

Lazarus Raised

John 11:38-44

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“He cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth” (Jn. 11:43-44).

The raising of Lazarus from the grave is arguably Jesus’ greatest miracle prior to his own resurrection. Here, Jesus conquers not just sickness but death itself. And, unlike earlier instances when Jesus raised someone who had just died, here we have the raising of a man who had been lying in the grave for four days and whose body was suffering decomposition.

The raising of Lazarus concludes the first half of John’s Gospel, often called “The Book of Signs.” These chapters center on seven miracles that are signs of Jesus’ deity. The Bible uses the number seven to represent completion, and this miracle fittingly completes John’s record of signs. The first miracle, in which Jesus turned water into wine, symbolized Jesus’ power to give life. “This seventh, climactic sign demonstrates Jesus’ power over death, thus foreshadowing his own resurrection.”¹ Alexander Maclaren writes that this miracle “crowns the whole, whether we regard the greatness of the fact, the manner of our Lord’s working..., the revelation of our Lord’s heart, the consolations which it suggests to sorrowing spirits, or the immortal hope which it kindles.”²

Christ’s Lesson in Faith

¹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 343.

² Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, 17 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 10:98.

Lazarus had become ill and his sisters Martha and Mary had summoned Jesus. When Jesus arrived, his friend was already dead. Drawing near to the tomb, he had shared the sorrows of those he loved. John 11:35 says, “Jesus wept.”

Once at the tomb, Jesus was “deeply moved again” (Jn. 11:38). This shows that he enters into our sorrow and feels the pain of our suffering. Yet, like a warrior come to the battle, Jesus immediately acts: “Take away the stone,” he said (Jn. 11:38). With these words, his tension is released into action. Herman Ridderbos writes: “Enough now of tears and wailing! Enough honor has been bestowed on death! Against the power of death God’s glory will now enter the arena!”³

If we think about the setting, we will not be surprised at Martha’s reaction. The sisters were comforted by Jesus’ presence, but Martha was astonished and alarmed by Jesus’ command to unseal the tomb. “Lord,” she objected, “by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days” (Jn. 11:39). This provides an important confirmation of this resurrection. We cannot object, as some have tried to do, that Lazarus was prematurely buried or was merely near to death, since Martha warns about his decomposition.

It is easy to criticize Martha’s unbelief, as many have done. But Jesus was acting to expose a decomposing body, which we be a horror especially to those who loved him. It is true that Martha had forgotten what Jesus had earlier told her. When she met him on the way into town, Jesus said, “Your brother will rise again” (Jn. 11:24). But anyone who has buried a loved one will not be quick to criticize Martha’s alarm. She shows how easily our faith breaks down under trial and how often we need encouragement to remember what we believe.

For this reason, I do not think Jesus’ answer was a rebuke. Instead, he took the occasion to offer a lesson in faith. A study of the New Testament will show that at the scenes of his miracles, Jesus is always concerned for the faith of his disciples. Earlier, when the disciples’ boat was sinking and Jesus quieted the winds and the waves, he first said to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” (Mt. 8:26). On his way to Bethany to raise Lazarus, he told the disciples,

³ Herman Ridderbos, *John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 403-404.

“Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe” (Jn. 11:14-15). Now, standing before the tomb, Jesus instructs Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” (Jn. 11:40). Earlier, Jesus had said to her “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn. 11:25). Having said this, Jesus now reminds Martha that if her faith will uphold for a few minutes longer, she will see this glorious reality unveiled before her eyes.

Jesus’ instruction to Martha overturns a widely held opinion. People say that “seeing is believing.” But Jesus tells Martha that if she believes, she then will see. It is true that when it comes to men and women we often can only trust their word when we see the results. Someone applies for a job and tells us he is capable to do it. We may hire him, but we also watch his performance. Only when we see what he can do can we really believe what he has said. But when it comes to God, his Word is enough for us to believe. And if we believe God, taking him at his Word, then we will see and receive our salvation.

Christians are just as challenged today to believe and see the glory of God. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes:

It makes all the difference in the world, if you lose your job and say, ‘This catastrophe is not for my dishonor and my hurt, but it’s for the glory of God that Christ may be magnified.’ The doctor comes and says to you, ‘I’m sorry to tell you that as far as I know, medical science can do absolutely nothing for you. Your case, from our point of view... is incurable.’ It’s a wonderful thing to say, ‘My Father measured this. He it is that put the spoon to my lips. The medicine may be a little bitter, but He knows what He’s doing. He’s the Great Physician. And He’s the Great Resurrector. He’s the One who’s constantly able to bring life out of death. And out of the death of my circumstances, He is able to bring the life of joy and victory and triumph.’⁴

In all circumstances, and especially in every trial, if we believe, we will see God’s glory in the way he provides for us, the way he strengthens us, and the way he saves us. And many others will see his glory through our faith.

⁴ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Illustrating the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1973), 149.

Christ's Example of Faith

It seems that Jesus' words were enough for Martha. She believed and the stone was removed. So now, having given a lesson in faith, Jesus offered an example of faith: "Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me'" (Jn. 11:41-42).

The first example Jesus provides is that our faith must look upwards to God: "Jesus lifted up his eyes." Martha's problem was that her eyes were looking down at the difficulties and only saw the obstacles to salvation. There was Lazarus's grave; what could possibly be done? Her eyes were filled with her circumstances when her faith should have been filled with God. This is what our faith should gain from our study of Scripture: an awareness of the power and grace of God. This is the lesson of Psalm 121, which begins, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 121:1-2). God is the Creator. When we look upwards to him, we see the power that made all things and therefore is mighty to save.

Secondly, Jesus' faith displays bold confidence in God. He prayed, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me" (Jn. 11:41-42). Apparently, Jesus had already prayed for Lazarus's resurrection, so he approaches the grave with a bold confidence in God's power. Our faith should act the same way: we should boldly believe in God's power and thank him even in advance for the blessings he will provide. "I will never leave you nor forsake you," God has said (Heb. 13:5). "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus," Paul assures us (Phil. 4:19). Ours should be like Jesus' faith standing before Lazarus' tomb, thanking God and knowing that he will show his mighty power.

This past week, I was speaking with a group of Moslem women in the village of Seguku, Uganda. They had invited me and three Ugandan Christians into their impoverished home. As we spoke to them about the grace of God, they demanded that we perform miracles. They were poor and hungry, and they wanted to know why God did not answer their prayers. I replied by asking them how they named God

when they prayed. “Allah,” they replied. “You see,” I said, “that is why God does not answer your prayers.” When you can call God “Father,” as Jesus did, and as all who believe in Jesus are authorized to do, then you may pray with confidence of his blessing.

When we have a personal relationship with God, as Jesus did, and which we gain through faith in Jesus (Jn. 1:12), we can know that God hears our prayers. And when we remember the grace that God has already shown us in sending his Son to die for our sins, then we are bold to believe in his willingness to help us. Paul wrote, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Knowing this, our faith should be confident in God and bold in prayer.

Thirdly, Jesus reminds us that our faith is to give a witness to the world about God. He concluded his prayer, “I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me” (Jn. 11:42). Jesus was praying aloud, not to draw attention to himself but to God. He wanted all who heard – and there were many Jews who had gathered around – to believe that it was God who sent him and was at work in him. Our faith should have a similar effect, encouraging others to seek their own relationship with God through Christ. William Barclay comments, “So much that we do is attempted in our own power and designed for our own prestige... It may be that there would be more wonders in our life, too, if we ceased to act by ourselves and for ourselves and set God in the central place.”⁵

Christ as the Object of Faith

The episode at Lazarus’s tomb tells us much about faith. However, its main purpose is to reveal Jesus not merely as an example of faith, but as the great object of our faith. This is what he prayed for, that we “may believe that [God] sent me” (Jn. 11:42).

It must have been dramatic to see Jesus walking up to Lazarus’s tomb, calling for the stone to be removed, and, when it was removed, praying as he did to his Father in heaven. These were bold claims – to declare that God always hears him and that God had sent him. The onlookers may have been opening their mouths to object. This was,

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:116.

after all, an open challenge to their unbelief. But before anyone else could act, Jesus spoke again: “When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus come out.’” (Jn. 11:43). And at the call of Christ, to the amazement of all and to the glory of God, John writes, “The man who had died came out” (Jn. 11:44).

John emphasizes that Jesus cried in a loud voice. The reason was not that he needed to shout loudly. But Christ was speaking in his divine authority. His was the voice that called the cosmos into being (see John 1:1-3) and now that same voice calls the dead back to life. Even the grave does not withstand his power. A. W. Pink writes, “Here was public proof that the Lord Jesus had absolute power over the material world and over the realm of spirits. At His bidding a soul that had left its earthly tenement was called back from the unseen to dwell once more in the body.”⁶

Because of this Jesus is a Savior we can wholly trust. In the face of death, we look to him and find death’s conqueror. Gary Burge tells of a woman named Barbara, whose faith encouraged him early in his Christian life. One day she called to say that the doctors had discovered an inoperable brain tumor. Over the next two months, Barbara physically wasted away before his eyes. At their last meeting, she held his hand and spoke with confidence. “Don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’m about to go on the greatest adventure of my life.” Soon afterward, she died.

Many people speak this way because they are avoiding the reality of death. But Barbara was not. Burge writes, “Her confidence was grounded in the strength of her knowledge of Jesus Christ. She knew him. She knew who he was. She knew his power and his ability. And she knew that he was waiting for her the moment she died... Jesus overpowered death at the tomb of Lazarus. Jesus likewise overpowered the dread of death for Barbara.”⁷

Jesus raised Lazarus back to a mortal life, which means that Lazarus later died again. But imagine his thoughts as he lay on his deathbed the second time. No doubt, he still had fears about the experience of dying. But imagine his confidence. “He knew that Jesus had a

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 614.

⁷ Gary M. Burge, *John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,), 329.

relationship with death like no other. Jesus was ‘resurrection and life,’ and so he was not going to the grave alone.”⁸ We know the same thing about Jesus, not because we have returned from the dead, but because of the witness of God’s Word. Therefore, by trusting in Jesus we may lay down in the grave confident of rising again.

John places a distinct emphasis on Jesus’ voice. Jesus called to Lazarus, and by the word of Christ, the dead man rose. This resurrection is a picture of how every conversion takes place: by the call of Christ in the gospel as it is preached, witnessed, or read. Earlier, Jesus had taught, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10:27). Peter wrote, “You have been born again..., through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23).

The call of Christ has power to raise the dead and convert the sinner. It is often remarked that this is why Jesus spoke the name “Lazarus”: otherwise all the tombs would have opened! Likewise, Jesus calls sinners to saving faith by name. We refer to this as the effectual call, that mighty work by which Christ calls us personally in his gospel and draws us with power so that we believe and follow him.

This means that by the power of Christ, even our poor preaching and stammering witnessing have power to save those who hear. I mentioned that last week I had the privilege to explain the gospel to a group of Moslems in Uganda. I spoke of our need for forgiveness and of God’s provision of his own Son to die on the cross to pay for our sins. This led to questions, which I tried to answer with God’s Word. Other questions came and after some time I had presented the gospel plainly. So, thinking I had found a good opportunity, I asked if they wanted to profess their faith in Jesus. One of them replied, “Mguzu [that is, white man], we already have believed.” It was not me, but Christ who converted them through his Word. I then had the privilege of leading five Moslem women and one Moslem man as they opened their hearts in prayer to God through new-born faith in Jesus.

What makes it possible for a white American, speaking almost entirely through an interpreter, to lead a group of African Moslems to profess their faith in Christ? At the beginning of our conversation, they were openly hostile to Christianity and thirty minutes later they

⁸ Ibid.

had prayed as Christians and were meeting members of the local Christian church. What causes this? It is not the persuasive power of man, but the saving power of Christ in his Word. Therefore let us preach God's Word. Let us speak the gospel of Jesus, because it is, the Bible says, "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The voice of Christ that raised Lazarus from the grave still speaks in the Word so that those dead in sin come to spiritual life.

If Jesus' cry before Lazarus' tomb speaks of the power of his Word, then Lazarus' resurrection depicts the experience of everyone who believes. Paul states this in Ephesians 2 when he describes every conversion as a spiritual resurrection. Before coming to Christ, Paul says, we are "dead in... trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). This means that we are spiritually dead, unable to lift a finger to assist our own salvation. We are dead to God. We care nothing for God's Word. We have no interest in worship or the things of heaven. But when the call of Christ penetrates our hearts, we are raised to spiritual life. Paul says, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4-5). As a result of spiritual rebirth, brought about by the power of Christ in his Word, we are changed. Our hearts are open to God. Our minds hunger for his teaching of truth. Our hearts are warmed to Christian fellowship. And our souls yearn to worship the God of grace. This is the spiritual resurrection, the new birth experienced by everyone who believes.

But notice what Jesus said after Lazarus had come forth. John writes, "The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go'" (Jn. 11:44). This shows us that having been raised to life with Christ, we are no longer to go on wearing grave-clothes. Like Lazarus fresh from the grave, the new-born Christian still bears the marks of death and sin. If he is to experience the new life to which he is called, the old life must be left behind, the clothes of death exchanged for garments of holiness and life. "Put off your old self," Paul writes, "which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24).

Have you embraced Jesus' call to live in a new and holy way? Or are you still wrapped in the grave-clothes of your former existence? If you are, then realize not only that Jesus calls you to a new life, but that he has power to transform you in holiness. Just as Lazarus experienced his resurrection by hearing Christ's voice, you will be transformed by the power of God's Word. But you must come to church and hear it. You must study the Bible for yourself. Then you will be "transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

And know that on a great day to come, the voice of Christ shall be heard throughout creation. For Christ will return according to the promise of his gospel. The Bible says, "The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise" (1 Thess. 4:16). Jesus cried, "Lazarus, come out" (Jn. 11:43), and the man who was dead came back to life. This is the Savior we need, the saving Lord we must trust. And on that great day to come, when Christ cries out once more, it will be the voice of our loving Savior that we hear, a voice we recognize as our own good shepherd, and he will lead us into the house of the Lord forever.

Christ's Power, Our Privilege

The account of the raising of Lazarus concludes with a final wonderful detail. Notice that when Lazarus came forth, Jesus told others – undoubtedly Martha, Mary, and the other disciples – to "Unbind him, and let him go" (Jn. 11:44). This shows that Jesus delights to have us participate in his saving work of life. Earlier, he called for others to remove the stone, now others are called to remove Lazarus's grave-clothes. This shows that there is work for us to do. The power is Christ's, but ours is the privilege to play a part in the salvation of others. James Boice comments:

We cannot bring the dead back to life. But we can bring the word of Christ to them. We can do preparatory work, and we can do work afterward. We can help remove stones – stones of ignorance, error, prejudice, and despair. After the miracle we can help the new Christian by unwinding the graveclothes of doubt, fear, introspection, and discouragement.

Are you willing to play such a role in the saving work of Christ?
Have you prepared yourself to witness, encourage, instruct, and serve?
Arthur Pink writes, “There is no higher privilege this side of Heaven
than for us to be used of the Lord in rolling away gravestones and
removing graveclothes.”⁹

⁹ Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 209.