

# Lazarus, Come Forth!

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Most of you are familiar with the account in John 11 of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus to life. It was an inspiring demonstration of Jesus' power over life and death, proving that He worked His miracles by the power and authority of God. But if we focus only on the physical circumstances of Lazarus' resurrection itself—seeing it as an isolated miracle—without also understanding what it pictures and without considering the events that led up to it, we are missing some important lessons. Lazarus comes from the Hebrew name Eleazar and means "whom God helps." As we will see, Lazarus is typical of those whom God helps, the elect whom He loves. In this article, I want to cover twelve lessons we can learn from the account of Lazarus from the time of his illness to the time after his resurrection.

## **1. The Spiritual Death of the Elect Sinner Is Not Permanent**

In the first three verses of John 11, we learn that Lazarus lived in Bethany, that his sisters are Mary and Martha, and that they sent Jesus a message saying, "Lord, behold, he for whom you have great affection is sick." Verse 4 then says, "But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This sickness is not to death, but for the glory of God, that God's Son may be glorified by it.'" Verse 5 says, "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus."

Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus knew Lazarus was going to die. Yet, He said that the sickness was not to death. Jesus did not make a mistake. What He meant was that, although Lazarus was to die biologically, the grave would not hold him permanently. Although a real person, Lazarus of Bethany pictured God's elect. Before they are regenerated and have exercised the gift of faith in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior, God's elect are spiritually dead in transgressions and sins. But their death is not forever. When they are born again, they receive true, spiritual life. Our deadness in sin, and God's resurrecting us from that, is, as Jesus said of Lazarus, "for the glory of God, that God's Son may be glorified by it." In Ephesians 2:1, 4-6, we read, "You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins.... God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with

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him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...."

## **2. God Has the Big Picture in Mind**

After we learn that Jesus loved Lazarus, John 11:6 tells us, "When therefore he heard that he was sick, he stayed two days in the place where he was." This sentence almost seems to contradict verse 5. Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters, and, *therefore*, delayed going to him two days. How can this be? Jesus did this because He wanted to give Lazarus and his sisters a greater gift by waiting for Lazarus to die and then resurrecting him. We might apply this lesson to our own lives. God may have a purpose in bringing us to suffer a great trial, but it is never separated from His love for us. So often, we see only the immediate, physical circumstances and forget that God has a bigger picture in mind. We may wonder why we have a trial. We may even doubt God's loving care for us. But verses 5 and 6 are very telling of the way God sometimes operates. He will see His beloved saints through their trials for a greater glory. God wants us to endure the trial and trust in Him to fulfill His purpose.

## **3. When We Walk in Jesus' Light, We Must Not Fear**

Verse 7 tells us that after the two days were up, "he said to the disciples, 'Let's go into Judea again.'" But His disciples were surprised that He would do this because the Jews had just been trying to kill Him (verse 8). Verses 9 and 10 say, "Jesus answered, 'Aren't there twelve hours of daylight? If a man walks in the day, he doesn't stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if a man walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light isn't in him.'" Jesus' answer stems from what He said in John 8:12: "Again, therefore, Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.'" They would not stumble because Jesus is the light of the world. When we are walking in the light with Jesus, we must not fear what man can do to us (Hebrews 13:6). We must be careful not to be like Thomas who, although expressing a carnal loyalty to Jesus, showed a lack of faith when he said, "Let's go also, that we may die with him [with Jesus]" (John 11:16). As Jesus' disciples followed Him (the Light) into Bethany that day, we can walk in the light of Jesus and bravely face our trials without fear.

#### **4. We Must Not Underestimate God**

Verse 17 tells us that Lazarus had been in the tomb four days, which, because the Jews buried on the day of death, also means he had been dead four days. As Martha later says in verse 39, "by this time there is a stench." There was no doubt that Lazarus was truly dead. But Jesus' delay in coming was a problem for the sisters.

Verse 20 tells us that Martha heard that Jesus was coming and went to meet Him, but Mary did not hear and stayed seated in the house. The following verses show that Martha did not fully appreciate who Jesus was and what He could do: "Therefore Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you would have been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that, whatever you ask of God, God will give you'" (John 11:21-22). Like many today, Martha attributed human frailty and fallibility to Jesus, thinking that He missed the opportunity to heal her brother. She did not understand that Jesus did not have to be there to heal Lazarus. He could have done it at a distance. And even when she seemed to be expressing faith, the word she used for "ask" shows she still didn't understand that Jesus is God. The word is *aiteō*, and it refers to an inferior begging something from a superior. It is not a word otherwise used of Jesus. It is the word Jesus frequently used of our asking things of God, but not of His asking. John 16:26 shows us the distinction: "In that day you shall ask [*aiteō*] in my name; and I say not to you that I will ask [*erōtaō*—the request of one equal to another] the father concerning you" (*Apostolic Bible Polyglot*).

Like Martha, we can all fall into the trap of being anxious over our circumstances and impatient with God. But this is not what He wants for us. He wants us to rest in Him and trust that He will work all things for our good how and when He sees fit.

#### **5. Jesus Is the Resurrection and the Life**

In John 11:23-24, we read, "Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'" It is true that there is to be a resurrection at the last day, but Martha has again made a mistake. It is an error that many people make today. Like Martha, they do not understand that there is a resurrection before the last day. Jesus corrected Martha: "Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will still live, even if he dies. Whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'" (verses 25-26).

What Jesus was telling Martha was vital. He says this to set Martha straight. Because of Adam's sin, all humans are subject to temporal, biological death (1 Corinthians 15:22a). But those who are in Christ, even though their flesh may die, forever live in Christ. Why? Because Jesus Christ *is* the resurrection and the life. Born again, believing Christians—because they are united with Christ who is the resurrection and the life—are already spiritually resurrected and right now have eternal life. Jesus told Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). And John the Baptist said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; and he who does not believe the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36, *English Majority Text Version*).

When Paul says that "our old man was crucified with Christ" and "that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (see Romans 6:3-7), he was not speaking nice-sounding, empty words just to make us feel good. Although our bodies are still subject to biological death, we have already died and been resurrected to eternal life. What remains is for God to also resurrect our bodies at the return of Jesus Christ.

This exchange between Jesus and Martha is recorded so that we may understand what is going to be illustrated in Lazarus' resurrection. That resurrection is primarily a picture, not of the resurrection at the end of the age, but of the first resurrection each Christian experiences when he or she is born again and is given saving faith.

## **6. We Give the Outward Call, God Gives the Inner Call**

Next, hearing what Jesus has said, Martha makes her confession: She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Christ, God's Son, he who comes into the world" (John 11:27). This is essentially the same as Peter's confession (Matthew 16:16).

Now, having made her confession, Martha, immediately goes and calls "Mary, her sister, secretly, saying, 'The Teacher is here, and is calling you'" (verse 28). This is a picture of personal evangelism, the outward call. The "Gospel" here is the message that the Teacher was calling her. I believe that "secretly" or "privately" is specifically mentioned here because Martha was a woman. This was private evangelism to her sister. This is something we all can do. Once we are converted, we

can call others to Jesus. But it is God who makes the inner call that gives life. We will see that pictured by Jesus' calling Lazarus.

### **7. "We don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews 4:15)**

As soon as Mary heard Martha's outward call, she arose quickly and went to Jesus (verse 29). Mary, who had not yet received the instructions Martha had, made the same mistake her sister had: "Lord, if you would have been here, my brother wouldn't have died" (verse 32). Hearing Mary and the Jews weeping, which was an outward display of the fact that they did not understand that Lazarus was not dead as Jesus counts death but was only sleeping, Jesus "groaned in the spirit, and was troubled." Jesus' distress over their ignorance continues for the next several verses. We read that when He was shown the tomb, "Jesus wept" (verse 35). Although God, Jesus was also human. His humanity gives him the ability to have and understand our emotions (Hebrews 4:15; 5:7-8).

Jesus was in the midst of great ignorance. And He realized that many of the Jews who were weeping would not come to believe even when they saw the miracle He was about to perform. This is apparently what caused Him to weep. Then, when He heard the wagging tongues criticizing Him for healing others but not coming to heal His friend, He again groaned in Himself (verse 37-38).

When He told them to take away the stone from the tomb, Martha still displayed a lack of faith, which Jesus corrected (verses 39-40). Then, for the sake of instilling belief in the multitude, Jesus openly prayed (verses 41-42). The people of the multitude are not the same as the people called the Jews in other verses. By "the Jews," the New Testament often means just the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and other devoutly religious, but often hypocritical, Jews. But the multitude were the common people or crowd (*ochlos*) who were attracted to Jesus.

### **8. God's Grace Towards a Sinner Is a Great and Irresistible Miracle**

"When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' He who was dead came out, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Free him, and let him go'" (John 11:43-44). Lazarus could neither cause Jesus to call him nor resist that call when Jesus gave it.

God's calling is a command. In the Greek, it is literally, "Lazarus! Here! Out!" And His calling gave Lazarus life. When God gives us the inward call, giving us new life and resurrecting us through the Holy Spirit, it is a command we cannot resist. And notice that it is personal. The outward call of the Gospel can be preached to the multitude. But the inward call is always addressed to the individual.

### **9. We Are Unable to Bring About Our Own Regeneration**

Like the sinner dead in sin, Lazarus had nothing to do with his salvation. He was powerless, he had no ability, he made no choice, he did not make a decision for Christ. This agrees completely with what Jesus says in John 15:16a: "You didn't choose me, but I chose you." In keeping with Titus 3:5, Lazarus did not do a good work: "Not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." Christ came to him and called him when Christ saw fit to do so.

### **10. When We Are Born Again, We Are Born Free**

Look again at John 11:44: "He who was dead came out, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Free him, and let him go.'" Like the Israelites coming out of bondage in Egypt, our regeneration sets us free from bondage to the law, sin, and death. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1, *English Standard Version*). Notice that while Jesus gave life to Lazarus, He told others to take off the burial wrappings. It is our job as Christ's servants to tell Christians of their freedom in Christ. Too many Christians, bound up in legalism and works-based Christianity, are still stumbling around like mummies! "For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14); "But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter" (Romans 7:6); and, "Yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law, because no flesh will be justified by the works of the law" (Galatians 2:16).

## **11. God Makes the Regenerated Believer Sit with Christ in the Heavenly Places**

John 12:2 shows Lazarus seated with Christ. Ephesians 2:1-6 says, "You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the children of disobedience; among whom we also all once lived in the lust of our flesh, doing the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

## **12. "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20)**

John 12:10 says, "But the chief priests conspired to put Lazarus to death also." There are many Scriptures in which Jesus warned His followers that they would be persecuted and even put to death: "They will put you out of the synagogues. Yes, the time comes that whoever kills you will think that he offers service to God" (John 16:2); "Then they will deliver you up to oppression, and will kill you. You will be hated by all of the nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9); "You will be handed over even by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will cause some of you to be put to death" (Luke 21:16).

Jesus' miracles and teaching attracted a lot of attention and created so much envy in the Jewish religious leaders that they wanted Him crucified (Mark 15:10). This murderous rage extended to Lazarus because of the astonishing miracle Jesus worked on him. After Jesus' resurrection, Stephen was bold enough to criticize the religious leaders and "they gnashed at him with their teeth...cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and rushed at him with one accord...threw him out of the city, and stoned him" (Acts 7:54-58).

Of course, many faithful Christians have been abused since. Why? Because their lives were outrageously noticeable as biblical. They were known to trust in Christ alone. They boldly spoke the Good News. And they proclaimed release from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2) to the captives (Luke 4:18, notice the results in verses 28-29). What will happen if we do this today? At least one result will be that the religious

leaders, who have a vested interest in keeping the people bound and blind to one extent or another, will slander and persecute us: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

In 2 Timothy 4:3, Paul writes, "For the time will come when they will not listen to the sound doctrine." That time *has* come. Let us be able to say with Paul, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith. From now on, there is stored up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day; and not to me only, but also to all those who have loved his appearing.... And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me for his heavenly Kingdom; to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4: 7-8, 18).

The next time you read through the account of Lazarus of Bethany, remember these lessons, including the fact that in his death and resurrection and persecution, we can see our own lives as Christians.