

A Grieving Family

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- [0 : 00] Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.
- So the sister sent word to Jesus, Lord, the one you love is sick. 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.
- Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. And then he said to his disciples, let us go back to Judea.
- But Rabbi, they said, a short while ago, the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you're going back? Jesus answered, are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light.
- It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light. After he had said this, he went on to tell them, our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to wake him up.
- [1 : 05] 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, also known as Didymus, said to the rest of the disciples, let us also go, that we may die with him. On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.
- Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.
- Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.
- Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.
- [2 : 16] The one who believes in me will live, even though they died. And whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she replied.
- I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world. After she had said that, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. The teacher is here, she said, and he is asking for you.
- When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

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. 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?

[3 : 41] 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, but at 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 believe, you will 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 peoples. I am 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 round his face. Jesus said to them, Take off the gray clothes and let them go.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for the Bible, and because from this passage we can so clearly see that you are a God who cares and listens.

[4 : 55] We thank you for you and for all the work he has put in the preparation for this message this morning. We ask that you will use the things he will say for your glory and that more people will see and believe in your son Jesus and we'll declare that he is indeed the resurrection and the life.

Well, friends, good morning and let me invite you to keep your Bibles open to the Gospel of John and chapter 11. Before we begin our study this morning, let me just bring a personal greeting to you all.

You may have heard, but Helen and myself and the children are moving up to the Highlands and we leave in July. So this is really the last opportunity I have to bring that greeting before we move.

But on behalf of our family and the Holyrood Evangelical Church family, I just wanted to thank you for your partnership in the Gospel during recent years.

We have benefited enormously from being part of the East of Scotland Gospel Partnership in which Graham and before him John have shown tremendous leadership.

[6 : 05] We as a church are very conscious of your prayerful support and we are grateful that you enabled us to use this building, this wonderful property, to hold our prayer meetings during those years when we were looking for a property of our own.

And we thank you that in recent months you have shared with us your preachers and you have sent both Graham and Alistair to preach to us. And so we rejoice in our partnership and I pray that partnership between these two church families will continue in the months and the years ahead.

Let's now look together at John chapter 11 and the raising of Lazarus. This is a very well-known account in the Gospel. It's a text that is known even to the wider culture and the world outside of the church.

David Bowie, the musician, wrote a musical called Lazarus. And you would expect people to understand what he meant by that because the story of Lazarus is widely known outside of the church.

So it's a very well-known account and it's a very important event in John's Gospel. It is the last of Jesus' miraculous signs before his crucifixion and the one in which he demonstrates his authority over the last enemy, death itself.

[7 : 30] And ironically, it is the resurrection of Lazarus that persuades Jesus' opponents that he must be put to death. 11 verse 53. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Jesus' life was already in danger at the beginning of the chapter but by the end it's the final straw and there is a price on his head, so to speak. So death casts its long shadow over the pages before us, over this entire chapter.

At the beginning, at chapter 11 verse 1, we learn of this man Lazarus. He's sick and it looks likely he's going to die of natural causes. And at the end of this section, chapter 12 verse 10, we find that there is a plot to put Lazarus himself to death.

The chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well. So at the beginning he's facing a natural death, at the end he's facing a violent death. Death casting its long shadow over the events of this chapter.

But in the middle of this account, we have the wonderful light of the gospel breaking in and these glorious words in verse 25, I am the resurrection and the life.

[8 : 47] Lazarus is delivered from the grave and the Lord reminds us that the last enemy will not have the last word on the last day. So we want to look at this passage together under three headings.

Firstly, verses 1 to 16, the sister's request. Secondly, verses 17 to 37, the Lord's sympathetic response. And thirdly and finally, verse 38 to 45, the supernatural resurrection.

Firstly then, the sister's request. Chapter 11 verse 1 to 16. You may have heard the name of Nabel Qureshi, who was a convert from Islam and he became a passionate Christian believer, a passionate evangelist.

He spoke at university campuses all over the world. He wrote a best-selling book, Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus. He was a talented writer and speaker, a father and a husband.

And in his early 30s, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and people followed his illness with prayerful interest. And during a very serious episode in his illness, he recorded a video message from his hospital bed asking that people might pray for a miracle and that he might be healed.

[10 : 10] He recognised the urgency of the situation. He said it needs to happen in the next few days. And no doubt people all over the world were praying in their thousands. But only a few days later, Nabel died, leaving his wife a widow and his toddler daughter fatherless.

What are we to think when the Lord does not do the miracle we ask for and long for? And that is the situation here with Lazarus.

Jesus was friends with Mary and Martha, who we meet elsewhere in the Gospels. And they have a brother who is also a friend of the Lord. In verse 5, we're told Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

But Lazarus is taken unwell and word reaches the Lord that he's perhaps about to die. And what happens next? Does the Lord drop everything and travel through the night to reach him?

Well, we're told in verse 6, when they heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed there two more days. By the time he arrives in Bethany, where Lazarus is, verse 17, we're told that he had been dead for four days.

[11 : 27] So the Lord knew his friend was sick. And yet he did not rush to his bedside. It took him at least six days to travel to his home.

And the situation is more complicated than that. If we think back to John's Gospel, chapter 4, you recall the miracle of the official who had a son who was at the point of death.

And this official pleaded with the Lord, saying, Sarah, come down before my child dies. And the Lord replied, your son will live. And when the official returned home, he discovered that his son was alive and had recovered.

So the Lord could heal at a distance, and yet he chose not to. The Lord could have travelled quickly to Lazarus' side, and yet he chose not to. And it took him six days at least to arrive in Bethany.

Why did he not do the miracle everybody longed for, and the sisters were hoping for? Well, we're going to think about that in our third point.

[12 : 32] But just notice a few clues were given. Verse 4, when Jesus heard this, he said, Verse 11, these enigmatic words, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep.

And verse 14, the Lord says to his disciples, Let's hold these thoughts in our mind, but let's notice that Lazarus died before the coming of the Lord.

And that is the experience of many Christians. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul writes that wonderful chapter about the coming of the Lord. And he says this, Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

What Paul recognised, what the early church experienced, was that many Christians did die before the coming of the Lord. Many Christians do fall asleep, despite the earnest pleas and prayers of their loved ones, before the Lord comes for them.

There are, of course, sometimes remarkable deliverances from death. In January, I spoke to a colleague in ministry who was taking part in a race and suffered a cardiac arrest and collapsed.

[14 : 05] And one of the other people in the competition was a doctor who immediately began to resuscitate him. And his life was saved. But very often our experience might seem more like that of Martha and Mary.

The Lord not doing the miracle perhaps we pray for and long for. So that was the sisters' request. And secondly, we see the Lord's sympathetic response, verses 17 to 37.

He interacts with the two sisters. And we notice that they both make the same remark to him. Martha says, Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

And Mary later says the same. And yet the Lord responds in two quite different ways. To Martha, he gives a theological answer. Verse 23, Your brother will rise again.

And Martha acknowledges this. She says, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Martha knew her Old Testament. She knew the glimpses of hope of the life to come which she read there.

[15 : 14] The faith of the psalmist that God would take him into glory and that he would dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Or the promise given to Daniel that those sleeping in the dust of the earth would awake.

A couple of weeks ago I was reading Isaiah in my quiet time and I encountered chapter 26, verse 19. A verse I don't recall reading before or certainly not with the impression it made upon me that day.

And this verse says, But your dead will live, Lord. Their bodies will rise. Let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning.

The earth will give birth to her dead. And all through the Old Testament these hints and foreshadowings of the resurrection. And Jesus says that he is the resurrection.

Verse 25, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. So he gives to Martha a theological answer reminding her of the promised resurrection, pointing her to himself as the one who is the resurrection and the life.

[16 : 28] And Paul says the same in 1 Thessalonians 4. For the words we read, not wanting to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, that we might not grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. The last enemy will not have the last word on the last day.

And that changes our understanding of an experience of death. Charles Spurgeon, the 19th century preacher, wrote these words, I will not fear you, death.

Why should I? You look like a dragon, but your sting is gone. Your teeth are broken. Oh, old lion, why should I fear you? I know you are no more able to destroy me, but you are sent as a messenger to conduct me to the golden gate wherein I shall enter and see my saviour's unveiled face forever.

The Lord gives to Martha a theological answer. But his response to Mary is different and she makes the same remark. Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.

[17 : 45] But to her, he gives no theological answer, but instead demonstrates a moving pastoral response. And we have in that response the shortest sentence in the Bible, 1135, Jesus wept.

Jesus wept at the death of a friend he loved. He wept that death should ever have invaded and polluted the world he made. And the Lord grieved.

Our majesty, the queen, in a televised address, once said that grief is the price we pay for love. And the Lord loved Lazarus and his sisters and so he grieved to hear of his loss.

And as Christians, we will grieve. Paul has just said the same in 1 Thessalonians 4. He wants us not to not grieve, but not to grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.

As Christians, we will weep when we lose those we love. We will weep with those who weep as we are commanded to. And we will weep as Jesus wept at the loss of friends and of family.

[19 : 07] The Lord manifested a sympathetic pastoral response. A very good friend of mine last year lost his sister in adulthood and he wrote and spoke about his experience of this.

And one comment which kept coming back to him was the importance of empathy. And what made the difference during those difficult months was people who were just willing to be with him and his family and to sit with them and to listen with them.

empathy shown to those bereaved. And that's what the Lord does here as he weeps with those who weep.

So the Lord gives to Martha a theological answer. He demonstrates to Mary a very sensitive pastoral response. And may we as Christian people as we minister to one another seek to strike that same balance.

The Lord's sympathetic response. Thirdly, verses 38 to 45 the supernatural resurrection of Lazarus.

[20 : 22] And the story is told so powerfully from verse 38. Jesus, deeply moved, comes to the tomb and commands the stone to be rolled away.

Martha objects. There is a bad odour. He's been there four days. But then Jesus says, did I not tell you if you believed you would see the glory of God? And so they take away the stone and he prays to God his Father.

And in verse 42 he says, I said this for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me. And after that he cries out to Lazarus in a loud voice, Lazarus, come out!

And the dead man comes out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. And the Lord commands the grave clothes to be taken from him and for him to be let go.

And it's just a wonderful reunion, isn't it? In recent weeks we've seen the restrictions being eased and people can now begin to meet their friends again.

[21 : 29] Grandparents can once more hug their grandchildren. children. And haven't these been wonderful, emotional, joyful reunions to hug those perhaps you haven't seen or touched for three months?

How joyful it must have been for these sisters to embrace Lazarus who they thought they would never see again. The last enemy is not the last word.

But why did it have to happen this way? Well Jesus says in order that he might be glorified, that if you believed you would see the glory of God in order that others might put their faith in him.

I say this for the benefit of the people standing here that they may believe that you sent me. And that is what happens verse 45. Many of the Jews who'd come to visit Mary and had seen what Jesus did put their faith in him.

When they saw the power of Jesus at work in Lazarus in his death and in his resurrection to life they believed that Jesus was the resurrection and the life.

[22 : 37] And isn't it often the case that when people see the power of Christ during an illness or a bereavement that they themselves come to put their faith in him. Nabi Al Qureshi in that video I mentioned he asked for prayer that he might be healed but he acknowledged in that video that God was sovereign and he said whatever happens I will love you and trust you.

And that video at the time I viewed it had been watched almost one and a half million times. It was perhaps not the answer Nabi Al himself would have wanted but one and a half million people have heard his testimony and seen his faith and seen him committing himself to the will of his father in heaven.

And it's often the case isn't it that when people see a Christian suffering or facing death that they themselves come to Christ. A famous preacher in Scotland was moved by the death of his Christian brother and that caused him to reflect upon his own Christian faith.

death. A friend ministering in East Asia used to say that people would come to funerals of Christians in that land that continent and say oh I wish I could die like a Christian.

John Wesley said of the Methodists our people die well. The Son of God glorified as Christians face illness and death in faith.

[24 : 16] Others coming to believe when they see the power of Christ at work in their lives. But it's also a picture of what will happen when the Lord comes again when he returns.

Paul speaks about those who sleep in death and he talks of the resurrection that Jesus died and rose again so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.

The Lord will come from heaven with a loud command, the voice of an archangel, the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first and we will be with the Lord forever.

Lazarus was woken by the voice of Christ calling his name. Jairus' daughter in Mark's gospel heard the Lord Jesus whispering to her Talitha little girl I say to you wake up and one day those who sleep shall hear the voice of Christ.

John 5 25 a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Some commentators have remarked that's why Jesus had to specify Lazarus in verse 43.

[25 : 37] For if he simply said come out the entire graveyard would have risen to life. That's what will happen one day as the Lord calls out our names and restores us to life once more.

And it's only possible through him. You see at the beginning of the chapter the Lord Jesus risked his life to save Lazarus from death. He knew he was in danger and yet he went to his friend.

But at the end of the chapter he speaks to us not of Lazarus' burial but of his own. And in verse 7 of chapter 12 Jesus speaks about his own burial his own death.

And this time he's not risking his life to save a friend from death he's giving his life to save his people from death. John Owen the Puritan theologian spoke of the death of death in the death of Christ and that is the New Testament witness.

Paul in 2nd Timothy Jesus Christ has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. The writer to the Hebrews since the children have flesh and blood he shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death that is the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death the death of death in the death of Christ so the Lord Jesus has the victory life conquering death and what a wonderful hope that is we live in this unprecedented time and every day we're told of the tens of thousands around the world getting sick or dying from the coronavirus we're given detailed figures of the excess deaths in our own countries never before have we been bombarded so often with reports of death statistics each day and what a wonderful comfort it is to have the words of Jesus in verses 25 and 26

[27 : 57] I am the resurrection and the life he who believes in me will live even though he dies so friends we saw the sisters request they prayed that Lazarus might live and Lazarus did live though not perhaps how they might have expected yet it was necessary for this to happen that the Son of God may be glorified and that others would come to believe in him and believe that God had sent him sometimes the Lord doesn't answer our prayers in the way we expect but like Nabeel Qureshi we are to trust him and love him and trust him for the future the Lord manifested a sympathetic response to the bereaved and as Christians we are to do the same we will grieve but we do not grieve as those who have no hope we must remember the theological truths of the resurrection on the last day but we must show a wholehearted pastoral response and to weep with those who weep and we saw finally the supernatural resurrection the Lord's power and glory that foretaste of what he will do for each and everyone who believes in him when he calls our names and wakes us from our sleep that we might be with him forever oh death

I know you are no more able to destroy me but you are sent as a messenger to conduct me to the golden gate wherein I shall enter and see my saviour's unfailed face forever what a comfort that is for us but also what a challenge and if you have been viewing these broadcasts and we're very glad that you have but you wouldn't yet identify yourself as a Christian can I direct your attention to verse 26 and the words of Jesus when he says do you believe this and maybe you've tuned in and you enjoy the music the wonderful music and you enjoy the Bible readings and listening to the prayers and today the Lord Jesus says to you do you believe this do you believe that he is the resurrection and the life do you have hope and security in him well friends today might be that day when you move from darkness to light when you cross over from death to life and you find in

Christ the resurrection and the life and find in him your hope and security in this life and in the world to come well friends thank you for the invitation may God bless you and may God keep you until we meet again Amen