

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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I am the Resurrection and the Life: Jesus confronts and dominates death provoking Enmity (John 11:37-57)

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are concluding a short series of talks based on the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel. As a general reminder, I will briefly outline the events of John 11, which were covered by the previous two broadcasts.

My colleague, Yannick Ford, spoke about Mary and Martha's plea to the Lord Jesus to visit their home in Bethany, to heal their brother Lazarus who was dangerously ill. When Jesus delayed His response to their request, Lazarus died before the Lord and His disciples arrived at Bethany. When Martha met Jesus with the news that Lazarus had died, the Lord Jesus comforted Martha with the announcement that "...[He was] *the resurrection and the life*" (John 11:25), an announcement that has thrilled and comforted His followers from that day to this.

Last week, Gordon Kell took us through the scene where Mary met the Lord and they walked together to the grave of Lazarus. Gordon left us at the point in the account where some in the company around the grave were criticising the Lord. As John 11:37 states: "*But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?'*"

We now take the story from this point to witness how the Lord Jesus dominated death by releasing the lifeless Lazarus from its clutches, before restoring him back to his sisters in Bethany. That we are considering these Scriptures at this time is particularly apt, for we are approaching Easter, the great Christian festival that marks the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

If we do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we are not Christians in the New Testament sense of the word, for whenever the Gospel was first preached the resurrection was a fundamental element of the Christian's confession. Peter's sermon, recorded for us in Acts 2:14-36, emphasises that the One who was crucified and killed by lawless men was raised up by God, when He "*loosed the pangs of death, for it was not possible for Him [Jesus] to be held by it*" (Acts 2:24). Acts 4:10 states something similar when the rulers and elders were enquiring into the healing of the lame man: "*...let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead - by him this man is standing before you well.*"

I ought to point out that Peter and John were, according to Acts 4:2, preaching the resurrection of Jesus when they were arrested. There are many other verses that I could quote that would further confirm the crucial importance of the resurrection in the lives of Christians, all through the ages. Suffice to say that all of the *Truth for Today* team hold steadfastly to the truth of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

I have stated this at length because I want to press upon us all this morning that this talk which, as I have said, is about how the Lord confronted and dominated death is not a lecture on biblical history, but a recounting of an event which resonates with all of us in today's world. As I write this, I have just been made aware of the death of a lady who had attended a country church for the best part of seventy years. I have preached there many times, so will miss her company when I go again. Was her faith and attendance there over those years in vain? I judge not for I believe that the Lord has confronted death for her, so that she has entered into life through His grace.

Now we must return to our passage in John 11:37, where the question was asked whether the One who could open the eyes of the blind could also have kept Lazarus alive. This is exactly what both Martha and Mary claimed He could have done, as John 11:21 and John 11:32 state, so we cannot dismiss the question as one posed in mockery, for they were voicing a live and pertinent issue as to why the power of God was not manifested to keep Lazarus alive.

Answers to prayer, or rather non-answers, are a perplexing issue for us, causing us to doubt God's presence in our lives. I have not the time to further examine the issues involved, only to point out that the answer to the question was delayed, on this occasion, for at least four days. All hope had been given up yet, as we shall see, the Lord was deeply concerned. All our prayers for relief from death, illness or some other difficult situation, might not be met as we would wish. We can, however, be assured that grace will be freely given to carry us through.

John 11:38 confirms that God is not untroubled by the human condition, for it tells us that the Lord was moved in His spirit, for the second time, by the tears of Mary and the others. By this time they had all arrived at the grave, which was a visible and stark reminder to the sisters of the absence of their brother. The complete acceptance that the situation was hopeless to the mind of Martha is illustrated by her protest, in John 11:39, when Jesus commanded the grave to be opened: "...Lord, by this time there will be an odour, for he has been dead four days."

The King James Version is even more graphic, for it translates "odour" as "he stinketh", which paints a mental picture of the finality and corruption of death. Leon Morris, in his comment on this verse, writes that "John is conveying to us the permanence of the state into which Lazarus had entered" (Morris, Leon: *The Gospel according to John*).

John 11:40 brings before us what was central to all the miracles that the Lord Jesus performed. Obviously, they had to do with the needs of man, whether to be healed or fed, and on each occasion the welfare of the people was to the forefront of the action. At the back of all the miracles though was the glory of God. The Lord deals with Martha's protest with such a promise. "Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?'"

We are not told when Martha was so instructed of the Lord. The words recorded in John 11:4, could have been reported to Martha, or she might have received them on another occasion. The important lesson for us is to receive His words and keep them in our hearts. I emphasise again the importance for us to see the inner significance of this miracle. When the Lord said that faith was necessary to see the glory of God, He is speaking to us as well as to Martha. On that occasion, at the grave at Bethany, the whole crowd would view the miracle, but only the few with faith would grasp its real significance and see the glory of God.

We have now reached the stage in this miracle story where the Lord shows His power over death, when He brings Lazarus out of the tomb. I read again from the English Standard Version John 11:41-42: "So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 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.'"

Even if those who moved the stone from the mouth of the cave remain unknown to us, I think we can be sure that they never forgot the experience of being so close to such an event. It would remain with them forever. What a pity if that is all they saw, and did not take notice of Jesus' words and believed that God had sent Jesus. Do we believe that truth, as we listen to these words, this morning?

The secret of the miracle is to believe that Jesus of Galilee is God's sent One. I cannot stress this too much. It is so critical to the whole of the Christian Gospel for us to believe that He is the Son, sent by the Father, "to be the Saviour of the world" (see 1 John 4:14). We can reject this truth, at our peril, by saying that educated folk in the 21st century cannot be expected to believe such primitive thoughts. If you stand alongside some of those present that day, and see only the miracle and not the glory of the One who performed it, you are missing the divine presence on the earth. John 3:16 tells us that "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son". Do we stand by that statement, accepting it with all our heart?

In a sense we are getting ahead of ourselves, for we have not yet considered the verses which describe the actual raising of Lazarus. Before we do so, can I say to anybody who has just joined us that you are listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today*, where we are considering the occasion in John 11 when Lazarus was raised from the dead. I am about to read John 11:43-44: "When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out.' 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.'"

It hardly needs to be said that the loud voice was not for the benefit of Lazarus, rather was it so that all the bystanders were aware of who was in command and exercised the power of God. It is difficult for me to move on from this wonderful verse, where the Prince of Life dominated the force of death by simply commanding the lifeless person to come out of the grave. It fills me with wonder at such a display of power. Surely this is the Son of God! So awestruck were the witnesses that the Lord had to instruct them to loose Lazarus from the strips of linen that belonged to the grave, so that he could take up his former life.

Bishop Westcott points out that this miracle was a decisive test of faith and unbelief in those who saw the miracle that day. It fostered division, as we can see, when we read John 11:45-46. There we learn that some believed in Him, yet others turned away to go and inform the Pharisees. We must accept that this is the same in our day. Some of us, through the grace of God, believe in Him. Others are indifferent and even hostile. Notice that John 11:45 stated that many believed in Him. This, I would judge, means that they believed the Lord Jesus was the 'sent One'. There is something unique about the Lord Jesus which has been revealed to us in Scripture, and in order to be believers in Him, in the New Testament sense, we must accept that He is God incarnate. As another has written: "The victorious

faith of the Christian is trust in God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ His Son. It means committing ourselves to the love of God as it is expressed in all that Jesus Christ was and all that He did." (CH Dodd, 1884-1973)

I would add a further comment regarding John 11:44, which I first heard from the platform at the Keswick Convention many years ago. The speaker used the command of the Lord when He said "*Unbind him, and let him go*", as a picture of a Christian today, seeking to live a sanctified life. In the thought of the Keswick speaker it was a command for us, when we become Christians, to leave our old ways and habits to walk in newness of life, led by the Spirit of God. Some listening this morning might not appreciate the use of Scripture in this way, but the truth that the speaker sought to illustrate remains important for us to practise in our world.

For the remaining minutes of our time together, I must focus on how this miracle reacted on those who did not believe in Him. Instead of faith and respect, it generated enmity, as John 11:47-48 record: "*So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the Council and said, 'What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 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.'*"

From this, and other Scriptures, it would appear that the chief priests, who were of the Sadducee Party, took the lead in opposing the Lord Jesus. From this point on, the Pharisees are hardly mentioned, for from then until the crucifixion events were being steered by the chief priests. A crisis was upon them, for far from persuading them of His claims this resurrection miracle had provoked enmity.

Leon Morris suggests that this meeting of the Council, or Sanhedrin, was the real trial of Jesus of Nazareth. Whether true or not, it is certain that a definite course of action was arrived at, which is best summarised by the proclamation of Caiaphas, when he stated that it was better for one man to die for the nation than that the nation should perish (John 11:50). We also learn from the following verse of a deeper meaning to this statement, for John claims it was through his (Caiaphas) office of High Priest that God spoke prophetically. The death of Jesus then was a substitutionary death. It would also be the cause of gathering together into one all the scattered children of God (John 11:52). Unknowingly, the chief priests were enacting the purposes of God, though their prime and selfish objective, in plotting the death of Jesus, was to protect their own privileged position.

We must pause here to consider the guilty attitude of the ring-leaders of this plot. John 11:47 said that they had recognised the implication of His many miracles. Instead of faith, it generated so much enmity that they sought to take His life. All through the ages, including our world today, it has been the case that those with closed minds against the Person and work of Christ will never accept His authority. The attitude of the chief priests indicates that, even when they acknowledged His works, the over-riding criterion was how it would affect them and their religious and social standing. I trust that all of us will be open to the challenge and instruction of the word of God.

As our allotted time has almost gone, we must hurry on to the closing verses of our passage. We have seen how some rejoiced and how some were filled with enmity. What was the reaction of the Lord in the face of this enmity? John 11:54 tells us: "*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.*"

From this we can understand that Bethany was a place that was too dangerous for Jesus to stay openly, though John 12 opens with a visit to Bethany to have a meal with Mary, Martha and Lazarus. At least twice in eleven verses the miracle of the raising of Lazarus, and its repercussions, is referred to. Now, Lazarus himself is an object of persecution.

Now, let us consider two points before I conclude. The first, from John 11:54, is how the Lord kept His disciples together. Unity of His followers was a quality that was fostered by the Lord. I believe that the unity of the people of God should be practically exhibited whenever we find occasion to display it. When I first attended the Keswick Convention I was struck with the lack of denominational labels.

The second point regards the persecution suffered by some Christians today. According to John 12:10, Lazarus was the object of death threats. Let us never forget our fellow believers who live in lands and societies that are intolerant of their Christian faith. Do we support them with our prayers and resources? Many of them face real danger every day simply because they believe in the Lord Jesus.

This morning we have considered the way that the Lord confronted and dominated, death when He went to the grave of Lazarus, along with the effects of the resurrection miracle on the bystanders. Our consideration of the Scriptures this morning will be of little use if it does not affect our attitude and our walk as Christians. Do we believe that the Lord Jesus dominated and defeated death by rising from among the dead? I finish with two lines of a hymn which reinforces just that:

*“Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
Endless is the victory Thou o’er death hast won.”*

Edmond Louis Budry (1854-1932)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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