

“The Resurrection and the Life”

John 11:17-44

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Text Comment

- v.17 That is, there was no question that he was dead!
- v.19 The suggestion is that a number of these friends had come from Jerusalem to comfort Mary and Martha. That may indicate that the family was at least somewhat prominent. That suggestion is supported by the value of the perfume that Mary will later lavish on the Lord's feet in 12:3.
- v.20 This picture of Martha accords perfectly with the picture of her, in contrast to Mary, given in Luke 10:38-42.
- v.22 Does Martha think now that the Lord will raise her brother from the dead? Her statement later in v. 39 does not support that.
- v.24 The Lord is deliberately ambiguous about Lazarus rising again and Martha does not seem to imagine that he is talking about raising him immediately.
- v.26 The fifth of the “I am” sayings in John. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection at the end of the age – though the Sadducees, the liberals of their day, denied it – but here Jesus says plainly that there is no resurrection to life apart from faith in him. But he goes further and says, as he has already said in several ways in the Gospel to this point, that those who believe in him have eternal life *already, they have crossed over from death to life.*
- v.27 Martha does not yet know that her brother will soon be alive again, but she knows very clearly who the man standing before her really is.
- v.30 The Lord is attempting to secure at least some privacy for his conversation with the two women, which could not be found in a house full of mourners.
- v.33 There is a question whether we should read “deeply moved in spirit” or “outraged or indignant in spirit.” The word itself probably suggests the latter more than the former. In that case the Lord would be angry at what he took to be the demonstration of unbelief by the mourners.
- v.35 The grief is for the same thing as the anger. In the Lord there is the perfect blend of both: the anger that keeps the grief from being merely sentimental and the grief that keeps the anger from being hard and callous. [Carson, 416]

The poet puts it this way.

So o'er the bed where Lazarus slept,
 He to his Father groan'd and wept:
 What saw He mournful in that grave,
 Knowing Himself so strong to save?

The deaf may hear the Savior's voice,
 The fetter'd tongue its chain may break,
 But the deaf heart, the dumb by choice,
 The laggard soul that will not wake,
 The guilt that scorns to be forgiven –
 These baffle e'en the spells of Heaven:
 In thought of these, His brow benign,
 Not even in healing cloudless shine.”

- v.38 Their lack of faith and understanding provokes his indignation once again. By the fourth century, Christians had built a church over the site of what was believed to be the very cave. It was called “Lazareion” after Lazarus, which is the origin of Bethany’s present Arabic name, “El-Azariyeh.”
- v.39 We are definitely talking about a dead man!
- v.40 Is that something he told her before but John did not record until now? Or, is he simply talking generally about what he has always taught faith in him will lead to?
- v.41 We have already been told on several occasions in the narrative so far that the raising of Lazarus was the divine intention. That Jesus came to Bethany precisely for that purpose is not in doubt.
- v.42 Jesus is ever determined to demonstrate that he is in the world at the behest of his Father and has come to do his Father’s will.
- v.43 “It is not John’s point, but it has often been remarked that the authority of Jesus is so great that, had he not specified Lazarus [by name], *all* the tombs would have given up their dead to resurrection life.” [Carson 418]
- v.44 This description is true to first century burial customs. Lazarus could shuffle, but he could hardly stride. Hence the Lord’s command to release him. The Lord’s resurrection, of course, was very different. He rose with a spiritual body, as Paul says, and left his graveclothes behind. Lazarus’ resurrection was just an anticipation of the greater resurrection of the Lord Christ and of all who trust in him at the last day. It was, in the language of John’s Gospel, a “sign.”

What an breathtakingly marvelous moment that was when Lazarus came out of the tomb four days after he had died! Whatever those present at the tomb must have thought, and however they

thought about it afterwards, we can't help but wonder what that entire experience, from death to resurrection, had been for Lazarus himself.

Here is Alexander Whyte [*Bible Characters*, ii, 57]:

“And thus it was that scarcely had Lazarus sat down in his Father's house: he had not got his harp of gold well into his hand: he had not got the Hallelujah that they were preparing [for] the Ascension of their Lord well into his mouth, when the angel Gabriel came up to him: ‘Hail! Lazarus: highly honoured among the glorified from among men. Thy Master calls up for you. He has some service for you still to do for Him on the earth.’ And the sound of many waters fell silent for a season as they saw one of the most shining of their number rise up, and lay aside his glory, and hang his harp on the wall, and pass out of their sight, and descended to where their heavenly Prince still tarried with his work unfinished. And Lazarus's soul descended straightway into that grave, where for four days his former body had lain dead, and towards which our Lord was now on His way. And the first words Lazarus heard were these, and the voice that spoke was the voice of his former Friend – ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me... Lazarus, come out!’”

But, Lazarus' own experience is more interesting speculation than important. For the text says nothing about that. Our Lord tells us explicitly what is truly important about this miracle. It is, he says, the demonstration of his power over death and of the eternal life that they obtain who believe in him. If we were to apply terminology we have been using in our studies in the OT history on the Lord's Day evening, we would say that vv. 25-26 are the “evaluative viewpoint” of this narrative, the statement that tells us what it all means, what its lesson is, what this piece of history is designed to teach us. It is all about escaping the power of death, not for Lazarus particularly, but for everyone, in all ages, who trusts in Jesus Christ. Lazarus, of course, died again at some future time. His sisters, if they survived him, mourned his loss a second time, though, no doubt, with a different spirit.

But, his death and burial notwithstanding, he never died! Not in the sense the Savior is speaking of in v. 26. He obtained, by faith in Jesus, eternal life, a condition of existence that is not and cannot be troubled by physical death. The rest of the Bible, of course, tells us more of how believers in Christ live, even though they die: how their souls go to heaven and into perfect righteousness and endless joy at the very moment of death, and how their bodies rest in the grave until the second coming of Christ, the day of resurrection, when their perfect souls will be united to their eternal bodies and they will begin the happy life of the Everafter.

It is a point – this promise of life in death and life after death – that is made with a special power in the magnificent illustration of it in the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

I. First, there is the full, honest, and so human recognition of the reality of death and dying.

You have it all here. The very experience that we have ourselves perhaps had in life already a number of times and certainly which we have observed in the living and dying of others.

You have the grief, the terrible sense of irretrievable loss, of desolation. You hear it in the voices of Martha and Mary and especially in their weeping. The Lord Jesus saw Mary weeping, we read in v. 33, and, no doubt, she and her sister had been weeping for four long days. They loved their brother and he was gone and would not come back. That is what death means for those who are left behind. You remember those lines from Wordsworth?

But she is in her grave,
And, oh, the difference to me!

And then you had all the rest of the so typical scene. The house was full of friends. No doubt many of them well-meaning friends. They had come from Jerusalem and, no doubt, many from Bethany. As women will always do, they brought food with them so that the sisters wouldn't have to provide for the large number of relatives and friends who descended on the home for the funeral and a few days thereafter. You can see the tables in that home laden with food. People would be standing around and sitting, inside and out, reminiscing about Lazarus' life. These were devout people so there was prayer and, no doubt, the singing of psalms from time to time. Perhaps the latter verses of Psalm 73:

Yet I am always with you;
You hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
And afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart
And my portion forever.

And then, as now, there is the cemetery. And, I suspect, more than once in those four days, the sisters and their friends had returned to the tomb to be closer to their brother for a while and to pay respects once more and to pray. I have returned to my father's grave and my sister's grave and many of you have done the same. And, then there are the accoutrements of death. Each culture has its own. We have our customs that make death a common experience for us all. Funeral homes serve our needs in customary ways. In those days they had professional mourners and perhaps there were those among the Jews mentioned in v. 33. It was a way of helping to empty a grieving heart of its grief, to prepare it for life going on.

My friends, I had the privilege just this past Friday, two afternoons past, to sit at the bedside of a dying woman and speak to her. Most of you have witnessed this scene. A hospital bed now sits in the living room and it is as if the entire house has been given over to the business of dying. And as I spoke to this woman who is now two years into her battle with cancer and, as she and everyone understands, much nearer the end of that battle than its beginning, she wavered between tears at the thought of the end of her life and her separation from her loved ones, and a measure of confidence in the Lord and her salvation. We spoke together about why death remains so fearful for us, why life is so precious to us, and how and why the Lord Jesus has

conquered death for us in the way in which he has and what that means. And in my prayer for her I mentioned to the Lord that this woman was now lying where innumerable multitudes of his saints had lain before. That she was passing through waters that every Christian must pass through until the Lord comes again. There is comfort, is there not, in the thought, as Horace has it in one of his *Odes*,

Pale death with impartial foot,
Knocks at the doors of poor men's lodgings
And of kings' castles.

No, what we have here in John 11 is the ordinary, universal experience of dying and death. Real death. Death as we know it and as we ourselves must face it. There is no sugar-coating here, no sentimentality whatsoever. Just the facts as they are. And that is what makes so powerful and so surpassingly wonderful that we have here

II. In the second place, the promise that this death, this real death is the death that, because of Christ and faith in him, is no death at all; the promise that in Christ we can live right through this death and never die, not really, not so that death overcomes us.

Death is terrible precisely because it takes life away from us, the only life we have ever had – the life we have lived in this world. It separates us from those we know and love and from the only mode of existence that we have experienced. It appears, therefore, to be for us and for anyone *the end* of life.

And it was precisely to demonstrate *the error of that way of thinking about death* that Lazarus' rising was designed by the Lord. No, death is not the end. It is the end of a period of existence, of a chapter of life, but it is not the end of life. Do you want proof. Well, see a dead man living again. It is only a demonstration. Lazarus did not afterward live the life that those will live at the moment they die in Christ. He did not come back to his sisters and his village as a perfect man with a resurrection body that was eternal and could never die, or even get sick. But, his rising proved the Lord's power over the powers of death and over Death's power to put an end of human existence. A Redeemer who can raise the dead, surely knows of what he speaks when he tells us, as he is about to leave the world, "I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be also."

It is in this sense that Christians never die. Death has been transformed for them into a passage, a tunnel, through which they travel to the world of everlasting light and love: their souls immediately, and their bodies in due time. Because of the eternal life that Jesus Christ has given to them, even their bodies, the Bible says, can be said only to sleep, for they will wake again and then live such a life as will make this life here seem but a shadow, a pale shadow of the real thing.

How quickly, how utterly will be forgotten the experience of death on the great day of resurrections when believers in Jesus Christ feel perfect, eternal life coursing through their transformed bodies. Imagine yourself there. You can perhaps imagine what it must have been

like for Lazarus to come out of that tomb, healthy and strong after just passing through the experience of illness and death. But, can you imagine the resurrection? Listen to a great preacher paint the scene.

“The dead are rising! ...Magnificent mausoleums are bursting in which lie inurned the ashes of sceptered monarchs; moss-covered sepulchers are cleaving, beneath which molder the remains of priests and high-priests, nobles and princes, legislators and warriors, philosophers, orators, and poets; while the grass-grown mounds under which the slave and the peasant repose in death are not disobedient to the heavenly call.

From dim cathedral aisles, from every crowded churchyard, from forest burying grounds, from profoundest ocean depths, the long-forgotten dead are starting into new, immortal beings amidst the thrilling realities of the judgment day. The solitary traveler rises from the lonely grave which he found far distant from home; while from the narrow beds in which they slept side by side in the populous cemetery whole families rise together...the mother once more clasps in her arms the babe that had slumbered with her in the same grave, and mingled its dust with hers. [John Girardeau in Kelly, *Preachers with Power*, 162]

Ah, but take care, my friends. How clearly our Savior said it. This happiest conceivable prospect is for those who believe in him, those who live in Christ, which is the same thing. It is Christ who gives life. We have heard that said a number of times already in this Gospel and here it is said again in the most solemn tones possible and backed up by the most magnificent demonstration of its truth. No one has ever come back from the dead except those Jesus Christ brought back and, then, Jesus Christ himself, the first fruits of those that sleep. No mere human being has ever brought himself or herself back from death. No, only Christ can do that. And he says that he will bring through death to everlasting life those **and only those** who trust in him. You must trust in him and live in him if you would live – not merely exist; everyone will exist after death – but if you will truly LIVE after death.

So, what will it be for you when the time comes. Are you thinking about that now? Don't wait until you are too weak, too sick, too much in pain, too distracted to think seriously about life, death, and salvation. No, the wise men of the ages always urged upon everyone the consideration of death and of their own dying, for nothing is more certain than that you will die, just as Lazarus did. And what then?

“Fore-fancy your death.” Samuel Rutherford

“Let death be premeditated.” Nicholas Ridley the martyr.

“Die speculatively.” Thomas Goodwin

“If a man would live well, let him fetch his last day to him, and make it always his company keeper.” Interpreter to Christiana in *Pilgrim's Progress* Part II.

“I sometimes do it myself. I go into the Dean Cemetery and think I see the gravestone of Alexander Whyte...when his days are over for preaching Christ.”

And when you do that, what do you see, besides the hospital bed now taking up the center of your living room with your loved ones gathered around it? Do you see a man, a woman with a smile on his or her face, because of the confidence that in Christ death must be – Lazarus proved it – “one short dark passage to eternal light?” Do you see someone who cannot wait to take that first step of the two steps that lead to the fullness of life in heaven in the very presence of the glory of God? Well, if you are a Christian, that is what it is your right and your privilege to see and what will be your right and your privilege to experience when your time comes.

Imagine Lazarus on his second death bed. What do you suppose he thought then? I’m sorry to leave my dear sisters; I am. I love them so. But I hope they will understand that my excitement at the prospect of taking this unbelievably glorious trip for the second time in no way diminishes my love for them! But, if *they* had been where *I* once was, they would understand why I’m in a hurry to get going!