

Jesus and Lazarus

I want to begin by apologizing for the title: Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus has only one interaction with Lazarus in all of John 11 and that is when he stands at the entrance of his friend's tomb and cries out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" When he came walking out of the tomb, Jesus turned to his family and friends and said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Despite that, Lazarus is still the focal point of the story, because he is the one person Jesus raises from the dead who is named, who lives near Jerusalem and whose raising to life causes the Pharisees to plot Jesus' death. The raising of Lazarus comes in the fulness of time, the time of God's choosing, and gives urgency to the religious leaders' plans to get rid of Jesus.

There are numerous details in this story that don't make sense apart from Jesus' commitment to the Father's timing. It begins with news that Lazarus is sick and from there we find out that he is brother to Mary and Martha of Bethany and that they have sent word to Jesus to let Him know that His friend is ill. Now, starting at verse 4, we read:

When He heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when He heard that Lazarus was sick, He stayed where He was two more days.

Where was He? He was most likely in Galilee. That's where He lived, where He conducted most of His ministry, and it's about 3-4 days journey from Bethany. We know that when Jesus finally did arrive, Lazarus had been dead for four days, so the two days Jesus spent waiting up north were the two days during which His friend slipped from being seriously ill and into death. Why would Jesus wait? Was it because He didn't care about His dear friends and what they were going through? Was He afraid to go near Jerusalem when people were out to get Him?

There's only one possibility that makes sense in light of Jesus' character and the way He conducted Himself: He didn't go because the Father showed Him that there was a greater purpose to be accomplished than keeping His friend alive. He showed Jesus that Lazarus would be raised from death and, I believe, He showed Jesus what that would mean to the Pharisees and chief priests and other opponents. In other words, what makes sense to me is that the Father showed Jesus that His time had come and that more would be accomplished if He waited two days than if He rushed back to Bethany to save His friend's life.

After two days had passed, Jesus spoke to His disciples:

"Let us go back to Judea."

"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone You, and yet You are going back there?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light."

After He said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but His disciples thought He meant natural sleep.

So then He told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Then Thomas ... said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Thomas must have been such a fun guy to be around. Let's look at this conversation a little closer -- there are some things here we need to see.

Notice how fear can control us. The disciples start off by questioning Jesus' decision to go to Judea because when they were last there the Jews tried to stone Jesus to death. "What are we walking into here, Jesus? Don't you know that this could be dangerous?" And then at the end, after all Jesus has told them about walking in the daylight and about how he is going to 'wake Lazarus up', we see Thomas saying, "Let's go to Bethany and become like Lazarus ... dead." Many times in the Scriptures and many times in our own lives we see the power of fear to trump the little candle of faith that we bravely hold up.

Jesus' response to their fear is to say, "It's still daylight, even if there's not much time left. Don't be afraid to walk while there is still some daylight left." He then points them to the time that is coming closer, the time when the light of the world will be taken away from them, when people who have rejected the light will stumble in the darkness. He is telling them that the time is not yet, even if it is close, and if the time for Him to be betrayed to death has not come, they don't need to fear.

Then Jesus uses picture language to describe to His disciples what will happen next: Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to Bethany to wake him! They don't get it, but Jesus doesn't quit on them; He tells them in plain words that Lazarus has died ... but He leaves it to their imagination to figure out what He means by waking him up again. Then Jesus speaks an important principle: "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." Remember that all through John's Gospel, and in the letters that John writes which appear near the end of our New Testament, Jesus is looking for faith. He wants to draw faith out of the most fearful and unbelieving hearts. And so, even though He knows that raising Lazarus will signal the end of His time of ministry, He is glad for the situation, because that miracle will inspire greater faith among His followers.

The heart of this story concerns Jesus' interactions with the two sisters, Mary and Martha, after His arrival in their town of Bethany. Martha hears that Jesus is coming and she goes out to meet Him:

"Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

There had to have been a bit of rebuke in Martha's voice as she expressed her disappointment that Jesus had taken so long to get there ... but there is still faith there as well. She knew Lazarus wouldn't have died if Jesus had been there and she believed that it was still possible for God to raise Him if Jesus asked.

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she told Him. "I believe You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

And then she left, going back to the house to find Mary and to bring her to Jesus.

"The Teacher is here and is asking for you." When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to Him . . . When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw Him, she fell at His feet and said, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

Again, we see this accusation; first Martha and now Mary tell Jesus that it's His fault -- "If You had been here, my brother would not have died." Pretty heavy.

On the one hand, they demonstrate faith that Jesus can heal, but on the other hand, there's blame when He doesn't. At this point, Jesus gets choked up:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how He loved him." But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus felt the pain of those near Him. He heard Mary's sobs and the wailing of the mourners, the sense of tragic loss all around Him and He cried with the people who were grieving their loss -- even though He knew what was going to happen next.

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," He said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said,

"Father, I thank you that You have heard Me. I knew that you always hear Me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me." When He had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

You've heard it over and over and over again over the past few weeks: Jesus looks for faith. Jesus inspires faith in people, teaches them to have it, then draws it out of them. "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God." "I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that You sent Me." Jesus with Nicodemus, Jesus with the woman at the well in Samaria, Jesus with His disciples, Jesus talking with anyone in the gospels -- He looks for faith.

Just a few verses ago He was asking Martha to believe that He is the resurrection and the life, that whoever believes in Him will live, even though they die. Even though they already believed that Jesus could have healed Lazarus before he died, Jesus asks them to trust Him for more than that, to trust Him for the power over death. And now He tells them that if they believe they will see the glory of God. And then He calls Lazarus out of the tomb, back into life, into the joy and celebration of all who loved him, who loved Mary and Martha, all the friends of the family -- anyone who cared at all would be thrilled to see what they had seen that day.

But there were some people who were not thrilled and we have to read on into the end of the chapter because this is the backdrop to everything that's going on in Bethany. There is a cost to great love, to great compassion, and it is always great sacrifice:

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in Him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

There's a full statement of why, from the political side of the issue, Jesus had to die. The rulers of the Jews were afraid that a massive movement to Jesus could only be seen as another Messianic uprising that the Romans would be quick to overthrow, probably with ruthless cruelty. These rulers saw that the result for them would be harsh -- they would lose the temple, their place of worship, and they might even lose the right to be a nation, which was better than nothing, even if they were under Roman rule. But if they quashed this Messianic movement themselves, then Rome would look on them with favor and would be inclined to continue to protect their position and their influence with the people.

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up. "You know nothing at all. You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So, from that day on, they plotted to take His life.

Even Jesus' disciples knew that it was dangerous to go back into Judea and Jesus certainly knew what He was up against. That had to have been on His mind during the four days of journeying that brought them to Bethany and the sisters of Lazarus.

The bigger picture was always on Jesus' mind, as we see from the other gospels where he prophesied to His own disciples about His coming death on at least three occasions. But, even with that in the background, and even with the knowledge that the Father was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus showed some important things about Himself in this story.

1. He showed that He had great empathy, a great ability to feel what others are feeling and to actually share their pain. Moments before He would call Lazarus from death back into life, He got all choked up and began to cry over the suffering of His dear friends. I like knowing that Jesus cares deeply about our struggles. I like knowing that He doesn't remain unaffected by the pain that we go through, or that we feel on behalf of others who are suffering.

2. Jesus looked past the raw human emotion that stirred up the two sisters to blame Him for Lazarus' death -- "If you had been here, our brother would not have died." He looks past the pain, the grief, and tries even in that tender moment to stir up faith. "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" "I am the resurrection and the life; He who believes in Me will live ... Do you believe this?"

3. Jesus wanted to restore Lazarus to life, wanted to see him reunited with his family, even if He put His own life at risk to make that happen. Even His disciples knew that He was walking into danger -- "But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews tried to stone You, and yet You are going back there?" Jesus knew more than they did, but He didn't delay because He was afraid to go to Judea, but so that He could raise Lazarus and build the faith of those whom God had entrusted to His care. Building faith -- we see it here overcoming both the emotional outbursts of painful accusation and the sinister threat of the Jewish leadership. Jesus would do what needed to be done.

4. Notice one more thing about Jesus -- the confidence of His authority. He could stand in front of a tomb and command a dead person to rise, just as He could speak to blind eyes and tell them to see or to demonic forces and command them to flee. Jesus was in charge. Jesus was in control of every situation. And the One who is in control of every situation isn't petty or condemning, isn't self-centred or demanding -- He acts in love and mercy.

What do we learn from Him?

1. We learn that those who truly put their trust in Jesus are in the best place, under the care of someone who is both powerful and compassionate. That doesn't mean that He makes all our difficulties go away, but it does provide us tremendous strength and hope in the middle of those challenges. Mary and Martha didn't have an easy time with Lazarus' illness, but their trust in Jesus brought those challenges to a wonderful conclusion. Jesus is looking for a people who will trust Him with their lives, even if things aren't working out the way we want, the way we would have done things - He asks us to trust Him.

2. Secondly, we learn that the Kingdom of God is priority one. Jesus was laying His

life on the line both to announce and to demonstrate God's Kingdom, God's rule, on this earth. Even if He was safer in Galilee, that mattered less than the demonstration of the Kingdom in Bethany. Even if it would have been easier to come quickly and heal Lazarus while he was still living, Jesus chose the greater miracle, the one that everyone would be talking about, the one that made a clash with the authorities inevitable. How can we develop a similar passion and priority for living under and living for, God's rule? Work on that in a moment.

3. Finally, for today anyway, emotions are a wonderful enrichment to life. The human responses of joy and grief, of contentment and anger, of compassion and heartache, enrich our lives, add depth, help us relate with others. But they aren't usually reliable sources of wisdom in relation to things like understanding God's purposes or knowing what to do next during a trial. Emotions like those that Mary and Martha felt can cause us to lash out at God instead of turn in to Him. So we're out there, angry and ignorant, and we can't receive His comfort and reassurance. Jesus looked for faith, even in the most painful of circumstances, and it is faith that brings hope. Looking to Jesus in the storm is not only what worked for the disciples; it works wonders for us.