

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Tel: 0845 603 0630. Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: George Stevens

Studies in John's Gospel: I AM the Resurrection and the Life - John 11

The headline that covers John 11 may well read: "BACK FROM THE GRAVE!" for it records the amazing details of the resurrection of Lazarus. The death and subsequent resurrection of this man is an event that revealed the way in which many thought about Christ including: Martha, Mary, the disciples, the chief priests and the Pharisees. Today, we are challenged with the question, "What think ye of Christ?"

The chapter may be divided into several sections:

Verses 1-6	the news of Lazarus' death
Verses 7-17	the discourse with the disciples
Verses 18-34	the meetings with Martha and Mary
Verses 35-44	the raising of Lazarus
Verses 45-57	the response of the Jewish leaders.

Verse 1 identifies which Lazarus is meant here. It was distinctly, Lazarus of Bethany. This village was less than two miles away from Jerusalem. There was another Bethany in existence, so that the Spirit of God states the names of the family members to prevent any confusion.

Interestingly, Bethany means: "house of dates" which expresses fruitfulness. Today, Christians are to be marked by the fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5. We know that fruitbearing does not come without some cleansing by the Father as illustrated by the vine in John 15. Furthermore, it is often when a Christian's faith is tested by God that she or he becomes more fruitful for Him. The meaning of the personal names recorded are instructive. According to *Young's Analytical Concordance*, Lazarus means "without help". He who was helpless was, as we shall see, raised from death and would sit at a table communing with the all-powerful, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. The name Mary means "bitter". Yet, she was the sweet worshipper of Christ in the next chapter in the Gospel according to John. Martha means "lady", but she was pleased to serve the Lord Jesus. So in John 12, we have a perfect picture. In Lazarus, we find communion with Christ. From the actions of Mary, we find worship that resulted in the house being filled with fragrance. While, in the part of Martha, we find faithful service. These three components mark a balanced Christian life today.

From verse 2 we realise that there must have been at least two anointings of Jesus, and, possibly three. They include:

- the woman who was a sinner who anointed the Lord's feet, bathed them with her tears and dried them with her hair in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7);
- the woman in Mark 14:3-9, who anointed the head of Jesus in the home of Simon the leper; and,
- the Mary in John 12 who anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair.
- There is no record of the woman in Mark 14:3-9 anointing Jesus' feet or wiping them with her hair. Yet, it is clear she did it to anoint Him for burial. This was the reason given also in John 12. In both cases the Lord said that she would be remembered for it.

Verse 3 tells us that Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus to inform Him that Lazarus was sick. The words of the message began with the word "Lord". The Greek word is "*Kurios*" and speaks of one who has control. It is used as the Greek equivalent of Yahweh or Jehovah. The sisters recognised the amazing power and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lazarus is described as "he whom Thou lovest" which shows that the sisters recognised the deep affection that the Lord had for their brother. Note that they did not invite action from Him. They simply informed Him of the situation which, as the Omniscient One, He already knew. This reminds us that God wants to hear our voices in prayer expressing our needs even though He may have already sent an answer before we utter the words. It reflects the dependence of faith. The answer of Jesus is given in verse 4, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby". This meant that physical death would not be the end of the matter, but that God and the Son of God would be honoured in the course of events. This was evidently uttered in the

presence of the messenger who brought Jesus the word of Lazarus' sickness because it was later reported to the sisters (John 11:40).

In verse 5, we read that Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus. The Greek word for "love" here is "*agapao*". It is used to describe the nature of God. Hence, it may be defined as that nature which always seeks the best for the good of its object. It is an entirely selfless love. The fact that all three are listed as individuals shows that the love of Christ falls upon each one of them equally. If you have faith in the Son of God, then you could add your name to the list of those who are loved by Jesus!

Verse 6 indicates that Jesus did not act immediately. It would have taken the messengers at least a day to reach Him. It therefore seems reasonable to say that Jesus knew that Lazarus had died during their journey. As a result, He stayed on for two days to complete His work in that area before suggesting they return to Judaea. The disciples were surprised by the thought because they knew the risk involved as the Jews wanted to kill Him. They said, "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone thee: and goest thou thither again?" The reply of Jesus in verses 9-10 seems strange at first sight: "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If a man walk in the day, he stumbleth not, because he seeth the light of this world. But if a man walk in the night, he stumbleth, because the light is not in him." The twelve hours of daylight represent the period of time during which a man can work. For the Lord Jesus, it speaks of the time He had to do His Father's business on earth. If He failed to do it, then He would be out of the light of God's will and His life would lose its direction. So, if Jesus had yielded to the fears of His disciples, ignoring the revealed will of the Father that He go and raise Lazarus from the dead, it would have been to walk in the night, and to stumble. It is clear from verse 4 that Jesus undertook the raising of Lazarus as a direct heavenly assignment, in full harmony with God's will, and in obedience to it. We can apply the same principle to our Christian lives. The light we receive from God (in its direct sense) should be followed without regard to human fears or opinions.

In verses 11-15, we read: "And after this he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. The disciples therefore said unto the Lord, If he is fallen asleep he will recover. Now Jesus had spoken of his death: but they thought that he spake of his taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus therefore said unto them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go unto him.'"

There is a beauty in the words, "Our friend..." Jesus identifies Himself with His disciples as to their combined friendship for Lazarus. The vital difference between a friend and a servant is that a friend is enlightened as to the reason why something is done, whereas a servant is commanded with no reason given. In this section as a whole, Jesus is telling His disciples why He has to return to Judaea. He reckons them as His friends.

At first, the disciples did not understand Jesus. They thought that sleep followed an illness and was part of the process of recovery. Jesus made it plain that Lazarus was dead. In the Lord's words we see that death for a believer is only sleep. Sleeping is a temporary state; and so, by His words, our Lord revealed that death is itself only temporary. Sleep refreshes and rejuvenates; thus in the resurrection this mortal shall put on immortality and this corruptible shall put on incorruption. From sleep, we awake; and the promise is secure in the Master's words that all in the tombs "shall come forth" (John 5:29). Sleep is also a time of rest; and the dead also "shall rest from their labours" (Revelation 14:13). The respect of mankind for this word of Jesus Christ is revealed on the tombstones of thousands in the words, "Asleep in Jesus".

So, recapping, the purpose for Jesus going to Judaea was to glorify God and Himself as the Son of God by raising Lazarus from the dead. Another purpose was the establishment of faith in His disciples because the proof of His Sonship lay in the fact that He could raise the dead.

The disciple, Thomas, shows that he has not understood the little parable of Jesus. If he had, then He would have known that the Lord would come to no harm in returning to Judaea because He was acting in the will of God. Lazarus would be raised! Therefore, in unbelief, he takes a fatalistic approach saying, "Let us go, that we may die with him" (verses 16).

Now when Jesus came, He found that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days already (verses 17). The matter of four days was significant to the Jewish leaders because they believed that the soul of the deceased person remained in the vicinity of the body for three days before decomposition set in. Four days of delay left rabbinical tradition void of any excuse that the person was not dead. From verses 18-19, we can see that Bethany was only about two miles from Jerusalem. This gave the opportunity for many Jews to visit Martha and Mary in order to comfort them following the death of their brother. The usual time of mourning was about a week; and the death of a member of a wealthy and distinguished family like that of Lazarus and his sisters accounts for the high number of mourners.

It was Martha who first heard that Jesus was coming. She went out to meet Him. Mary, who is later told by Martha that Jesus had come (verses 28), sat still in the house. Her personal grief for Lazarus must have been so

overwhelming that Martha did not want her to be disturbed. On the other hand, Martha seems to have risen above personal grief to assume the duties of hostess. But, more importantly, the trust she had in Jesus is proved by her opening words to Him: "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." This shows that she knew that Jesus could have healed Lazarus had He been there. It does not go so far as to recognise that He could have healed with a word from a distance. Nonetheless, she continued, "And even now I know that, whatsoever thou shalt ask of God, God will give thee." Clearly, Martha was confident that Jesus was so close to God that He only had to pray and God would raise her brother from the dead. It may well have been that the words of Christ passed on by the messenger still rang in her ears: "This sickness is not unto death." However, she doesn't seem to realise that Jesus had the power of life in Himself.

There was comfort in the reply of Jesus, "Thy brother shall rise again." Yes, the Pharisees themselves believed in the resurrection of the body. Job believed it also. In Job 19:26, he said, "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God..." Martha believed the same because she stated, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Martha's faith was genuine - she knew! She knew that ultimately there would be a resurrection. She knew that Lazarus would rise again. It is then that Jesus reveals Himself as the resurrection and the life. Listen to His wonderful words, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die. Believest thou this?"

On many occasions, Jesus uses the term "I am" in a very special way. The force of the words is seen in John 8:58 where He said to the critical Jews, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am." It would seem, initially, that He was claiming to be pre-existent to Abraham; but the Jews realised that He was claiming to be eternal - God Himself. Why? When we turn to Exodus 3:14, we find God revealing Himself to Moses: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." The self-existent God revealed Himself to Israel's leader as "I AM". So we see when Jesus uses the words, "I am" in certain contexts, He is indeed claiming to be God. It was no wonder that the religious Jews took up stones to cast at Him. They knew that a man who made such a claim was worthy of death.

We find the words "I am the resurrection and the life" absolutely marvellous! As the self-existent One, He had life in Himself. This is life in its fullest sense. It is the spiritual life that quickens a soul. It is that eternal life which is seen in both longevity and quality in the One who said to John, "Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (Revelation 1:17-18). Furthermore, as the resurrection, He is able to impart physical life to that which was dead. Both are found in His words, "...He that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never die." The first expresses resurrection. The believer in Christ who dies shall live. This is the physical side. Here the believer will receive a new body - one that is glorious, heavenly, incorruptible, powerful, spiritual and immortal (1 Corinthians 15). The second expresses that the living believer in Christ shall never die in the sense of suffering the second death (see Revelation 21). The latter is an eternal separation from God. At the present time all men owe their existence to Him. The goodness of God is poured out upon everyone. However, those who do not believe will find their final destiny is Hell - a place or condition of ruin for body and soul. They will be banished eternally from God and His blessings. Instead, they will suffer the kind of torment listed for the devil and his angels. What a solemn truth!

Jesus then progressed the faith of Martha with the question, "Believest thou this ...?" The same question is asked of each one of us individually. Do we believe the words of the Son of God? Those who do so shall not see death. The answer of Martha is delightful, "Yea, Lord, I have believed that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, even he that cometh into the world" (Young's Literal Translation). She acknowledges His Lordship - the One who must control her life. She recognises Him to be the Messiah - the Chosen One of God whom the Old Testament scriptures predicted. But, by revelation from the Father, she like Peter, recognises that He is the Son of God. She had believed this and she continued to believe it. What a magnificent confession! What is your declaration of faith like?

Verses 28-31 indicate that Martha was instructed by Jesus to fetch Mary for: "She went away, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Teacher is here and calleth thee." Mary's response was immediate and she hurried to Him outside of the village. Those who were her comforters followed. Finding Jesus, she fell down at His feet and said, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." These were identical words to those uttered by Martha, but they rose up from a heart bowed before Him in worship.

In verses 33-34 we read, "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping who came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, and said, Where have ye laid him? They say unto him, Lord, come and see." It was the distress that death brought that moved Christ to groan in the spirit. He was deeply moved by the sorrow around Him and fully identified with it. Some would point out that the word for groaned may mean "being moved with anger". If this were the case, then it would have to relate to the root cause of suffering, death and distress, namely, sin. However, the word is probably better expressed by the word "troubled". Literally, it is "He troubled Himself". If the first touched the emotions of His soul, then the self-generated concern for His own touched His spirit as He was affected by what sin had brought in. How He suffered in the bearing of griefs and carrying of sorrows in His lifetime!

Interestingly, Jesus asked, "Where have ye laid him?" As Son of God, He would have known this; but He invites them to take Him to the place. It is all part of the communion and work of faith. The reply was, "Lord, come and see ..." It was at this point that Jesus wept. He shed tears! Christian, has there been the loss of a loved one in your life. Don't be afraid to weep. We weep over many circumstances that touch our lives and we should not be embarrassed about doing so.

We, like those moving towards the tomb of Lazarus, can only speculate as to the reason for the weeping of Jesus. Like the Jews at the time, we might exclaim, "Behold how he loved him!" Others there expressed unbelief in the words, "Could not this man who opened the eyes of him that was blind, have caused that this man also should not die?" It may have been this attitude of unbelief that caused Jesus to groan within Himself a second time as He arrived at the tomb. Nonetheless, He ordered that the stone be removed. He again develops the faith of those present. Martha said, "Lord, by this time the body decayeth; for he hath been dead four days." We are so much like Martha. We hear marvellous truths concerning the Lord Jesus, but we don't really fully apprehend the wonder of His Person and power and its application.

Jesus had to remind her of the message sent back to the sisters as was recorded in verse 4: "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou believest, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" Martha was soon to learn that in every doubt or temptation, in sorrow, suffering, or in death itself, the redeemed can say in faith, "If I trust in Christ, I shall see the glory of God." The stone was removed and Jesus thanked His Father for hearing Him. He must have prayed already about this matter. Such was His dependence upon the will of the Father. Maybe He had prayed in the groanings that could not be uttered. His prayer was a witness to the bystanders that the Father had sent Him and was to promote faith in them.

Only then did Jesus shout those words, "Lazarus, come forth." This was a public command to one in death whose body had started to decompose. It reminds us that all in the graves shall hear His voice! Some will come forth to the resurrection of life. Others come forth to that of judgment. Furthermore, it was specifically Lazarus who was addressed by the Lord. That Lazarus alone responded. In a day to come, the Lord will come into the air and shout. The sleeping saints will be raised and those believers alive at the time will have their bodies changed in the twinkling of an eye and go to be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15).

His movement limited by the binding grave-clothes and his sight hindered by the napkin covering his face, Lazarus came out from the cave alive and well. Jesus ordered the bystanders to release him. How would you have felt if the job had fallen to you? Has the Lord asked you to do a work for Him of which you have been fearful? Lazarus did not rise "through the tomb" as Jesus did later, but came out of it through the entrance to the same life he had before. He was still cumbered with mortality and subject to all the conditions of earthly life.

Many of the Jews, who came to Mary and saw that which Jesus did, believed on Him. God had indeed been glorified and the Sonship of Christ confirmed. Others who were there went and reported the event to the Pharisees. Rather than believe their witness, the Pharisees drew together a council with the chief scribes and conspired to be rid of Jesus, believing that if such miracles continued all would believe, provoking the Romans to come and take their place and their nation. This they would do anyway in AD 70 under Titus. The high priest, Caiaphas, made a statement of political expediency; but there is little doubt that the Spirit of God was prophesying through him to state the truth that Jesus would be the one man to die for the people and, therefore, the nation. The chapter ends with these sad words, "Now both the chief priests and the Pharisees had given a commandment, that, if any man knew where he were, he should shew it, that they might take him."

*"What think you of Christ?" is the test
To try both your state and your scheme.
You cannot be right in the rest
Unless you think rightly of Him.*

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