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John 11:38-45 “Lazarus, Come Forth!”

Intro. The fact is only God can create life. Man is now able to clone life, but man cannot create life, or restore life to one who is fully dead. This morning we are going to relive the account of what was probably the greatest miracle Jesus performed in His earthly life. Lazarus was dead for 4 days. His body was already decaying. It was absolutely impossible for him to come back to life. But Jesus restored life to Lazarus. I firmly believe that what we have here is sober, eyewitness testimony of what actually happened. John, the author of this book, was there, and he is reporting his own eye-witness account of what happened.

John’s main point in including this story in his gospel is this: When Christ gave resurrection life to Lazarus, He proved beyond a doubt that He is indeed the Son of God. V.45 says that as a result of this miracle, “many ... believed in Him.” It was the crowning miracle that led many in Judea to believe in Him. Leading people to believe in Jesus is the main point of the whole gospel. John wrote in John 20:31, “but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

Now this miracle was very important at this point in the ministry of Jesus. In v.15 Jesus indicates that this miracle would be an opportunity to confirm the faith of the disciples. In just a few short weeks they would see Jesus arrested, and then He would be executed on a cross. They needed this miracle in order to prevent any doubts that He was the Messiah and the Son of God. I hope that our own faith in Jesus will be strengthened as we continue to study John 11 together. And if you have never trusted in Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, I hope that today would be the day that you do so.

So is Jesus the Son of God? Or was He just another great religious leader of history? Well, this miracle should answer that question. Now in order for this miracle to lead to faith in Jesus, let’s see first of all that:

## I. SOME PROBLEMS HAD TO BE OVERCOME

From the standpoint of human logic, the death of Lazarus seemed like an insurmountable problem, especially now that he has been dead 4 days. Martha and Mary assumed the situation was hopeless. Nevertheless, we read beginning in v.38 that Jesus came to the tomb when Lazarus was buried.

Now I want you to see the other problems Jesus had to overcome in order for people to believe in Him as a result of this miracle:

A. The Stone Blocking the Cave – We read in the last of v.38 that Jesus “came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.” If Lazarus was to come forth from the tomb, and if the people were to witness this great miracle, the stone needed to be moved out of the way. Jesus did not want the stone removed to give Him access to the dead man. He wanted the tomb removed so that the people could witness the miracle that would take place simply by speaking a command.

I want you to understand the burial customs of that day in Israel. They did not generally bury bodies by digging a deep hole in the ground. Instead, a common way to bury loved ones in

Judea was to lay the body in a cave. Tombs were either natural caves or caves that had been hewn out of limestone rock. Over the doorway to the tomb, a cartwheel-shaped rock sat in a groove so it could be easily sealed and opened again for other burials. This stone was placed over the cave for the purpose of keeping out wild animals. The average size on the inside of hewn out tombs was about 6 feet deep and 9 feet wide. Inside on one side, there were usually at least 2 shelves carved into the rock to place the dead upon. Burial probably took place within hours after death. The dead body would remain on the shelf for about a year to fully decompose. After a year, the bones were collected and put in a bone box, and the shelf would be available for the next person. The bone box would take up much less room. The person's name and a little about them might be engraved on the box.

Of course, the stone was no major obstacle. Jesus just gave a command in v.39 that the stone be moved. Jesus used men who were strong enough to take the stone away.

Now that the stone was rolled away, He could deal with the next hindrance to people benefiting from this miracle:

B. Martha's Lack of Faith - The command to move the stone activated the concern of Martha<sup>1</sup> for the body of her brother. She said in the last of v.39, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." She did not want the stench of her brother's body to escape from the tomb. Her statement seems crude, but death is crude and awful. We can cover up the terrible reality of death today by embalming the body effectively, but death is still just as real.

But the point I want to make is that she demonstrated a lack of faith by her statement. Like so many, she assumed that rolling the stone away would accomplish nothing good. She believed it was too late. She probably believed the Jewish tradition that a person's spirit remained near the body for up to 3 days, hoping for resuscitation.<sup>2</sup> But by the end of the third day, it was believed that the spirit would depart. You see, by the fourth day the face of a person became corrupted from decomposition and unrecognizable. By the way, in vv. 17 & 39, the evangelist makes special mention of this fourth day in order to stress the magnitude of the miracle. Lazarus was truly dead and that the miracle of Jesus would not be simply one of resuscitating his friend. So in light of the fact that this was the fourth day, she didn't seem to imagine that the purpose of Jesus was to raise Lazarus from the dead. The only purpose that she could think of was that Jesus intended to view the body, since He did not do so earlier after Lazarus died. She objected because she couldn't stand the exposure of his corpse, especially to the crowd gathered there. She wanted to remember her brother as he was when they first buried him, and not now that death and decomposition had seized her brother to such a terrible extent.

Some people are like Martha: they go through life and only see the problems, and obstacles. They get worried and stressed out over various difficulties. They do not see divine possibilities. Yet we need to understand that if God can raise Lazarus from the dead, He can certainly handle whatever problem you are facing!

Now up to this point in the story, the stone still has not been moved. Martha's lack of faith was a greater obstacle than the stone itself. Now this leads to the next lesson. When you face a great obstacle in life, or a great problem, you need to:

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<sup>1</sup> She must have heard what was going on, and, with her usual activity, have joined the procession, though we left her in the house (Maclaren).

<sup>2</sup> Burge says this was an early medieval Jewish tradition which may well go back to the first century.

## II. RECOGNIZE THE PURPOSE OF GOD

Remember always that God has a purpose when He allows problems in your life. So Jesus reiterates that there was a purpose in what He was doing. Martha's concern and unbelief gave Jesus the opportunity to restate the purpose of God in what was about to happen. In v.40 He said, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe<sup>3</sup> you would see the glory of God?" Note Christ's calm confidence in His own power. Evidently, Jesus made this statement to Martha earlier, but it is not recorded here in this chapter, unless it is our Lord's interpretive summary of what He said to her in vv.23-26. However, He did tell His disciples in v.4, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Jesus did not want her simply to see a corpse resurrected; He wanted her to see God glorified in this miracle. So the ultimate purpose of the miracle Jesus was about to do was the glory of God. And in order for the people to see the glory of God, the stone had to be removed so they could witness the miracle. This statement of Jesus reminds me of John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." So this miracle was to be performed primarily for the glory of God, not to extend the life of Lazarus. The glory of Jesus as the Son of God would be seen in this miracle.

What is the glory of God anyway? Ex. 33:18-19 makes it clear that the glory of God refers to His praiseworthy attributes. There Moses says, "Please, show me Your glory." Then the Lord said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Three of the wonderful attributes of God are mentioned in that verse. Now let me ask you. What attributes of God would be demonstrated by raising Lazarus from the dead? Here the absolute power of God is demonstrated and revealed, and thus the glory of God's power is revealed in Christ. We also see the goodness of God in restoring Lazarus back to his heart-broken sisters. We also see from this miracle the fact that God is the *Living* God (Deut. 5:26; Jer. 10:10; Mt. 16:16; Heb. 12:22). So again, more than seeing a resurrected brother, Christ wanted her to see Him glorified. The miracle was evidence of His deity for it revealed the very glory of God.

Every time you face an insurmountable problem, it is God's opportunity to work in your life. And every time He solves a problem, God's primary purpose is not just to help you, but that we might reflect on God's goodness, knowledge, and power. We should give God the glory and praise for what He has done. So instead of focusing on our problems, we should patiently trust Christ and look to Him. We should be looking for how God is going to be glorified in each situation. Our utmost concern should not be our own problems, but God's glory. We ought to be looking for the ways God is going to work in and through your problems, and how God is going to be glorified. In fact, you will be much better off if you do not look at life from a self-centered point of view, but always consider how God can be glorified through your life. So as you face a problem, your prayer should be, "God, how can you be glorified through this problem?" It may be through an amazing divine intervention, but it may be in how God so clearly comforts you, strengthens you, and gives you peace even in the midst of the trouble you are facing.

So that leads to my last point.

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<sup>3</sup> Notice Jesus didn't say, "If you believe, I will do the miracle." He didn't condition the miracle on her faith. Rather, He said if she believed Him, she would see the glory of God. There's a distinction between the two. The sovereign act of Christ raising Lazarus would have happened whether Martha believed or not. But for her to see the glory of God in the miracle, she had to have faith in Christ. In the natural world, "seeing is believing"; in the spiritual, believing is seeing.

### III. HOW GOD CAN BE GLORIFIED

I want to share with you two ways that God can be glorified in your life. These are not the only two ways, but these are the two ways reflected in my text. First of all:

A. Through Publicly Known Prayer - In v.41 Jesus prayed before doing anything else. The last of v.41 says, "Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, 'Father, I thank You that You have heard Me.'" Note that Jesus prays looking up to heaven, probably with hands upraised. This was a common posture for Jewish prayer. He didn't ask the Father for anything; He simply thanked Him for having already heard Him. Clearly Jesus had already prayed about this matter. He evidently prayed upon receiving the message His friend was sick (v.4). After praying to the Father He knew what God's will was in this matter.<sup>4</sup> It was not the healing of Lazarus, but the resurrection of Lazarus. He thanked His heavenly Father for hearing His prayer, and He thanked God in advance what He was about to do. There was no question in His mind that Lazarus would rise from the dead.

What a blessing it is to know that God hears your prayer. Jesus said in v.42, "And I know that You always hear Me..." Wouldn't you like to know that God hears your prayers and will respond to your prayers? There are two primary conditions for God to hear your prayer. First, you must pray in Jesus' name. Jesus said in John 14:13, "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." There are at least two billion people on earth who pray to their god or gods, but they do not pray in Jesus' name. Well according to Jesus, such prayer is an exercise in futility. The second condition is that you pray and ask according to God's will. 1 John 5:14 says, "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." Romans 12:2 says that God's will is "good and acceptable and perfect..." You ought not to want to pray for anything outside of God's will! So you can be like Jesus and have confidence that God will hear your prayer.

Now the main point that I wanted to make is the fact that Jesus prayed out loud. Why? V.42 tells us. "...because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me." Jesus prayed out loud because He wanted the people present to know He was intimately connected with the Father, and that what was to happen was a work of God, through His Son, in answer to prayer. This in turn should lead them to believe in Him as the Son of God.

This is similar to what we read in Acts 16:25, "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." When God manifested His power in shaking the prison, and setting Paul & Silas free, the Jailor came and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved." He knew in his heart that there was a connection between the prayer of Paul and Silas, and the miracle that had just taken place! So he then believed in Jesus after hearing the gospel.

I believe that we need to do most of our praying privately, as Jesus taught in Mt. 6:5-6. However, we should also pray *publicly*. One purpose of public prayer is that people might know what we are praying, and when God answers prayer, they will recognize it as an answer to prayer, and God would be glorified. This reminds me of what Jesus said in Mt. 18:19, "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven." He wants at least two praying for the same thing so that you have enough witnesses when the answer to prayer is clearly given. This is one reason why you should share prayer requests. When several or many Christians are offering the same intercessory prayer, then when God answers that prayer, God is glorified.

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<sup>4</sup> Jesus said in John 5:19, "'Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.'"

Just a couple of weeks ago we asked you to pray for Adam and Niki's infant son Christian. He was facing a potentially serious health condition. Thankfully it turned out not to be as bad as it could have been, and the surgery was successful and he is on the road to recovery! May God be praised and thanked!

B. Through a Demonstration of the Life-Giving Power of God – Having dealt with Martha's unbelief and since the stone was moved, and since Jesus has prayed, everything is now ready for the great demonstration of the glorious power of Jesus. Let's see what happened. First, we read of:

1. The Lord Gave the Command - Notice what Jesus did. V.43 says He was ready to call Lazarus from the grave, He "cried with a loud voice." The Gk. words (φωνη μεγαλη εκραυγασεν) denote an extremely loud utterance.<sup>5</sup> Many have wondered why He shouted so loudly. It was not necessary in order to perform the miracle. Instead, there are 3 possible answers. First, in keeping with the portrayal of death as a deep sleep, it may have seemed appropriate to shout to release Lazarus from it. Second, a loud shout was commensurate with the power required for a resurrection. It was a shout of power and authority. Third, I think Jesus shouted to alert all the people concerning what was about to happen. He wanted this miracle to be a witness to the many people who were gathered there. This is the most likely reason.

And what was it that He shouted? He said, "Lazarus, come forth!" Or, "Lazarus, come out! (εξω)". Now an interesting question is this: what would have happened if Jesus had not shouted the name of Lazarus? Friend, Jesus has so much power that all the dead within the sound of His voice could have risen!

Now I want to make two applications of how Jesus brings life by speaking the Word. First, that illustrates a spiritual reality. How is a person born again to new life? It is by the Word of God. Peter said that we are born again, "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible by the Word of God, which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23). Just think, by faithful teaching and sharing the Word of God, we can be used of God to bring life to those who are spiritually dead! This very morning I pray that God will grant new life to some soul.

That is not the only shout of Jesus concerning the resurrection of believers. 1 Thess. 4:16-17 says that when Christ comes again, He will descend from heaven with a shout... and the dead in Christ shall rise first." Someday Christ will shout to us something like, "Church, come up," and all God's people shall arise in resurrection power! That will take great power to raise millions of believers from the grave, but Christ certainly has the power. We are going to hear that shout someday. So when Jesus gives that loud shout, will you be one of those that will rise up to meet Jesus in the air?

2. Lazarus Came Forth! – By this time there must have been a growing crowd of people. Having heard the shout of Jesus, they must have silently waited to see what would happen next, their hearts pounding in hushed, anxious anticipation. This was a critical moment, because if Lazarus didn't come out, Jesus' credibility was on the line. He had already announced that Lazarus would rise from the dead (vv.23, 40), and now He calls him forth. Did He have the power to recreate fresh skin and restore decayed organs? Then, those close to the tomb probably heard the sound of movement. Then, sure enough, v.44 says, "And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped<sup>6</sup> with a cloth..." Can you imagine that! Out of the darkness of the tomb, Lazarus appeared at the doorway before the awestruck crowd! His

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<sup>5</sup> The verb itself means to cry out loud (see use in 18:40; 19:6, 12, 15 of the crowd shouting for the crucifixion of Jesus). Adding the modifier "great" means it was very loud.

<sup>6</sup> Jewish burials tied the jaw closed, put coins over the eyes, and covered the face with a linen cloth.

sisters run to Lazarus. They hug and cry and then their tears turn to laughter. Some people are shouting with joy. Some kneel in amazement and adoration. Others are stunned in silence. Martha and Mary no doubt go up to Jesus to thank Him for giving their brother back to them. Yet one Person there was not awestruck. Jesus knew that He had the life-giving power of God. At some point I would imagine that He, too, hugged His friend Lazarus. After the shock wore off, many people carried the news of this miracle back to Jerusalem (12:9, 17).

The only explanation of the appearance of Lazarus at the door of the tomb is that the power of God brought him back to life. At the sound of Christ's voice, death had to yield up its captive, and Christ stood as the conqueror of sin and death. He proved He has power over death. Listen to what Jesus said in Revelation 1:18, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death." Once a person is dead, it seems that he is locked in with no escape. But only Jesus has the key that can open the doorway out of the terrible grip of death. And Jesus unlocks death for all who will believe in Him. When Jesus said in v.25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live," He wasn't making idle conversation. He was proclaiming an eternal truth. Believers will experience eternal resurrection life.

Over the years of my ministry I have conducted many funerals. When we leave the cemetery everyone knows the finality of death. Yet for the believer in Jesus, there is hope. Jesus says, "I have the keys of Hades and death." He can unlock the prison of death and the grave.

3. Lazarus Was Released from His Grave Clothes – Jesus said in the last of v.44, "Loose him, and let him go." They did not wrap the dead like a mummy. Instead, each limb of a person would be wrapped, as well as the torso, or main part of the body. So it wasn't too difficult for Lazarus to walk to the doorway of the tomb. Imagine him wrapped in strips of cloth and his head covered with a separate cloth—what a vivid and unique picture that must have been! But with a face cloth probably still on him, and with the other cloths, he certainly needed to have the grave wrappings removed. So Christ commands that he be freed from those old grave clothes. His hands were probably wrapped up as well.

There are some lessons here for us. First, Christ sets us free when He gives us life. He will set you free from the penalty of sin. He will also set you free from the power of sin. Jesus said in John 8:34, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." Sin is addictive. In the same context, He said, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (v.32). So when God gives you new life, you need to get rid of the old grave clothes, so to speak. You need to put off the works of darkness, and the sins of your past.

There is another lesson here. Jesus did not do anything that man could do. Only God can raise the dead, but men were involved in rolling the stone away, and removing the grave clothes. Jesus was not in the business of doing tricks for public appeal. He could have rolled the stone roll away, seemingly all by itself, like a Jedi Knight who just waves his hand to move the stone aside! Don't you think Jesus could have done that? Instead, he used men. Imagine the joy of these men when they realized that they had a part in such a great event. And if we will simply make ourselves *available* to the Lord, we will have the joy of getting in on some great things that God will do. God uses people who are available. If you saw a need you could meet, and sense the Lord's leading you to meet it, would you be available to serve the Lord in that capacity? Also, God expects us to do what we can do, and then to trust Him to do what only He can do. Many can roll a stone away, but only God can raise the dead. Man can now blast a kidney stone. There's no point asking God to do that. Go to the doctor. Pray to God concerning those things that only He can do. God wants to do a great work in this church, but we must not sit around doing nothing, and ask God to do everything.

We can share the gospel but only God can grant repentance, saving faith, and new life.

Conclusion: What power! Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?<sup>7</sup> Notice what v.45 says, “Then many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him.” What did they believe? They believed that He was God’s chosen Messiah. Surely many also believed that He is none other than the Son of God.

Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe He is the One God has sent to save us from sin and death? Do you believe He is the Son of God? Have you trusted in Him as your Savior? If not, why not today?

Sources: Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); William Hendriksen (read again), *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); Herschel H. Hobbs *John: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Resurrection and the Life: John 11* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986), John 11:30-45; Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink (only part), *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Warren W. Wiersbe, “Be” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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<sup>7</sup> The narrative is built to tell us about Jesus, not Lazarus. This may seem obvious to some, but many miss this basic point when explaining the chapter (Burge).