

Raising Lazarus from the Dead (John 11:1-44)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background

- a. After healing a man who had been born blind, Jesus teaches about who He is, by speaking in parables about a Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep (us).
- b. He teaches that no one can snatch the sheep from His hand; and that He and the Father are one.
- c. Review **John 10:33-42**.
- d. Jesus' enemies accuse him of blasphemy, degrading the name of God by making Himself equal with God. They pick up stones to stone Him (the penalty for blasphemy under the Law, based on **Leviticus 24**). He escapes Judea and goes to the other side of the Jordan River.
 - i. Jesus goes to the area where John the Baptist had been baptizing people.
 - ii. People there believe what John had said about Jesus.
 1. Recall that John the Baptist had identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and as "the Son of God". (**John 1:29, 1:34-36**)

II. Significance of this Story and Chapter in John's Gospel

- a. **Chapter 11** is in the middle of the **gospel of John** (with ten chapters before, and ten after).
- b. This event is a major turning point in the gospel
 - i. It is the last and greatest miraculous sign performed by Jesus, prior to His own resurrection. Miracles that preceded it included:
 1. Turning water to wine at wedding in Cana (**John 2**)
 2. Healing the nobleman's son in Capernaum, without even going there. (**John 4**)
 3. Healing the paralyzed man by the pool in Jerusalem, telling him to rise, take up his bed and walk. (**John 5**)

4. Multiplying the five barley loaves and two small fish, to feed 5,000 people (**John 6**)
 5. Walking on water in the Sea of Galilee (**John 6**)
 6. Healing the man born blind (**John 9**)
- ii. After this miracle of raising Lazarus, the Jewish leaders realize that things are getting out of hand, and plot to kill Jesus (and Lazarus, too).
 - iii. After this chapter, rest of the gospel focuses on events during the last week of Jesus' life prior to his crucifixion, and then on the resurrection and post-resurrection events.

III. Lazarus is Dead (Read **John 11:1-16**)

- a. Context: Thomas assumes that if Jesus returns to where He had come from, He will be stoned. As His disciples, they could face severe persecution or death as well.
- b. **Question:** Who were Mary, Martha and Lazarus (one brother and two sisters) of Bethany? It seems that Jesus had an especially close relationship with these three.
 - i. According to the early Church historian Eusebius, John wrote his gospel after the other three gospels were in circulation (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*; Book 3, chapter 24). Therefore, John is filling in details not covered in those earlier gospels. For example, in Luke's gospel we find background information about Mary, Martha and Lazarus.
 - ii. "Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, 'Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore, tell her to help me.' And Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. Bu one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.'" (**Luke 10:38-42, NKJV**)
 1. This account from **Luke 10** speaks of Jesus being in the home of two sisters named Mary and Martha. It is generally assumed that both accounts refer to the same pair of sisters.

- iii. It says, “It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.” (**John 11:2**, NKJV)
1. The comment regarding this being the same Mary who wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, is explained further on in the story, in **chapter 12**.
 - a. “Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.” (**John 12:1-3**, NKJV)
 2. Could this be referring to someone mentioned in **Luke’s gospel**?
 - a. “And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, ‘This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner.’” (**Luke 7:37-39**, NKJV)
 3. Two explanations have been offered:
 - a. The two accounts of anointings and wiping the feet with the hair of a women refer to the same event. That would equate Mary with the woman described as “a sinner”, generally assumed that this is referring to a public sinner of some type, like a prostitute. OR
 - b. There were two different anointings, by two different women (the “sinful woman” in **Luke 7**, and Mary the sister of Martha in **John 11**).

4. How this has been understood historically:
 - a. Many in the Roman Catholic church have assumed that these two references (as well as Mary Magdalene) referring to the *same woman*.
 - b. However, several others have rejected that idea, citing reasons such as the following.
 - i. Magdala (the town Mary *Magdalene* is associated with) is in the north, by the Sea of Galilee; while Bethany is in the south, near Jerusalem.
 - ii. Also, character and nature of the relationship of the sinful woman in **Luke 7** appears to be different from the Mary of Bethany in **John 11**. Therefore, some reject equating the sinful woman with Mary of Bethany and hold that there must have been two different episodes of Jesus being anointed by women and his feet dried by their hair.
 - iii. One early Christian preacher who rejected the idea that these two women as the same person was John Chrysostom (c. 349-407 AD), bishop and preacher in Constantinople, in his *Homily 62 on the Gospel of John*.
 - c. After hearing that Lazarus is sick, Jesus waits for two days before doing anything about it.
 - i. It makes a point of saying that Jesus loved Mary, Martha and Lazarus. Yet Jesus waited for two days.
 - ii. **Question:** Why did Jesus wait two days, if he cared so much about Lazarus?
 1. **Answer:** Obviously He had a better plan that involved not getting there until Lazarus had been dead for four days.
 2. **Question:** Why does God not answer prayers right away when we ask Him? Can you think of other “delayed response” prayers in Scripture?
 - a. Abraham and Sarah childless until ages 100 and 90 (**Genesis 17:17**). While Abraham desired and was promised a son, he had to wait years for that to happen.

- b. Job suffered for an extended time before being restored.
 - i. “My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.”
(**James 5:10–11**, NKJV)
- c. Joseph wanted to get out of prison. He was sent to prison in Egypt unjustly and had to remain there for over 2 years before being released and elevated. That happened after Pharaoh’s dreams, which set the stage for 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine. Ultimately, God used that to bring Jacob’s entire family to Egypt, to save their lives and to lay the groundwork for the great deliverance in **Exodus**, some 400 years later.
- d. Jews in Egypt were afflicted 400 years; they were not able to return to and inherit Canaan, *until* the sin of the Amorites was “complete” or “filled up” (**Genesis 15:16**).
- e. Jesus’ teaching on prayer:
 - i. (After telling the disciples how to pray, in **Luke 11**) “And He said to them, “Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within and say, ‘Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you’? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs.” (**Luke 11:5–8**, NKJV)
 - 1. Even though God loves us, He admonishes us to be *persevering* in prayer over time, if we expect our prayers to be answered.
 - ii. “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not

fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, "Get justice for me from my adversary." And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." Then the Lord said, 'Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?'" (**Luke 18:1-8**, NKJV)

1. Being patient and persevering in prayer is a mark of true faith; the kind of faith that God is looking for.
- iii. Often when God does not answer right away, it does not mean He does not love us, nor that He has no plans to answer. Sometimes it just means "later". Reasons include:
 1. The stage is not yet set; other people and factors involved that we are not aware of that simply are not yet ready.
 2. We are being tested and refined. God is looking for faith in us that will persevere.
- d. The disciples do not want to go back to Judea at this time.
 - i. Recently the Jews in Judea had tried to stone Jesus for blasphemy. (**John 10:31, 10:38**)
 - ii. Jesus reassures them with a discussion about *sunlight*, saying, "If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble because he sees the light of this world." (**John 11:9**)
 1. Earlier Jesus had said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." (**John 8:12**, NKJV)
 2. I assume Jesus is alluding to the fact that he is the light of the world; therefore, if He is with His disciples, they should be safe and should not stumble.

e. Lazarus “sleeps”

- i. Here Jesus is using sleep as a metaphor for death. However, the disciples misunderstand and take Jesus literally.
- ii. There are several places where the word “sleep” is used to refer to *death* in Scripture. Here are a few examples:
 1. **Genesis 49:9** and **Numbers 24:9** (These are prophecies about a lion “sleeping” and then “waking up”, using poetic language to point to the death and resurrection of the *Lion of the tribe of Judah*.)
 - a. “Judah *slept* as a lion’s cub” (**Genesis 49:9**)
 - i. This is from Jacob’s death-bed prophecy about Judah.
 - b. “He *lies down and rests* like a lion. And like a lion’s cub, who shall rouse Him?” (**Numbers 24:9**)
 - i. This is from Balaam’s third oracle.
 2. “Then many of those who *sleep* in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to disgrace and everlasting shame.” (**Daniel 12:2**)
 3. “And when [Stephen] said this, he *fell asleep*.” (**Acts 7:60**) (From account of Stephen’s death by stoning.)
 4. **1 Corinthians 15:50-53**
 - a. “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” (**1 Corinthians 15:50-53**, NKJV)

IV. **Jesus Arrives in Bethany; Lazarus in the Tomb Four Days** (Read **John 11:17-27**)

a. Summary of the story

- i. When Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus had already been dead and in the tomb for four days.

- ii. Martha goes out to meet Jesus, first. Mary remains in the house.
- iii. Jesus tells Martha that her brother will rise; they have a discussion about the resurrection.
 - 1. Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life."
 - 2. Martha believes what Jesus says, and states "You are the Christ, the Son of God."
- b. Martha had extraordinary faith in Jesus.
 - i. She believed if Jesus had been there, her brother would not have died. She believed Jesus would have been able to heal Lazarus. (**John 11:21**) Not only this, but...
 - ii. It seems to me that *even after Lazarus being dead for four days*, she believed that Jesus could reverse the tragedy!
 - 1. "But *even now* I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." (**John 11:22**, NKJV)
 - 2. This implies to me that she believed Jesus could raise her brother back to life, even after being in the tomb four days.
 - 3. This may be one of the greatest examples of faith in the Bible!
- c. When Jesus said her brother Lazarus would rise, Martha's response was, "*I know* he will rise again, in the resurrection at the last day.
 - i. **Question:** How did Martha know that? There are a few possible explanations for how Martha came to that knowledge regarding the general resurrection of the dead:
 - 1. Jesus had been teaching in the resurrection of the flesh (bodily resurrection) of all the dead, on the Last Day.
 - a. Read **Matthew 12:40-42**.
 - i. There will be a day of judgment.
 - ii. There will be people there separated from hundreds of years being judged.
 - b. Read **Matthew 22:23-33**.
 - c. "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth." (**John 5:28-29**)

2. In two prior lessons in our series on **John's gospel** (related to **John 5:28-29**, on "resurrection of the dead"; especially in the Part B lesson), we discussed at length what the Bible teaches on this foundational doctrine. As we explained in those lessons all the dead will be bodily raised, souls reunited to transformed flesh, immediately prior to the time of final judgment.
 - a. Prior to that time, the souls of the dead are waiting in Hades.
3. Resurrection of the dead is taught in the Old Testament as well.
 - a. Jesus rebuked the Sadducees for their ignorance of the Old Testament Scriptures and teaching on this subject, in **Matthew 22**. They tried to trap Him with a made-up story of a woman who marries seven men in succession following the death of each prior husband. They then ask Jesus the hypothetical question, "Whose wife will she be *at the resurrection?*"
 - i. "Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." (**Matthew 22:29**, NKJV; see also **Mark 12:24-27**)
 - b. When Paul was brought before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, he appealed to his fellow Pharisees in the council:
 - i. "But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, 'Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!'" (**Acts 23:6**, NKJV)
 - c. **Daniel 12:1-2** "Then many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and others to disgrace and everlasting shame."
 - d. **Isaiah 26:19** "The dead shall rise up; those in the tombs shall arise."
 - e. **Ezekiel 37** (prophecy of Valley of the Dry Bones)
- d. Martha believed Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God".
 - i. **Question:** Where did she get that idea from?

1. **Possible Answer:** Read **Psalm 2:1-8**

- a. The coming of the Anointed One (Greek = “the Christ”) was foretold by King David about 1,000 years before the time of Jesus’ birth, in **Psalm 2:2**.
- b. He would also be the Son of God, as stated in **Psalm 2:7**.
- c. In this psalm, the Lord says of the Son, “*Ask of me and I will give You* the nations for Your inheritance and the ends of the earth for Your possessions.”
 - i. It sounds to me like this Christ, the Son of God, will be able to receive virtually *whatever He asks for*, from the Father.

2. Perhaps this is why Martha had said,

- a. “But even now I know that *whatever You ask of God, God will give You.*” (**John 11:22**, NKJV)
 - i. Martha understands that the Christ will have power to ask for whatever He asks for, therefore He can bring her brother Lazarus back to life.
 - ii. This confidence displays remarkable faith!

e. Jesus teaches, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

- i. Jesus says those who believe in Him, *though they die*, will live.
- ii. Jesus also says those who believe in Him will *never die*.
- iii. Do these two statements contradict?
 - 1. Actually, there is no contradiction here. Both statements can be true, but only if Jesus is speaking of *two different* deaths.
 - 2. Consider what it says in **Revelation** regarding the “second death”.
 - a. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” (**Revelation 2:11**, NKJV)
 - b. “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” (**Revelation 20:14**, NKJV)
 - c. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall

have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.” (**Revelation 21:8**, NKJV)

iv. Therefore, both of these statements are true.

1. Those who believe in Jesus who may die in the *first* death (natural physical death), nevertheless *will not* die in the second death (the lake of fire, or hell).

V. Lazarus is Raised (Read **John 11:28-44**)

a. Here we see dramatically both the humanity and divinity of Christ displayed.

i. *He weeps* with those around him, overcome with sorrow at the death of their brother and His friend. He empathizes fully and carries their burdens and sorrows (**Isaiah 53:4**).

ii. He calls Lazarus out of Hades and back to life.

1. Hades is the place where the dead go (as we see in the story of a rich man and *another* Lazarus, in **Luke 16:19-31**).

2. That is where Jesus went for the three days He was in the tomb, as Peter explains in **Acts 2:25-33**, pointing back to **Psalms 16**. Here it is clear that Hades (Greek term) and Sheol (Hebrew) refer to the same place.

b. Jesus cries out, “*Lazarus, come forth!*”

i. Somehow, when Jesus cries out here, His voice reaches *even to the depth of Hades* and He is able to call Lazarus back from the dead!

ii. Consider: What might have happened *if* Jesus did not specify Lazarus here *by name*, and just said “*Come forth!*” Is it possible that *all the dead* who had been laid to rest in that tomb area could have come out?

iii. This raising of Lazarus from the dead is a foretaste of what will happen in the future, on the Last Day, when Jesus will call *all the dead* to rise up from their graves!

1. “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” (**John 5:28-29**, NKJV)

2. Read **1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11**, which describes this general resurrection that will happen on the Last Day, when Christ returns.
 - a. In Jesus calling back from the dead, we are provided a small foreshadowing of “coming attractions”: the day when *all of the dead* will be raised!
 - b. Jesus told us that one day *all of the dead* will hear His voice and come out of their graves (**John 5:28-29**).
 - c. This will happen suddenly, unexpected by most; as a thief in the night.
 - d. With this in view, we must be: sober, vigilant and always prepared!
 - e. Paul says we are to comfort one another with these words.
- iv. A sobering reminder that all of us need to be contemplating our own deaths, and what will follow, was penned by Bishop Richard Challoner (1691-1781) in *Think Well On It*, a series of spiritual reflections on death. From chapter 7 of that work:
 1. “Consider first that there is nothing more certain than death. ‘It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment.’ (**Hebrews 9:27**). The sentence is general; it is pronounced upon all the children of Adam. Neither wealth, nor strength, nor wisdom, nor all the power of this world can exempt anyone from this common doom. From the first moment of our birth, we are hastening to our death; every moment brings it nearer to us. The day will come – it will most certainly come, and only God knows how soon – when we shall never see the night. Or the night will come when we shall never see the morning. The time will most certainly come when thou, my soul, must bid a long farewell to this cheating world and to all that thou hast admired therein – and even to thy own body, the individual companion of thy life – and take thy journey to another country, where all that thou settest a value upon here will appear as smoke. Learn, then, to despise this miserable world and all its enjoyments, with which thou must part so soon, whether thou wilt to or no.”
 - a. (Source: *Think Well On It*, Richard Challoner, TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 2006, p. 19)

2. This is a sobering warning for each of us to be prepared for his or her own death.
3. There will be a resurrection of the dead. On the day Jesus returns, every person who ever died will be returned from Hades and reunited with a transformed body, prior to final judgment. Some will inherit eternal life; the rest will inherit eternal condemnation.
4. We do not know when Jesus will return. He told us that His return will be like a thief in the night, and like labor pains suddenly coming upon a pregnant woman.
5. Let us be ready; and prepared at all times!