

21. Jesus, the Resurrection, and the Life

John 11:1-37

The Gospel According to John

Chapter ten of the Gospel of John closed with Jesus' walking the 3,500-foot sharp descent from Jerusalem to the Jordan Valley some 825 feet below sea level, an area just north of the Dead Sea. He went there after His confrontation with the Jewish religious authorities when they tried to stone Him because He spoke of Himself as the "Good Shepherd," and made the statement, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus escaped their grasp and came down to the location where John the Baptist was baptizing the many people who came to him by the Jordan River (John 10:42). This location was where the messenger told Him the news about the sickness of his friend, Lazarus. □

¹Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²(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.) ³So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴When 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." ⁵Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, ⁷and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸"But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" ⁹Jesus 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. ¹⁰It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light" (John 11:1-10).

When Jesus received this news, He was not close to the home of His friends. To reach the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, just over a mile and a half east of Jerusalem, it would take a day's journey up the eighteen-mile ascent to his friends in Bethany. We can learn many things in this story, not only about Who Jesus is but also the way He responded when faced with the enemy called death.

It's a lovely thought that the village is known as the village of Mary and Martha (v. 1). Wouldn't it be a beautiful thing if your devotion to God were such a well-known fact that it would cause your name to be renowned in your town or city? John, the writer of the Gospel we are studying, assumed that his readers had heard about Mary from the other Gospel writers (v. 2). He does not introduce us to Mary's anointing of Christ with costly perfume until the next chapter. The sisters sent word to Jesus that "the one you love is sick," meaning Lazarus. We need to remember that Jesus enjoyed spending time with the three and that they had become close friends.

They did not ask Jesus to come, for they knew that it would put such enormous pressure on Him. The sisters were aware that the religious authorities were after Christ and wanted to kill Him. To come anywhere near Jerusalem would be to court disaster, but they could not avoid letting Him know the situation. He was their only hope. Perhaps, at the back of their mind was the knowledge that Jesus had healed the Centurion's servant from a distance (Matthew 8:5-13), and, maybe, He would do a similar thing for Lazarus.

When the Lord heard this news, He responded that it would not end in death and that God's Son would be glorified through it. I'm sure the messenger took those words back to Martha and Mary. The problem was that, even as Christ said it, Lazarus was already dead. Let's think it through. It took a day for the messenger to walk the distance to where Jesus was. Jesus waited two days (v. 6) before He left, and of course, when He went, it took at least a day to get back up to Jerusalem. When He got there, Martha told Him that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days (vv. 17 and 39).

Question 1) Why didn't Jesus heal from a distance like He did the Centurion's servant? What was the purpose of delaying for two days? Have you ever questioned God's timing?

Jewish tradition taught that the soul or spirit of a dead person was believed to stay near the body for up to three days. When the color of the face changed, and signs of decay became evident, then they considered the person to be dead with no hope of resuscitation. After three days, it was believed to be impossible for the soul to re-enter the body. By the time the messenger came to Jesus, the Lord knew what was on the Father's heart. Every recorded funeral that Jesus attended resulted in the dead person raised to life. There was the widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:11-17), but doubters could say that he had only just died. Then, there was Jairus' daughter, and they could have said that she was not yet buried (Matthew 9:18-26); however, here now was the raising of Lazarus, where corruption had set in some time ago.

If the Lord had departed to raise Lazarus right away, people could have argued that it was a healing that took place, rather than a resurrection, and the Father wanted to teach us that Jesus is, indeed, the Resurrection and the Life (v. 25). The Jewish people believed that, according to the Scriptures, there would be a resurrection of the dead and that one of the signs of the Messiah would be that He would perform that particular miracle. The resurrection of Lazarus would be a blessed event, but more than this, it would also be a sign to them that Jesus was and is the Messiah Who has power over death, i.e., the prophesied One Who would raise the dead:

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 (Isaiah 26:19).

²Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:2-3).

The fact that Lazarus was dead for four days meant that there would be no room for doubt in people's minds when he was raised from the dead. Here was evidence for the Jewish people that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah!

Now, let us return to the disciples and Jesus after this message reached them. After two days of waiting, when Jesus told the disciples that it was time to leave and go back to Judea, they all knew that He was talking about Jerusalem. They had to go through Bethany and Jerusalem to get

to the Judean plateau. They immediately began to question His decision, knowing that it would be hazardous for all of them.

The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem had already tried to kill Jesus. They were all marked men as disciples of Jesus, the renegade against the Jewish religious elite. They could not see any reason why they should be going back up to Jerusalem. As far as they knew, all was well with Lazarus. Jesus Himself said that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, so they thought that he was well until the Lord made it plain that he was dead (v. 14). So, when Jesus spoke to the messenger that it would not end in death, do you think that Jesus got it wrong? Of course not! He had said that it would not *end* in death, the emphasis laid on the word *end*. He reassured them that all would be well while they continued in the light. Time was counted in hours; the day was twelve hours and the night, also. The time would come when darkness would reign from His crucifixion until He rose again. The Lord knew that His time was coming, but until then, He had nothing to fear as He walked in the light and went about His Father's business.

¹¹After 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." ¹²His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; ²⁶and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world" (John 11:11-27).

Question 2) Jesus used the term *fallen asleep* to describe the death of a believer. Will those of us who are believers be unconscious and asleep until Christ comes? What happens to us when we die?

The Lord described the death of a believer as "sleep." It is the separation of the soul and spirit of a man from the body. The body is in the grave asleep, but the spirit, the invisible part of us that is the real "us" goes to be with the Lord. The first martyr, Stephen, when the Jews were stoning him for his faith, saw the Lord standing at the right-hand side of God the Father (Acts 7:56), and then the Scripture says that he fell asleep in the Lord (Acts 7:59). His body was there in a pile of stones, but the Lord Jesus had stood from His normal seated position at the right-hand side of the Father to receive the spirit of Stephen to Himself. When Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead, Scripture says that her spirit returned (Luke 8:55). If her spirit returned, where had she been? She had been with the Father, even while her body was in the physical realm lying there

before Jesus. In writing to the church at Thessalonica and Corinth, Paul the Apostle wrote:

He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him (1 Thessalonians 5:10). We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Even when a believer's body is dead (asleep), we will be very much alive and with Christ. Paul wrote elsewhere about this particular thought:

²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is **better by far**; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Philippians 1:22-24).

Paul wrote that he desired to depart and be with Christ. If he believed that he would be unconscious, it would not be "better by far." No, Paul believed that the instant he died, he would be with Christ. When we believe, like Paul, that death is better by far, this attitude of faith in Christ will prepare us to be ready to face anything.

Thomas has been called the doubter too often, but when we read that Jesus said to the disciples that they were going up to Jerusalem and Judea, Thomas was packed up and ready to go: **"Then Thomas called Didymus said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, so that we may die with Him'"** (John 11:16). He fully expected to die with Christ. Death may be the king of terrors to many people, but Jesus is the King of kings and has overcome death and hell for us who have entrusted our lives to Him.

Question 3) After being told about Lazarus, Jesus waited two days before He left for Bethany. Share a time when you have been frustrated with the timing of God. At a later time, was there anything good that happened as a result of the delay?

I remember a time when, for three and a half years, I battled with the US Immigration Service over trying to get my Resident Visa for the USA. It was a trying time because I could not receive any wage for the entire time while I was waiting. We had to trust the Lord to provide for us. This waiting period was very frustrating. Had it not been for our friends and the grace of God, I don't know how we would have made it through that time. Looking back, I became stronger in my faith due to the many times the Lord sent people to us with finances to help us through that stressful experience. God's timing is different from our timing; we would prefer to have all of our answers to prayer be immediate! Jesus did not go right away to His friend's house. We know this because it states that, after the steep ascent, Jesus arrived near to the village of Bethany (v. 17, 20). Martha was told that Jesus was coming, not that He was there. (v.20).□

Now, we see Martha rushing outside to meet Jesus, while Mary stayed. To what place did He arrive? It is likely Christ arrived outside of the village where the tombs were situated. Martha came to the place where He was waiting. Jesus and the disciples would have been tired after ascending the sharp incline from the Jericho Road. When Martha heard that the Lord was coming, it was instinctive. She stopped whatever she was doing and dashed to meet Him without

Mary, but the Lord would not raise Lazarus until Mary was there as well. He wanted them both to greet their brother as he came forth from the tomb.

Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were well known in Jerusalem, for the Scriptures tell us that many Jews had come to comfort the sisters when they heard that Lazarus had died (v. 19). John does not tell us why Mary stayed behind. We know that Martha was a perfect hostess, always caring for her guests. Maybe, she had learned her lesson from Mary's waiting at the Lord's feet and listening to Christ's words. Now, she was determined to put Christ first and her responsibilities to her guests second. We are left to wonder why Mary stayed at the house.

When Martha came to Christ, she was full of "if only's." **"If you had been here, my brother would not have died"** (v. 21). We can often regret things that happen in our lives, whether by our own choice or by random misfortune. Life is full of "if only's" and "what if's." Life is full of questions. However, if we stay focused on the "if only's" in our lives, we can miss the more important question, which is, "What now?" Our question to the Lord in such situations is to be "What now, Lord? What is the next step?"

No problem or situation is so big or complicated that it escapes a solution, especially when we invite the Lord into the equation and ask for Him to step in with His power. Here, Martha expressed her regret. However, she also knew that nothing is too hard for the Lord, for she ventured further to say, **"I know that even now, God will give you whatever you ask"** (v. 22).

We are often hard on Martha when we read about her and her sister, but Jesus looked at her grief with tenderness and felt her pain. As we learn in this passage, she got a lot right! She dared to hope and declared her belief that He *is* the Messiah, the Son of God, Who has come into the world! We may recognize Jesus in our situation, but have we reached out to Him in expectation? Martha's faith was brought to a point where she could say, **"I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask"** (v. 22). However, she doesn't ask Him! Many of us have come to the place where we have strong faith, but we don't ask Him to move miraculously. It is like the story of the man who had a demonized son: □ □

²¹Jesus asked the boy's father, "How long has he been like this?" "From childhood," he answered. ²²"It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." ²³"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for one who believes." ²⁴Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; **help me overcome my unbelief!**" (Mark 9:21-24).

This man, like Martha, had a battle with his unbelief. He believed that Jesus could heal and deliver his son, but like many of us, including Martha, our faith is focused on the situation that seems so dire and impossible before us. We need help from God in battling our unbelief! The Great *I AM THAT I AM* (Exodus 3:14) is in front of Martha and looking for an expression of her faith. He shared with her just Who He is— **"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?"** (verses 25-26). This is the fifth *I AM* statement of Christ. It is as if the Lord is saying to Martha, "I am all you need Me to be." So often, we see the Lord seeking to stretch the faith of His disciples, and this is what He is doing with Mary and, perhaps, with each of us, i.e.,

lifting our eyes to invite Him into our situation and to expect the Lord to do something in answer to our faith. “We have not because we ask not,” said James (James 4:2). In the situation that confronted Martha, He is the One who has life and resurrection power in Himself, for He is the Life and the Resurrection. The Lord wants to get our focus off our “If only” questions, and instead, for us to ask Him, “What now? What do You want to do now, Lord?”

Has there been a difficult time or experience in your life when you have said, “If only this would not have happened,” or, “If only I would have made this decision instead,” etc.? If you have regrets or sadness about a past situation or present difficulty, invite Jesus into the situation now.

Question 4) What is your “if only” situation? What comes to mind? Share if you feel able. (It is okay to pass if it is too uncomfortable).

Martha returned to the house to get Mary, for the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus would not take place until she arrived. When Mary was called, she dashed out of the house, and all the people followed her:

²⁸After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” ²⁹When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹When 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. ³²When 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.” ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴“Where have you laid him?” he asked. “Come and see, Lord,” they replied. ³⁵Jesus wept. 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?” (John 11:28-37).

When Mary arrived where Jesus was, presumably near the tomb, we see her devotion to the Lord. Again, she falls at His feet (v. 32). She also said the same thing as Martha, “**Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died**” (v. 21). We then see an outbreak of emotion in Mary and Martha and the Jewish people who have come to grieve the death of Lazarus: “**When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled**” (v. 33). The Greek word translated as “deeply moved” is *embrimaomai*. John uses this word only here and in verse thirty-eight of chapter eleven, which is similarly translated: “**Jesus, once more deeply moved.**”

Let us think about this Greek word. In different situations, Matthew and Mark in their Gospels also used this Greek word, where it is translated, “**Jesus warned them sternly**” (Matthew 9:30) and, “**Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning**” (Mark 1:43). In another situation, the disciples expressed their anger using this Greek word translated: “**and they rebuked her harshly**” (Mark 14:5).

Question 5) When John used the Greek word, *embrimaomai*, to describe the response of Jesus to

the outpouring of emotion at the tomb, what was he trying to communicate and why?

Some would say that John was describing sternness or anger seen in Jesus that day at the weeping of the Jewish mourners. I cannot communicate what was going on better than commentator William Barclay:

Why the anger? It is a suggestion that the display of tears by the Jewish visitors to Bethany was sheer hypocrisy, and that this artificial grief raised Jesus's wrath. It is possible that this was true of the visitors, although there is no indication that their grief was synthetic. But it was certainly not true of Mary, and it can hardly be right here to take *embrimaomai* to imply anger. Moffat translates it: "Jesus *chafed* in spirit," but *chafed* is weak. The Revised Standard Version translates: "Jesus was deeply moved in spirit," but again that is colorless for this most unusual word. Rieu translates it: "He gave way to such distress of spirit as made the body tremble." With this, we are getting nearer the real meaning. In ordinary classical Greek, the usual usage of *embrimaomai* is of a horse *snorting*. Here it must mean that such deep emotion seized Jesus that an involuntary groan came from deep within His heart. Here is one of the most precious things in the gospel. So deeply did Jesus enter into men's sorrows that His heart was wrung with anguish.¹

Here we see a beautiful picture of our Lord Jesus entering into our sorrows with us. The prophet Isaiah spoke of Him as being a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3). The Lord here is the perfect model of Psalm 51:17: "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." I have known men who have put on the Lord Jesus to such a degree that they weep very easily around pain and suffering. What a beautiful thing it is to have a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17) and to be able to enter into the pain of others and weep with them when they weep (Romans 12:15 KJV). What an example the Lord is to us as we live our lives in this world. God understands our pain! Even though we often do not know why He allows suffering in our lives, we know that He sees all things. That is why His timing is perfect because He knows the end from the beginning. □

We will look at Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead in our next study, but it would be good to close our study by asking the question: what is your "if-only-you-had-been-here,-Lord" situation? Now would be a good time to break into groups of two or three and pray for one another that the great "I AM THAT I AM" would step in and be your help in whatever situation you are in as you read these words. Ask Him the question; "What now, Lord?"

Prayer: Father, thank You for the perfect example of Your Son, the Lord Jesus, for being able to enter into our pain and suffering. Please help us to learn to live like Him in every way. Amen!

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¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of John*, Published by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, page 97.