

22. Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

John 11:38-57

The Gospel According to John

Optional Warm-up Question: What's the worst smell you've ever experienced? What was the reason for the smell, and how did you encounter it?

The God Who Empathizes with His People

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, we see a heart-wrenching picture of the pain experienced by the Lord Jesus as He encounters the bitterness of death and suffers alongside His friends. In the passage which we are studying today, we are given a glimpse into the emotion Christ displayed in His humanity. While being fully human, we witness Him as Lord over death, performing a most miraculous display of the power of God. In our last study, we explored the things that led up to Jesus' return to Martha, Mary, and the dead Lazarus. Jesus was moved with strong emotion at the weeping of Martha, Mary, and the mourners at the tomb:

³⁶Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹"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." ⁴⁰Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴²I 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." ⁴³When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The 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." ⁴⁵Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him (John 11:36-45).

In verse thirty-eight, Jesus was deeply moved again. John emphasizes to us that Jesus was wracked with sobbing as His heart was touched at the raw emotion of each person there with Him at the tomb. Why does John tell us a second time that he was deeply moved? I think it is because he saw something in Christ that day that he could not let go without drawing attention to the way His heart was touched by the pain of His friends around Him. Jesus was convulsed with sobbing. Here we see something completely different from any other so-called god of this world. This God that we see in the Scriptures empathizes with His creation. A person with empathy understands and shares the feelings of another. The God of the Bible can feel what we feel, i.e., the things that give us pain touch His heart. Isaiah the prophet wrote about Him, saying, "**Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows**" (Isaiah 53:4). The writer to the Hebrews, talking about Jesus being our High Priest, writes:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to **empathize** with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus feels the pain of His people. The King James Bible translates it as Jesus “groaned in Spirit” (vs. 33, 38). He felt the pain of His people groaning under the consequences of the fall of His creation. Matthew tells us more about Jesus’ healing in this way: “**This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our diseases’**” (Matthew 8:17). What Matthew is saying is that Christ felt the pain of those who were hurting, and the pain touched Him or was “bore” by His innermost being. Let’s look at another example: When a woman with an issue of blood pushed her way in the crowd around Jesus and touched the hem of His garment, she was instantly healed, Jesus immediately stopped and said, “**Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me**” (John 8:46). There was a divine exchange by the Lord, he carried her sickness, and power left Him as a result. He felt the burden of illness before He carried it. This notion is similar to what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus, Who had never sinned and was holy in every way, was repulsed by the very thought of carrying all men's sin, guilt, and shame to the cross (Luke 22:42).

When Saul, the religious zealot who became the Apostle Paul, was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians and throw them in jail, the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road. He said to Saul, “**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads**” (Acts 26:14). Saul had no idea that Jesus; God in the flesh, felt what His people feel. The Lord said to him, “Why do you persecute **me**?” Saul had been blindly persecuting Christians but did not understand that these were, indeed, the Lord's people! The Lord made it clear to Saul that He empathizes with His people and feels what they feel. The Lord had been prodding Saul's heart with conviction, such as when he saw the death of Stephen, the first martyr (Acts 7:57-60), but Saul carried on, even while under conviction at the godliness that he saw in Stephen that he lacked. Our wrestling and resisting against conviction (kicking against the goads) is only hard on us. God in His mercy showed Saul (Paul) His pain at what Saul was doing to God's called-out ones, the Church.

Question 1) Do you see God as a lofty judge, or can you imagine Him deeply moved by your pain? Can you remember a time when you were sorrowful? How does it feel to think of Christ entering into your pain?□

The Tomb of Lazarus

The city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas are built on the mountainous region of Judea. The difficulty this presents is that there is insufficient soil depth for burial places. To be buried in a cave or a tomb hewn out of the rock was only for the rich, such as the tomb of Lazarus. The entrance to the grave or cave would have had a coin-shaped rough-chiseled stone like a considerable cartwheel often weighing several hundred pounds as it was at the tomb of Jesus. When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to Jesus' tomb that resurrection morning, they were afraid that the three of them would not be strong enough to roll the stone away due to the size and weight (Mark 16:3). The entrance to the tomb would have a slot carved below, and the door would be rolled into place closing the grave. Often, the bones of whole families would be in one cave. □

The Israelites at the time were not practitioners of Egyptian embalming techniques; the bodies were allowed to decompose. What they did do, however, was to wrap the body in aromatic spices. In his book *The Reality of the Resurrection*, Merrill Tenney tells us about the typical procedure for the burial: □

The body was usually washed and straightened before being bandaged tightly from the armpits to the ankles in strips of linen about a foot wide. Aromatic spices, often of a gummy consistency, were placed between the wrappings or folds. They served partially as the cement to glue the cloth wrappings into a solid covering. A square piece of cloth was wrapped around the head and tied under the chin to keep the lower jaw from sagging after the body was encased.¹

The weight of the spices that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea put around the body of Jesus weighed seventy-five pounds in weight (John 19:39). If that was normal, and according to Scripture, it was, it would have been difficult for Lazarus even to get up, let alone get to the doorway. He was bound up with the grave clothes. It is similar to the way it is with us. Even though we received new life, sometimes we are still bound by the things that hold us to our old dead life in sin. We need to be unbound and released from the weight of things in our past life, the habits that held us down to our old life. □

Jesus commanded the disciples and those gathered there to roll back the stone from the entrance. Perhaps wavering at the impossibility of it all, Martha complained that the smell of death would be overpowering since Lazarus had been dead for four days. I wonder if there was an odor coming from the tomb? There couldn't have been an airtight seal on the door; it was only a rock-hewn door. We must ask ourselves at what point did the miracle take place? I think that as they moved back the stone, there was the stench of death coming from the tomb. After Lazarus had come back to life, many of the Jews who were there to witness this miracle, put their faith in Him. That kind of evidence would be hard to ignore. The Lord looked up to heaven and prayed to His Father, thanking Him first before calling out to Lazarus with a loud voice, "**Lazarus, come out!**" (v. 43). Christ called out Lazarus by name; otherwise, all those who were dead in the vicinity would have come back from the dead!

Let us consider what happened to the body of Lazarus after Jesus' words. With the seconds ticking away, the spirit of Lazarus returned to his body as His heart received new life and power and started pumping fresh blood around his body. That which was dead and decomposing suddenly gained life and energy. Rigor mortis would have set in between two and six hours after death, but now his limbs began to move again. At the loud voice of the Lord of Life, Satan had to release Lazarus from the sting of death. □

Can you imagine looking at the crowd around the tomb at that moment? It's easy for us because we know the details. We already know the end of this story. However, for them when they heard the command of Jesus, I'm sure there were those who smelled death and scoffed at the thought of Lazarus coming out of that tomb. How long did it take? Are we talking seconds or two or three minutes of silence before Lazarus stood at the doorway? In that gap of time, did the smell of death disappear noticeably first? As we look at the faces of those who heard the powerful words

¹ Merril C. Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963, Page 117.

of Jesus, what do you think were the thoughts of Mary, Martha, and the mourners with them?

Still wrapped in grave clothes, Lazarus appeared at the entrance of the tomb. It must have been difficult for Lazarus to stand, let alone walk due to the bandage-like wrappings that were around him. □

Question 2) Imagine yourself in the crowd of mourners. Describe the reaction of those hearing Christ commanding Lazarus to come out and then seeing Lazarus at the entrance. What do you admire most about Jesus at this moment?

One thing is sure: when Lazarus stood at the door, there were gasps of astonishment and screams of delight. Death had been conquered! We have a Savior that overcomes death and the grave! Jesus was and is always practical, for as soon as Lazarus appeared at the entrance to the tomb, He told those standing aghast to “Take off the grave clothes and let him go” (v. 44). Christ is very practical in all that He does, for elsewhere in Scripture we see that, when Jesus brought back from the dead the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue ruler, as soon as she awoke from death, He told them to give her something to eat (Luke 8:55).

Lazarus coming forth from the dead is a picture to us of our resurrection, for when Jesus comes for His church, He will come with a loud shout:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

The raising of Lazarus is not entirely similar to the day when Christ comes for His Church for Lazarus was not given an incorruptible body and still had to die when his time came, but the Lord used this miracle to remind us that there is a time coming when we that love Him will hear His voice. At that time, our spirit that is with the Lord will return to a new, redeemed, and gloriously powerful body (1 Corinthians 15:43). We will come out of our graves to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

I wish John had told us more about the celebration back at Martha’s afterward, don’t you? Instead of the after-funeral meeting and reminiscing about the life of Lazarus, they must have been avidly listening to his experience of dying and being with the Lord in heaven. I wish that I could have been a “fly on the wall” at that party! I would have loved to hear their conversation and see the relief and delight of the sisters as they wept and embraced their brother, recounting the whole episode from the time they thought they had lost him for good to the time when he came forth at Jesus’ command. I’m sure there was quite a praise party to the Lord as they relived this miraculous event.

The Plot to Kill Jesus

There will always be those who will rain on our parade, and that is what we see next. Some of those who opposed Christ saw the danger to the religious elite that this beautiful miracle posed; they went to the Pharisees and told them what had happened in Bethany.

⁴⁶But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. “What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.” ⁴⁹Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” ⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life. ⁵⁴Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead, he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. ⁵⁵When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, “What do you think? Isn’t he coming to the festival at all?” ⁵⁷But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him (John 11:38-57).

When the religious elite heard the news of the raising of Lazarus, an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin was called. The Sanhedrin was the presiding religious group of men seventy in number, established at the time of Moses. The High Priest ruled over them, making their number seventy-one. When Moses was overwhelmed with work, the Lord took some of the power of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on seventy of the elders of Israel to help him in counseling and spiritual direction (Numbers 11:17). By the time of Christ, the Sanhedrin had reached the pinnacle of its importance, legislating all aspects of Jewish religious and political life. The Sanhedrin was composed of Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees focused on living their lives in complete obedience to the Law, and they didn't involve themselves or care so much for the politics of the nation except as it related to the keeping of the law. On the other hand, the Sadducees were aristocratic, wealthy, and intensely political. All of the priests were Sadducees, and they did not believe in the resurrection; whereas, the Pharisees did.

A Defining Moment

We don't know if all the seventy men gathered, but there is evidence that suggests that those who were sympathetic to Christ were not notified of the meeting. The seventy or so elders began to talk about the recent development regarding Jesus, for they faced a "defining moment." What is meant by the term, a *defining moment*? It is a time in our lives that defines who we are and who we will come to be, i.e., an event that typifies or determines all subsequently related occurrences. What does a defining moment look like? For Peter the Apostle, it was when he heard Jesus preach and Jesus told him to drop his nets for a catch. Even though he complained that he'd fished all night, nevertheless, he let down his nets and caught a massive amount of fish. The defining moment was when Jesus told him to leave his nets and follow Christ, and from then on Peter would catch men (Luke 5:1-11).

I can remember a crucial defining moment in my own life. For me, it was a time when I was working with my father on his fishing boat, and the government had placed a herring ban on all the fishing boats due to the quota being fulfilled. My father decided that, because no other fish were allowed to be caught at that time of the year, he would carry on fishing anyway and sell the fish to a private buyer, and gain more profit. I understand his reasoning at that time. The government made it very difficult for fishermen to earn a living by the placing of bans, considered unfair by a lot of fishermen. As a Christian, I had two options: carrying on with my father and fishing illegally, or quitting the business and walking away from my nets. God spoke to me from the Scriptures, **“Come, follow me and I will make you into fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19)**. I decided at that time to give up commercial fishing, and I never went back. My life changed due to the decision that I made at that moment.

Defining moments don't occur often, but they change your life depending on how you react to the moment. The defining moment in front of the Sanhedrin at that time was their response to this current event. The surrounding area must have been buzzing about the miracle of Lazarus. Perhaps, there had been some who, once skeptical, were now convinced that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah. How would they react to this miraculous event that had just happened? Would they explain it away and seek to justify their position? Would they ignore it and try to focus on controlling the “movement” that they now considered dangerous?

Question 3) Can you think of an event that you would describe as a defining moment that changed your values or your life altogether? What changes did it bring to your life?

We have already seen that the defining moment in front of the Sanhedrin was the decision they now had to make. Everyone would have been looking to them as many must have been wondering if He (Jesus) was, indeed, the Messiah, the one foretold as coming. Previously, the religious leaders as a whole had rejected Him. This public rejection would have caused a dilemma for those who had been devoutly following the religious leaders. What should they do about Jesus of Nazareth? The Sanhedrin's concern was that, if they did not stop Jesus, then all men would go over to Him, and this would undermine their authority. They would lose their life of ease and comfort, milking the system that they had built up, the system upon which they had come to depend for their livelihood and social standing in the community.

Again, we see the person of Jesus forcing people to make a decision that will affect their eternal destinies. The High Priest, Caiaphas, influenced them to the degree that they would murder Jesus rather than see religious division among the Jewish people, thus leading to the Romans' taking away the authority of the Sanhedrin. The leaders made a decision that they felt was the best for their survival and what they felt was for the good of the whole Jewish community.

⁵¹He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵²and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (John 11:51-52).

Question 4) Was this prophecy that Caiaphas spoke a true prophecy inspired by the Spirit of God? What do you think?

I'm convinced that the Spirit of God inspires not all prophecy; otherwise, why would Paul be advising the Church to weigh up or judge the prophetic word spoken among a body of believers:

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should **weigh carefully** what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29).

Even biblical prophets got things wrong. When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the future king, Samuel stood before the eldest and tallest, and he thought that God's anointed was before him. God had to speak to him that Eliab was not the one that God had chosen (1 Samuel 16:6). When King David had a desire to build a temple for God in Jerusalem, he shared his plans with the prophet Nathan. Nathan's response was, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you" (2 Samuel 7:3-5). God had other plans, though, and during the night, He spoke to Nathan that he was wrong and that he was to tell David that a son and heir of David would build the temple and not David himself. Again, a prophet got it wrong.

Then in the Book of Acts, a prophet named Agabus took hold of the Apostle Paul's belt and tied his hands and feet with it. He said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:11). He wasn't far off, but it was the Romans, not the Jews, who bound Paul. The Jews wanted to kill him! Don't get me wrong, I do believe in the gift of prophecy, but I will always seek to use the Word of God as the plumb line to see if the word of prophecy could be something that the Spirit of God is speaking as a word of strengthening, encouragement, or comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

In this instance before us today, it is possible that this prophecy of Caiaphas had a self-seeking motive. However, in God's sovereignty, He allowed it to be recorded as prophecy, for even the enemy's plan was working out God's eternal purpose. When Caiaphas spoke these words, it might have been manipulation on his part to get people to side with him in the act of giving up Jesus, a righteous man. He saw that some of the religious elite were considering that, the more they objected to Jesus' actions, the more it drew attention to Him: "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). Their defining moment forced them either to accept Him or to reject Him, and they chose to keep their authority, comfort, and place instead of bowing the knee to the Lordship of Christ—even amid signs and miracles that were compelling evidence of Christ's true identity.

As students of the Gospel According to John and the life of Jesus, maybe this is a defining moment for you. How much evidence does it take before you, too, to decide as to the person of Christ? Is this a defining moment as you consider what your response will be to the Holy Spirit? Is there a sin or habit that you are harboring, keeping you from following the Lord? Will you walk away from something that you know in your heart is not right before God? To some of you reading these words, the Spirit of God says, "This is your day. This is your defining moment." If you choose to follow Him, He promises to be with you in helping you to change. The choice before us today has incredible possibilities. Eternity weighs in our decisions. Abandon every thought of position, ease, and comfort that would keep you from bowing your knee to the God of creation. Ask Christ to forgive you for your sin and begin to walk with Him. If you have already made this decision, take time to consider if anything is holding you back from fruitfulness as a

disciple. He will answer you. In this study, we have witnessed His power in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It is this same Spirit Who will work in you to bring you into newness of life.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for the power of Your words. Thank You for calling us from darkness into Your marvelous light. Help us to be aware of life's defining moments and say "Yes" to Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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