

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John (SB_JN11_The Raising of Lazarus)

Introduction

Sometime after Jesus' withdrawal across the Jordan that was mentioned in the closing verses of the previous chapter (Jn 10:40), the events of chapter 11 transpired. We know from chapter 10 that it would have been winter and based upon the chronology of the remainder of the Gospel, we know that it was the winter prior to Jesus' crucifixion in the Spring. The events of chapter 11 mark the high point of the dramatic nature of the miracles performed by Jesus. The division between those who believed and those who did not believe only crystallized from this point forward. By the end of the chapter, the Sanhedrin convenes with the sole purpose of eliminating Jesus and His influence (11:46-53).

The raising of Lazarus demonstrated the truth of Jesus' earlier statements to be Lord and the source of life itself.

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. (Jn 5:21)

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. (Jn 5:25)

Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth. (Jn 5:28-29a)

The raising of Lazarus symbolized the power over death possessed by Jesus as the Son of God. It portrayed the resurrection to a certain degree. The difference was that Lazarus was **resuscitated** in the same body that would be subject to physical death. The **resurrection** body is not subject to physical death – it is imperishable (1 Co 6:14; 15:51-53; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Jn 3:2-3).

Lazarus is Sick (vv. 1-7)

We probably have more information concerning this group of friends of Jesus than any other group in the Bible. Jesus often stayed at the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. In Luke 10:38-42, we see Jesus being welcomed into the home of Mary and Martha. The character development in these few verses reveal Martha as the busy hostess while Mary is intent upon listening to Jesus' teaching. Jesus mildly rebukes Martha for complaining about Mary's failure to assist with the expected duties of a co-hostess. Jesus redirects Martha's focus upon those things that endure instead of the exigencies of life. However, in chapter 11, it is this same energetic Martha who demonstrates her faith in her conversation with Jesus prior to His rolling back the stone and resuscitating Lazarus. We see a faith expressed by Martha that is parallel to that of the centurion.

Martha then said to Jesus, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.' (v. 22)

Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' (v. 24)

She said to Him, 'Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.' (v. 27)

A note about the identity of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus – there are several women named Mary during the life of Jesus who are mentioned in the Gospels. Many times the Mary of this chapter is confused with the Mary who is the subject of Luke 7:36-50 who is most likely the Mary Magdalene mentioned in Matthew 28:1-9 to be one of the first to witness the resurrected Jesus. The Mary of Luke 7:36-50 appears at a dinner for Jesus hosted by the Pharisee, Simon. She is a known “sinner,” presumably a prostitute or involved in other acts of immorality. You may recall that at this dinner, she cleaned Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair. Jesus rebuked the self-righteousness of Simon who had distanced himself from this Mary, a known sinner. Simon had even distanced himself from Jesus for associating with a known sinner. This scene occurred early in Jesus’ public ministry in Galilee.

In contrast, the events mentioned in John 11:2 occurred at the end of the Lord’s public ministry in Bethany in the house of yet another Simon, the leper (Mk 14:3). Lazarus was also at this feast (Jn 12:2). Since John wrote his gospel long after the Synoptic Gospels were written, the incident to which John refers in 11:2 had already been recorded in Matthew 26:7-13 and Mark 14:3-10 even though in the chronology of John’s narrative, it had not yet occurred (see John 12:1-3).

In verse 4, when Jesus stated “this sickness is not unto death” (v. 4), He did not mean that Lazarus would not die, but He was prophetically stating that it would be an occasion for a manifestation of the glory of God through Jesus’ resuscitation of Lazarus. This is the reason that Jesus waited for two more days before going to Lazarus’ sisters. Jesus knew that this would be an opportunity for the greatest manifestation of His power over death that He could provide prior to His own death and resurrection. Verse 4 expresses the theme of the entire of this narrative in chapter 11, i.e. the works Jesus performed were designed to glorify God and lead to belief (cf. v. 15).

And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, ***that you may believe.*** (Jn 11:15)

At the time, it was very strange to Mary, Martha and Jesus’ disciples that Jesus would have delayed His coming for two days (v. 6) so that by the time of His arrival, Lazarus had been dead for four days (v. 39). They may have felt as if Jesus had failed them in a similar manner to the Jews who stated “Could not this Man, Who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?” (v. 37).

Personal Note: It is very difficult for us whose paradigm is shaped by a society that is focused upon instant gratification to wait patiently for the Lord’s answer to a prayer. Yet, in most, if not all, situations, it is that period of delay that God has designed to shape and mold our faith into a greater instrument for His glory. As we demonstrate patience in a time of suffering financially, physically, emotionally, etc., we manifest a poise and confidence that should point to the source of our stability. Sometimes, the period between our first request and the answer to our prayer is a matter of minutes. Sometimes, it is a matter of days, weeks, months or even years. Sometimes, the answer to our prayer will not be seen in our lifetime. Nevertheless, God expects us to be faithful to Him – thus, the importance of knowing Him intimately through His Word. As we learn more about His essence and how He works through our study of His word, the greater our ability to trust in Him to be faithful. Our understanding of His purpose in our lives and in human history is not blurred by the fact that we suffer. We realize that suffering is inevitable – the question is whether the suffering will be a source of blessing through faith or whether suffering will be wasted time in our lives.

The Lord and His Disciples Travel to Bethany (vv. 7-16)

In this section of chapter 11, we see the disciples concern for Jesus’ safety considering all of the animosity against Him that had recently manifested itself in and around Jerusalem (e.g. 10:31). When Jesus had not responded immediately to the news of Lazarus’ illness, the disciples

may have concluded that Jesus thought it was too dangerous to go there. When Jesus indicated His desire to go there (v. 7), it must have been quite a surprise to the disciples. Jesus' reply to the disciples in verses 9-10 are metaphorical. The twelve hours of daylight represent one's lifespan designed by God for each believer. To walk in the day is to execute God's plan for one's life in trusting obedience. The "light of this world" in Jesus' metaphor refers to Jesus Himself. To the contrary, to walk in the night is to venture through life apart from the light – thus, it is a life not characterized by faith or trust. If we walk in trusting obedience to the Father's plan, no one or nothing can harm us or cause us to suffer unless it is allowed by God.

Perhaps most interesting of all in this passage is Thomas' reply to Jesus. Thomas seems to have a brooding type of personality – he seemed to see the dark side of every situation. Jesus said let us go so that the glory of God might be made manifest. Thomas said *let us go so that we may die*. On the other hand, Thomas was extremely devoted to the Lord. In spite of his skepticism, he followed the Lord anyway.

I Am the Resurrection and the Life (vv. 17-27)

From our study of the Gospels, Bethany was apparently the place where Jesus enjoyed staying while He was ministering in and around Jerusalem. Perhaps Martha prepared wonderful meals for Jesus and the other guests while Lazarus and Mary engaged in conversation with Jesus (10:39). It was Mary who anointed Jesus while Lazarus sat at the table (12:1-8). Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem from Bethany on what is now known as Palm Sunday (12:12-13). Jesus stayed in Bethany just a few nights prior to His crucifixion (Mk 11:11). It was near Bethany that Jesus ascended into heaven (Lk 24:50-51).

By the time that Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days – enough time for his body to have begun to decay. Many people who knew the family had already made their way from Jerusalem to see the family. Mary and Martha were not only grieving the loss of Lazarus, they also were plagued with the thoughts of what could have been if only they'd acted sooner to send for Jesus or if only Jesus had arrived sooner (vv. 21, 32). However, Martha displays a faith comparable to the centurion (Matt 8:5-13; Lu 7:1-10) when she says to Jesus – "But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You" (v. 22). Martha had complete faith in Jesus' power over death as she perhaps reflected upon the previous miracles that Jesus had already performed to include the many healings of those who were afflicted with various illnesses and diseases (e.g. the centurion's servant – Matt 8:5-13; Peter's mother-in-law – Matt 8:14-15; unnamed others – Matt 8:16-17), not to mention the daughter of the ruler who had been restored to life (Matt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lu 8:40-56).

Principle: Martha's statement in verse 22 is a perfect illustration of the principle that an intimate knowledge of our Lord's character by the believer is a pre-requisite to trusting the Lord in times of adversity. In our day, when Jesus is not physically present, we must rely upon our knowledge of Him provided to us through His word.

Jesus' statement that "I am the resurrection and the life" was meant to convey the idea that eternal life is intrinsic to Jesus as God. It is not something He gives as if it were extrinsic to Him, rather it is a part of His essence that we partake when we are brought in union with Him through belief.

Jesus' Conversation with Mary and the Observations of the Skeptics (vv. 28-37)

Whereas Martha had gone out to meet Jesus upon hearing of His arrival, Mary stayed at home in the house (v. 20). Whereas, Martha had expressed her growing faith in the Lord, Mary could only express emotions. While Scripture does not indicate whether Mary was present at the opening of the tomb, Scripture is clear that Martha was present (v. 39). As a result of her faith, Martha saw the glory of God demonstrated through the resuscitation of Lazarus.

Verses 33-34 indicate that Jesus was troubled and that He “groaned in the spirit” as He observed the pain and emotional toll that death took upon those whom He loved, particularly Mary. He was even moved to weep in sympathy for their suffering. The Greek word that is translated “troubled” or “deeply moved” is the 3rd, person, singular, aorist, middle, indicative of (*embrimaomai*) and it means to be angered.¹ As Jesus observed the grief that Satan had brought upon the human race as he gained a temporary victory in the Angelic Conflict via physical death (Ge 3:3-4 cf. Ro 6:23; Re 12:9), Jesus was sternly indignant or angry at this momentary triumph.

Even the Jews who had come to comfort the family were amazed at Jesus’ compassion and open display of emotion. They thought that surely this man Who had such power at His disposal was admitting to the helplessness of the situation. Their skepticism seems to at last find a real basis – there were even some situations that Jesus could not conquer. Their fatalistic view of life and cynicism regarding Jesus was about to be shattered.

Lazarus is Raised from the Dead (vv. 38-44)

To a Jew, contact with a dead person meant ceremonial defilement. Martha’ faith is really being called to task. She is called upon to risk personal embarrassment by an act of obedience. When she rolled back the tomb, she didn’t know exactly what Jesus would do. Would she have to enter the tomb and deal with a dead corpse?

Jesus immediately acknowledged His complete dependence upon God the Father. He also communicated openly with the Father within hearing of all present that the miracle that they were about to witness was a sign of God the Father’s approval of His Son. There could be no greater affirmation.

The Effect of the Miracle: a Division Between Belief and Unbelief (vv. 45-57)

Gosh, Jesus sure was lucky that Lazarus obeyed, right? NOT! How else could the unbelievers deal with this incredible evidence? Oh, what if we kill Jesus to stifle such displays? In Caiaphas’ opinion, it was better for Jesus to die rather than the nation plunged into a military siege by the Romans. If something wasn’t done Jesus would continue to gain followers with such displays and the Jewish religious leadership would lose their status. In an interesting twist of irony, God uses the wrath of men for His Own purpose (Psa 76:10).

¹ Kurt Aland, et al, editors, *Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament* (Federal Republic of Germany, Stuttgart: 1994) and commentary contained in Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary – New Testament*, John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, editors (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 314.