

The Death of Lazarus

John 11:2 *It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.*

Lazarus is the brother of Martha and Mary, with Mary being the same woman who later anoints (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37-38; John 12:3) Jesus, with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard, before his death.¹

John 11:9-10 *Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."*

He was telling them that just as a typical day in their agrarian culture had a number of hours of daylight in which work could be done, He had a set amount of time in which to accomplish the deeds given Him by His Father.²

John 11:11 *This He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep."*

In light of the Bible's teaching on the resurrection of the dead, sleep is an apt metaphor for death. However, properly speaking, any "sleep" that occurs is only true of our bodies. Our bodies lie in the grave after our deaths, and our spirits do not go to sleep but go to be with the Lord until the resurrection of our bodies on the last day. (Phil. 1:23).¹

Philippians 1:23-24 *But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.*

to depart means "to loose from all the confinements, pain, and limitations of this life" *be with Christ*. Death brings us immediately into the presence of Christ – no soul sleep or no purgatory in between.³

John 11:14-15 *So Jesus then said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him."*

This, in turn, helps us to see one of the purposes that our Creator has for allowing us to experience grief and suffering. Pain, while not in itself a good thing, is a means through which our Lord works for the final good of our redemption.¹

The ancient Jewish rabbis believed that when a person dies, his soul hovers near his body for three days, which meant it was theoretically possible for the soul to reenter the body during that period and bring it back to life. After day three, the soul would depart and death was irreversible. The body

would remain in the grave until the resurrection at the end of the age. Given that belief, John's mention that four days have passed since Lazarus' death when Jesus arrives at Bethany is an important detail.¹

The resurrection of the human body is a cardinal doctrine in the orthodox Jewish faith. But in the fifth of His "I am" statements, our Lord completely transformed the doctrine of the resurrection and, in so doing, brought great comfort to Martha's heart.⁴

John 11:25-27 *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" 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."*³

Jesus of Nazareth never uttered a bolder statement than this. He directly linked eternal life with Himself. He tied everlasting life, ultimate victory over the greatest enemy of all mankind, death itself, with faith in Him. To believe in Christ is to gain eternal life.⁶

Q. 85 *Death being the wages of sin, why are not the righteous delivered from death, seeing all their sins are forgiven in Christ?*⁵

A. The righteous shall be delivered from death itself at the last day, and even in death are delivered from the sting and curse of it;^s so that, although they die, yet it is out of God's love,^t to free them perfectly from sin and misery,^u and to make them capable of further communion with Christ in glory, which they then enter upon.^w

s. 1 Cor. 15:26, 55-57; Heb. 2:15; John 11:25-26; t. Isa. 57:1-2; 2 Kings 22:20; u. Rev. 14:13; Eph. 5:27; w. Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:23

The Raising of Lazarus

John 11:33-35 *When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.*

The force of the verb here is much stronger than is indicated by the word *troubled*. A more accurate translation would be, "Jesus was irate."²

He was not angry at Mary and Martha. That which caused the anger of the Son of God to boil up and overflow in His spirit was that He was in the presence of the ravaging destruction of the greatest enemy of mankind, death. This was the foe that, in only a few days, He was going to confront head on in the throes of the agony He would experience on the cross, dying to conquer death.²

John 11:43-44 *When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

Some of the people stood paralyzed with fear or with astonishment, gasping at what their eyes had just beheld. This may have been the greatest of all Jesus' miracles during His incarnation, the climax to all the other signs He had performed earlier to corroborate who He was. ²

Expediency and Extravagance

The religious authorities were intent on getting rid of Jesus. Upon hearing of the resurrection of Lazarus, "the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council". ¹

John 11:48 *"If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."*

John here refers to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council that the Romans allowed to deal with many of the Jew's internal matters, particularly with respect to faith and practice. The council consisted mainly of Sadducees, who held the priesthood in first century Judaism, though representatives of the Pharisee party made up an influential minority on the Sanhedrin. ¹

The Sanhedrin feared that enthusiasm for Jesus would spark a rebellion among the Jews and that the Romans would come in and punish the Jews, dissolving the Sanhedrin and destroying the temple. ¹

John 11:50 *"nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish."*

Yet those words would express the central doctrine of the Christian faith – the substitutionary atonement of Christ. ³

John 18:14 *Now Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people.*

Caiaphas, the high priest, said they should seek His death, for it would be better for one man to die than for all the Jews to suffer Roman reprisal. ¹

- This unwitting prophet was right that it was better for Jesus to die – not for political redemption as Caiaphas thought but to purchase eternal salvation (vv. 51-53). ¹

Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the town called Ephraim, at least for a little while. Ephraim is probably the same town as Ephron (2 Chron. 13:19) located about twelve miles outside of Jerusalem. ¹

In church history, some people have sought out martyrdom or invited persecution. Certainly, we must be willing to die for our Savior if we are ever called upon to recant our faith, but that does not mean martyrdom is something we should purposefully seek. ¹

Suffering

It is when we view our suffering as meaningless – without purpose – that we are tempted to despair. ⁶

- In all our prayers, we must let God be God. No one tells the Father what to do, not even the Son. ⁶

Job did not understand why God had called him to suffer, but he did understand that God *had* called him to suffer. ⁶

Ecclesiastes 7:14 *In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider – God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything that will be after him.*

The bottom-line assumption for anyone who believes in the God of providence is that ultimately there are no tragedies. God has promised that all things that happen – all pain, all suffering, all tragedies – are but for a moment, and that He works in and through these events for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). ⁶

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But Lazarus died again. Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. Yet every person Jesus healed eventually died. ⁶

When God issues a call to us, it is always a holy call. The vocation of dying is a sacred vocation. When the summons comes, we can become angry, bitter, or terrified. But if we see it as a call from God and not a threat from Satan, we are far more prepared to cope with its difficulties. ⁶

Every person who has lost a loved one to death knows the poignant hope that abides. It is the hope that somewhere, sometime, we will see our loved ones again. That hope is the consolation we cling to when death separates us from our loved ones. ⁶

¹ *Tabletalk* magazine, Robert Rothwell, June 2018, pp. 44-52

² *John (St. Andrew's Expository Commentary)*, R. C. Sproul, 2009, pp. 201-218

³ *New American Standard Bible*, Charles Caldwell Ryrie *study Bible*, 1995

⁴ *Be Alive*, Warren W. Wiersbe, 1986, pp. 169-180

⁵ *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 1647

⁶ *Surprised by Suffering*, R. C. Sproul, 2010