory that could not be ignored. It could be rejected but not ignored. Jesus had previously said that He could only do that which He saw His Father doing. So the raising of Lazarus was the work of the Father declaring that death would have no lasting existence and hold over the children He had created. So the glory involved here was not simply power over death but the power of the life God has reserved for all His trusting children. Not to be plagued by death and the fear of death is marvellous. To enter into a kingdom where all that is totally absent and the life created from the beginning able to blossom is startling. If we assume the messenger returned to Bethany and told these words to the sisters then the Lord was presenting them with the hope of trust.

### **God's Glory and Our Greatest Joy**

*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days longer in the place where He was (Vs 5, 6).* The Lord waited for two days where He was for the benefit of Martha and Mary. John showed this by the words, 'Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus'. There is no intended tension between His love and His staying two more days. To accomplish the greatest glory for His Father, Himself and the lives of His loved ones Jesus decided that resurrection was better than healing. The sign to the nation was that it required more than healing. Nothing short of resurrection at the hands of God's Son could bring the life back. Our mistrust and impatience about God's delays only reveal that our primary focus is ourselves. We don't readily make the connection that the greatest glory of God is directly related to our greatest need and our greatest joy. Some within the church have set the glory of God over and against our best interest. So the whole relational experience of Jesus and the Father is reduced to meaninglessness. This of course turns the task of glorifying God into a duty and a burden. Jesus understood that the greatest glory of God in this situation would result in the greatest joy of His beloved friends. This, when accepted is a startling freedom for all believers. We no longer need feel that if our service is to be truly holy it must be given with the dread of self sacrifice. In a sermon titled 'The Pleasantness of Religion' Jonathan Edwards argued, "It would be worth the while to be religious, if it were only for the pleasantness of it". Our

service may demand self sacrifice, but if it is done in any other spirit than the spirit of joy because of the heaven the Father has given us here on earth then it will amount to little or no glory for God.

***Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?"*** (Vs. 7, 8). Aware of the death of His friend (vs. 11), Jesus announced His intent to go to him. As Judea was very close to Jerusalem, and still fearful about the near stoning of Jesus that had recently occurred there (10:31, the Disciples were stunned. The fear of His death and theirs dictated their intentions and emotions. Added to this they felt that because of the words of Jesus that the illness of Lazarus would result in the glory of God and not lead to death it made no sense for them to go so close to the enemy. In His reply, (Vs. 9, 10), Jesus implied that as long as He was doing the works of His Father there was no room for fearful withdrawal. His words also implied to the Disciples that as long as they were with Him they would be free to walk and work without fear. Any attempt to measure our obedience by what seems safe or according to what we fear is a subtle and debilitating weapon of the evil one.

***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." The disciples then said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 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, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."*** (Vs. 11-15). By saying that Lazarus was 'asleep' Jesus was not playing down the drama of death. That which gripped the body and existence of His friend was the great final enemy. Here was the evil one attempting to thumb his nose at the greatness and regality of created flesh and blood. By calling it sleep Jesus was pointing to the fact that He alone had the power of death and resurrection. Satan may hold people under his 'power of death' (guilt and the fear of judgement), but Jesus was about to put an end to that on the cross.

The use of 'sleep' for the death of one of God's covenant children was not uncommon. See, Genesis 47:30; 2 Samuel 7:12; Matthew 27:52; Acts 7:60; 1 Thessalonians 4:13. The Scriptures are also clear that to be asleep in this way is not to be in some suspended intermediate state. Paul said that to be absent from the body is to be present to the Lord, and this not as some 'naked spirit' (2 Corinthians 5:1-4).

***Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, so that we may die with Him"***(Vs. 16). Thomas was definitely a 'glass half full' type of person. He expected the worst and so often failed to see the truth when confronted by it. We are not arguing for certain personality types here, but simply showing how the grace of Christ was not reserved for the positive thinkers. Thomas's remark revealed a spirit of fatalism (living as a victim in a Fatherless world). Here was a spirit of devotion without joy and any sense of the Father at work.

### **Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life**

***Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days*** (Vs.12). A large crowd of friends had come to comfort Mary and Martha. But by pointing out this fact John was also giving a hint of the strife to come (Vs.45). Not only was the air full of the horror of death but also of intrigue.

Jesus had two personal exchanges with the sisters; first with Martha then Mary. He was there for the glory of God but His inclusion of the two women was full of compassion and hope for them. Peter would later call it the many varied grace of God (1 Peter 4:10). Martha's greeting to Jesus was not an angry "If you had cared you

would have come sooner”, but the greeting of deep sorrow tinged with a form of trust. It encapsulates the common cry of the sufferer, “If... then...” We know only too well that this cry can turn into angry ‘Why’ accusations of God. The earlier words of Jesus, “This sickness is not to death” although seeming now false still seemed to hold out some hope in Martha’s mind. Martha clearly trusted that had Jesus been present when Lazarus was ill He could have healed him. Even this far into death she implied that Jesus could still do something if He asked God (Vs. 22). What she still failed to see was that the Lord before her was the resurrection and the life, in Himself. That was the glory that needed to dawn. Our Lord’s gentle drawing of Martha to confession of trust is beautiful (as it is with all believers).

***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?" (Vs.25).*** Here was the faith nurturing word followed by the question which brought Martha to liberty. The crisis of trust had crystallized. Would Martha trust that Christ would keep her from death? Would she trust that when like Lazarus she ‘slept’ she would not feel death but simply the seamless transition into life? (See 8:51). Apart from Jesus there is no life and no resurrection. So by faith union with Christ the assurance of the final resurrection becomes the norm by which we live and face death in this age. To live knowing that we shall never ever die is an amazing grace. Everyone lives and reacts in life to the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). It is a huge enemy to true relational freedom for all of us. We should be wise about this battle in our own life and those we try to comfort.

***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." When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept. (Vs. 32-35).***

The Lord’s response to what was before Him was deep and powerful. So intense was His indignation that His whole body shook. His indignation was not towards Mary or the mourners. It would be presumptuous for us to attempt any analysis of the Lord’s suffering at that point. Sufficient to say that the impact of death upon humanity was starkly repugnant to the Life of God, especially as the people seemed not to be aware of their slavery. This indignation intensified as He went to the tomb. There it welled up into deep tears. The aggression of sin and death against humanity was now confronting the true Life from God. More importantly, the Resurrection and the Life was confronting death.

***So the Jews were saying, "See how He loved him!" 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.36, 37)*** The reaction of the crowd ranged from sentimentality to scepticism; both dangerous indications of blindness towards Christ and His Father.

***Jesus said, "Remove the stone." 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." Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" 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. 39-42).***

The Lord’s prayer is one of unity with the Father, not a request that the Father raise Lazarus. He had promised that He was the resurrection and the life, now He would prove it. Martha, unaware of how Jesus was going to act was afraid of the stench of the corpse. But there would be no stench only life.

***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."***

The cry of Jesus brought the decaying flesh of Lazarus back to wholeness and vitality. He stumbled out of the tomb, restricted and some kind of shocking spectacle. Jesus ordered him unwrapped. The power of Jesus was stunning. Nobody present could have denied that, particularly Lazarus. Nothing more is heard of Lazarus. Naturally he would go into another tomb again, but next time He would enter it with the confidence that by the time they buried him he would have been long with Christ alive and free.

### **Great Power, Great Reaction**

More believe (Vs. 45), but while the Leaders now admit that Jesus is doing signs they resolutely refuse to see what the signs point towards (Vs. 48). They were too afraid that their position as Leaders in Israel would be taken away ***"If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."*** Had they been truly concerned for their nation they would have known about the prophecies concerning Christ and then been watching to see His signs. Whatever creates blindness towards the Father and His Son will be employed by the evil one. How powerful and destructive is that blindness when wed to religion.

The Sanhedrin made plans from that time to put Jesus to death (Vs.53). Having seen Jesus bring back life to Lazarus their hearts were only full of death.

***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?"***

These are the key words of the whole event. Jesus was not simply doing something amazing for Lazarus. His declaration confronts every human being. Driven by so much fear of dying, whether bodily, emotionally, psychologically etc, we spend inordinate amounts of time, energy and money attempting to secure ourselves. Will we hear Jesus, see the sign of this resurrection directing us to the glorious grace of the Father. He would not leave His children dead. He would not allow the flesh and blood He made to simply rot away into the earth. When we see this sign we are free to live now. It will be true that death will still hold fears for us it seems. We are not talking of perfection in this life of faith. However, to know that we will never see death, never feel its corruption, but be taken through what others will see as our death into further and fuller experiences of family life with the Father, transforms our present life.

### **Questions for discussion and further reflection**

1. Discuss the many ways this sign speaks into our culture
2. How did the glory of Christ as the resurrection and the life come through to you as we studied this account?
3. We often think about the resurrection as holding out future hope. That is true, but discuss how Jesus words impact the now.
4. Why is it that we often get so angry when the Lord doesn't move to our timetable.