

The Disturbing Death of Lazarus

John 11:1-37

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Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.³ So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."⁴ But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."¹⁶ So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

¹⁷ Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. ²⁰ So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

²⁸ When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." ²⁹ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. ³⁴ And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" – John 11:1-37, ESV

Introduction: The Darker Shades of Providence

If I were to take a quick poll of the room to ask you if you believe that God works all things out according to His will and in His timing, I'm sure most of you would probably agree with that statement. I certainly agree with it.

However, knowing a truth in abstract and living in the light of its reality are sometimes two very different things. The truth is I don't really handle disappointments and set-backs very well. More often than not, I act as if I expect things to work out according to my will in my timing, and I'm not very happy when they don't.

I remember when we were expecting Andrew. His due date was June 9, 2004. This would be right at the end of my first year as the Principal of New Covenant Christian School. I thought this was perfect: He would be born right when the school year was ending, and I would have a more flexible schedule over the summer as we adjusted to life with a newborn. God had a different plan, and Andrew was born on April 6th, more than two months early and just in time for the most hectic time of year in my first year ever running a school. The first month, when Andrew was in the hospital in Columbia, I was working in Abingdon, and we were living in Owings Mills, was very difficult.

Yet we also saw amazing support and encouragement through these hard weeks. People provided meals for us. School staff and parents stepped up to cover events and help make things run smoothly. And, when he got out of the hospital in May, Andrew got to attend his own baby shower, a wonderful and encouraging event that displayed the love of the body of Christ in powerful ways.

As turns of providence go, that one was relatively mild. Although we had a very stressful time, it lasted just a few weeks, really. Some people deal with much darker and more difficult providences. Mary and Martha faced one when their brother Lazarus turned deathly ill and Jesus was a few days' journey away, and it only got worse when Lazarus died days before Jesus arrived.

A. Lazarus

We are told three times in today's passage that Jesus loved Lazarus:

1. The message Mary and Martha sent to Jesus said simply, "*Lord, he whom you love is ill.*"
2. John, to make sure we knew this was true and wasn't just something in the mind of Martha and Mary, tells us, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*"
3. Then, in response to Jesus' weeping, "*the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'*"

When darker providences come into our lives, we are often tempted to question whether or not God loves us. Some people would even say that any sickness or difficulty we face in life comes from either as the direct consequence of some terrible sin against God or from a lack of faith in God and His promises. They teach us that we can be healthy and freed from trials if only we have faith and live in obedience.

Lazarus' sickness and death deny that way of thinking in strong, clear terms. Martha, Mary and Lazarus were core supporters of Jesus. They hosted Him and His disciples when He came to Bethany, near Jerusalem, and obviously had a close relationship with Him. We're not told of any grievous sin or lack of faith. If anything, the words of Mary and Martha in this passage reveal deep and strong faith.

B. Jesus

So, if Jesus truly loved Lazarus, how do we explain His strange actions? He does not respond to the news of Lazarus' illness with urgency. In fact, we're told that He intentionally waited where He was for two full days before He left to travel to Mary and Martha. Even more puzzling, we're told, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*" (vv. 5-6) John is telling that the reason why Jesus stayed where He was for two more days was because of His love for Martha and Mary and Lazarus.

To help us understand what is happening, we should get the geography and the timeline clear in our minds: Jesus is staying on the other side of the Jordan, where He had gone with His disciples at the end of John 10. It was apparently a 3-4 days' journey by foot from Jerusalem. So, the messenger was sent by Martha and Mary 5-6 days before Lazarus' death, thus arriving to Jesus and His disciples 2 days before Lazarus died.

We know Lazarus is still alive when the messenger arrives to tell Jesus about his illness and it seems obvious that Jesus waits until Lazarus has died to leave for Judea. He tells His disciples, "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,*" indicating that he had just died, and Jesus knew it by His supernatural knowledge. Then, Jesus and His disciples leave on the journey to Bethany, arriving four days after Lazarus' death and burial, as he would have been buried the same day he died.

So, what is Jesus doing? How is this love? Why would He delay? Why four days?

Well, Jesus tells us the answer Himself when He first receives news of Lazarus' illness: "*This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*" The miracle of Lazarus' raising, which we will examine next week, will be the seventh and final sign of Jesus in the Gospel of John before His resurrection. It will be the climactic sign, showing the greatest power.

Jesus is aiming to glorify God the Father, display His own glory and power as the Son of God, and strengthen the faith of His disciples, including Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The best way for Him to do this is to delay. Arriving four days after Lazarus' death allows Him to raise Lazarus after the Jewish people would have given up all hope. A Jewish rabbinical teaching held that the spirit of a person remained near the body for three days after death, making resuscitation theoretically possible. Yet after three days, the spirit was said to depart for the after-life, making a return to life impossible. This teaching was not based on Scripture, of course, but it was believed by many of the Jewish people nonetheless.

For Jesus, the raising of Lazarus gave Him the perfect opportunity to teach His disciples an important truth about Himself. Just as Jesus fed 5,000 and used that sign to teach "*I am the Bread of Life*" and opened the eyes of the man born blind just after He had taught, "*I am the light of the world,*" so He now unites the sign of Lazarus' raising with His teaching, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*"

This is the 5th I AM statement of Jesus in John:

1. *I am the bread of life: 6:35, 48, 51*
2. *I am the light of the world: 8:12; 9:5*
3. *I am the door of the sheep: 10:7, 9*
4. *I am the good shepherd: 10:11, 14*
5. *I am the resurrection and the life: 11:25*

This is perhaps the deepest and most complex of Jesus' I AM statements so far. Jesus sets up this statement by vaguely telling Martha, "You brother will rise again." Martha takes this to be a general reference to the hope of the resurrection at the end of time. Jesus wants her to know that the general hope of the resurrection she has held onto for years is much more personal than she knows, So he says, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*"

Jesus words are wonderful and also a bit confusing. It can appear on the surface that He's repeating Himself, but He's actually talking about two different resurrections and thus two distinct and connected ways in which He is the

resurrection and the life. Martha has physical, end-times resurrection in mind, so Jesus starts here when He says, “Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” Believers who die in the Lord will surely be raised to life again at the Last Day, when Jesus returns in glory to usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

Yet Jesus is the resurrection and the life before the Last Day, so “*everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*” Jesus means that everyone who comes to spiritual life and thus comes to believe in Jesus shall never truly die. The life they have been given is eternal life.

This theme was first explored in John’s Prologue, 1:12-13 – “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*” Believers in Jesus have been born of God, and those born of God will never die.

Then, in John 3, Jesus talks to Nicodemus about this life in terms of the new birth, saying, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” and “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*”

John 3:36 further explains Jesus’ words about being born again by saying, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*”

Finally, in what we have seen so far in John, Jesus says in John 6:47, “*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.*”

Jesus Himself is the resurrection and the life. He Himself is the eternal spiritual life we receive now by faith, and He Himself is the power of resurrection and eternal glorified physical life we will enjoy for all eternity in the new creation. In fact, the internal spiritual life we enjoy now is the first-fruits, the down-payment, on the eternal life we will enjoy in the new creation. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*”

We also see Jesus’ great sympathy here. Not only is He seeking the glory of His Father and the manifestation of His own glory by revealing more of who He is to His disciples, but He is also sympathizing with His disciples in their grief. Jesus isn’t faking sympathy or just demonstrating that He can be sympathetic. He enters into grief for His friend with his friend’s sisters. The word used for Jesus’ weeping is different from the word used for Martha’s weeping and the weeping of the Jews. Their weeping is described as a crying aloud, a wailing. For Jesus, we’re told He shed tears, He broke into tears.

The weeping of Jesus was open and observable. He was no false stoic, idealizing a lack of emotion. So noticeable was His weeping that the crowds said, “*See how he loved him!*” But they, too, were confused by Jesus’ actions, by His delay in coming and by His failure to heal His beloved friend. They asked, “*Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?*”

C. The Disciples

In fact, everyone around Jesus in this passage seems confused by His words and His actions. Not least among the confused are the disciples.

When Jesus decides to remain where He is for two days, they don’t say anything. They are obviously not eager to return to Jerusalem. When they were in Jerusalem for Tabernacles in John 8 and then when they were back in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication in John 10, the crowd had tried to stone Him both times. It’s probably early

Spring, around March, at this time. So, they remember what happened in October and in December, and they're not eager to return so close to the scene of two attempted stonings just a couple of short months later.

Then, when Jesus announces His decision to go to Lazarus, they feel the need to remind Him of what the crowds in Jerusalem were trying to do: *"Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"*

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. ¹⁰ But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

They did not understand what He meant. But what He meant was really very simple: His time of ministry was the day, and while that day of ministry remained, they were safe, no matter what the crowds wanted to do. The day would come for Him to lay down His life, but it was not yet.

Then, Jesus tells them pretty clearly what He intends to do, although they still don't get it –

¹¹ After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." ¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. ¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

Thomas probably speaks for the rest of the disciples when he says, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* He is probably speaking of dying with Jesus, not dying with Lazarus, so his words are a mixture of ignorance and bravado.

D. Mary and Martha

Mary and Martha are as confused as the disciples, and even more distressed, because of the grief of the death of their brother. Based on what they both say to Jesus, it seems obvious that while they were waiting for Jesus during those long days, they began to say to each other, *"If only Jesus were here . . ."* and then after Lazarus' death, they said, *"If only Jesus had been here . . ."* Jesus had likely been in their home many times. Now when they needed Him the most, He was so far away. Why?

Yet they still trusted in Jesus. They knew in their hearts that if He had been there, He could have healed their brother. Right after Martha says to Jesus, *"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died,"* she says, *"But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you."* Then, in their incredibly poignant exchange, when Jesus tells Martha *"I am the resurrection and the life"* and then he asks her, *"Do you believe this?"* She said to him, *"Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."* The death of her brother did not diminish her faith in her Lord.

While Martha showed her faith by her profession, Mary comes and falls at the feet of Jesus. Earlier in her life, we saw Mary in the Gospel of Luke sitting at His feet, listening to Him. Now we see her falling at His feet and weeping. In the next chapter, we will see her anoint His feet with costly perfume. Mary is thus seen three times in the same place, at the feet of Jesus! What better place could there be?

E. The Crowds

Beyond the disciples and Martha and Mary, we see the gathered crowd of Jewish mourners. Some Jews were in the house with Mary, consoling her and grieving with her. We're told later that others came from Jerusalem. These

people are confused, too, and their confusion is the last thing we hear before Jesus comes to the tomb to raise His friend, which we will see next week.

As we see the raising of Lazarus next week, we'll see that their response to this great work varies, depending on where they stand with God. Many come to believe, but some actually rush to tell the Pharisees and encourage them to take action against Jesus, even after being eye-witnesses of the most astounding miracle. But more on that next week . . .

Conclusion: What about us?

We've taken a different approach to today's passage than we usually do. Instead of going line-by-line through the text, we've looked at Jesus' words and actions and the words and actions of those around Him. We've done this to prompt us to think about ourselves and our lives in the light of this passage. Jesus is at work in our lives and in the world around us. How do we respond?

In today's passage, we see Jesus acting in ways that confuse His followers and seem to be adding to their hurt. Yet in the midst of His confusing actions and mysterious words, we as readers of John's Gospel can see that He is acting to glorify His Father, to better reveal Himself to His disciples, to show His love and care for those he loves, and to sympathize with His loved ones in their grief. His actions are not rushed by the urgency of others, but neither are they delayed, even when they seem like they are. He acts in perfect love and wisdom.

In this passage, we can see what Jesus' intentions are because John shows them to us. We don't have the benefit of an inspired Gospel-writer to neatly narrate our lives. Yet we can know that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. He never changes. If we are His sheep, He loves us just as surely as He loves Lazarus and Martha and Mary. He loves us personally, individually and wisely. As we spend time getting to know Him in His word and in prayer, we can know that His heart remains the same, as do His priorities.

So, what is He doing in our lives? He is glorifying His Father. He is revealing Himself to us. He is loving us. And He sympathizes with us in our trials and grief. And how should we respond? Like His disciples, we should follow Him. Like Martha, we should profess our faith in Him clearly. And like Mary, we should fall at His feet in worship.