

**John 11: 1-16; “Our Friend Lazarus Sleeps”, Sermon # 61 in the series – “That All May Honor the Son”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall, on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, in the Morning Worship Service.**

We have here a very touching scene in the life and ministry of Jesus. A certain man, it says here, was sick; that is, Lazarus of Bethany. Bethany was the town of Mary and her sister Martha it says here in verse 1. It is worded in this way because Christ was very close with all of them; Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They were some of His closest disciples, but they were also some of His dearest earthly friends. They liked to put Him up at their house when He was nearby. The Mary who is mentioned here was the same Mary who anointed Jesus with fragrant oil and wiped His feet with her hair. You may be thinking, well, I do not remember the apostle John mentioning that incident in this book yet, and you would be right. He will not mention it until the next chapter, chapter 12, where he relates it in the first 8 verses, but he mentions it here so that we will know that this was the same Mary, this woman who greatly loved her Lord.

Since this is a very long passage and there is so much good truth for us to consider, I am going to preach it in two parts. I am going to do what Jesus did here and deliberately wait a few days until next Sunday to bring you the glorious climax of this story in the raising of Lazarus from the dead. What I would like us to focus on this morning, is Jesus’ words and deeds, 1<sup>st</sup> of all – When He heard that Lazarus was sick. 2<sup>nd</sup> – When He deliberately determined to wait to go to Lazarus. And 3<sup>rd</sup> – When He finally determined to go and wake Him up. May the Lord help us to receive these truths with a humble submissive spirit, and live in the expectation of what Jesus can, and what He will do for us on the Day when He raises us from the dead.

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – Let’s consider what Jesus’ words and deeds were when He heard that Lazarus was sick.** (verses 3 and 4)

So, Lazarus was very sick. He was probably burning up with fever, and writhing upon his bed, tossing and turning; praying and hoping that His dear Friend Jesus would hear about what he was going through, and that He would come to him. His sisters no doubt came to his bedside at many points. They tried to encourage him with the thought that they had sent word to Jesus and that He knew. They had sent to Him, and they told Him in the most endearing terms, that His friend Lazarus, His friend whom He loved, was sick. They all knew how loving, how thoughtful, and how faithful Jesus always was, to always help the sick people that He had just met; people who had come to Him for help. How much more would He respond quickly now, and hasten to come to come to them now, when He heard of Lazarus’ trouble.

Let us always remember that the Lord Jesus does love each and every one of His people. He knows of every sickness, every illness, and every weakness that you have. Remember when you are sick, that you should seek Him in prayer, and even ask others to lift up their prayers to Jesus that He might come, and that you might be healed. Too many people seek the physicians but they do not seek the Lord, the Great Physician. When Jesus heard the words of the messenger who they sent, telling Him that Lazarus was sick, the first thing that He said, in front of His disciples and the messenger who had brought Him word – “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”

Now, the reason that He said this was in order to bring real hope to everyone who was hoping that Lazarus would live. He was saying that this sickness that Lazarus had was not going to be unto death; that is, that even though he would die, the kind of death that he would experience would not be to go to heaven immediately, to live there for thousands of years to await the resurrection of all the dead on the final day of this world. Lazarus would indeed die, but he would only be dead for a few days. This Jesus knew. But the disciples did not know. But

I want you to see that the Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples by these words, to hope in Him continually.

Hope is a grace which our Lord cultivates in the lives of His dear people. “Now abide faith, hope, and love.” “The greatest of these is love.” So, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. It comes by believing in the promises of God and Christ. But hope is the desire and expectation that God will do something good; that He has a good purpose in the difficult things that He ordains for you. It is looking to Him with the desire and the expectation that He will help you to understand, that He will help you to endure, whatever trial, sickness, or suffering that He ordains for you, until He finally delivers your life from all distress. We need to learn to pray in hope, during the times of our sicknesses or other people’s sicknesses.

Listen to Psalm 71: 1-3. Perhaps Lazarus was praying in this way, when he was so sick. “In You, O Lord, I put my trust; let me never be put to shame.” “Deliver me in Your righteousness, and cause me to escape; incline Your ear to me, and save me.” “Be my strong refuge, to which I may resort continually; You have given the commandment to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress.” Verse 5 – “For you are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth.” “By You I have been upheld from birth; You are He who took me out of my mother’s womb.” “My praise shall be continually of You.” “I have become as a wonder to many, but You are my strong refuge.” “Let my mouth be filled with Your praise and with Your glory all the day.” Verse 12 – “O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!” And verse 14 – “But I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more.”

This sickness was for the glory of God! It had come to Lazarus so that the Son of God would be glorified through it; so that His power to uphold Lazarus in His spirit, all the way to death, would be seen. And then that He, our Lord Jesus, would be praised and honored, worshiped and adored, when He raised Lazarus from the dead. This mighty work would prove that He was from God, and that He was the Messiah of the Jewish people. It would confirm the faith and hope of all the people looking on, and all of Christ’s followers in every generation of the world would read of it in the Bible.

How could Jesus know that Lazarus’ sickness was not unto death? He knew it because He was God as well as a Man. And because He was God the Son, He knew all things related to the purpose of God the Father. He knew it because He and the Father had ordained it. Let us learn to glory in the sovereignty of God, and not be dismayed by it. God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have good things to give to us and do for us, in us, and through us, to God’s glory. All things, even life and death, sickness and health are in their Holy and Loving hands. Have you learned this truth, as it is stated in Psalm 62: 11 – “God has spoken once, twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God.” There is a purpose in all that He ordains, and in all that He permits.

Now, it is also true that we need to remember that we live in a fallen world. Because of that, we need to understand that people are sometimes going to get sick. And we all are eventually going to die, because of Adam’s sin in the beginning of the world. Adam was the one who brought sin and death into the world, and as a result we will probably only live to be 70 years old, the Bible tells us. Perhaps if we have strength, we may live to be 80 or 90, or even possibly 100 years old. However, we need to come to terms with this. We are given every day that we have, by God. Our times are in His hands. Therefore, we must hope in Him continually.

Whatever physical strength we presently have now, still we will only have so much time upon this earth, to learn from God; how to live our lives to His glory, and the earlier that we begin to think about what God would have us to be, and have us to be doing with our life, the better. Dear listener, the meaning of life is found in your knowing God, and in your being able to enjoy Him forever, beginning now. Will you not learn to see life in this way, and to pursue knowing God, trusting in Him, hoping in Him; learning to love Him with all of Your heart? He knows

exactly Your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual state at any given time. But He expects you to cultivate your faith, hope, and love, in Him.

Yes, even when you are sick, like Lazarus was, and maybe you are on a bed of pain. Yes, even when you are dying. If you cultivate these graces by looking to the Lord Jesus now, in the times that you are healthy, you will find that you will be able to exercise them when it comes your time to die. You must prove Him now, in the good times, that He might be your all in all when it comes your time to die. Psalm 71 again; this time verses 17-21 – “O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works.” “Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come.” This is what Lazarus was going to do, here in this situation; Mary and Martha too.

**2<sup>nd</sup> – Let’s consider Jesus’ word and deeds when He deliberately determined to wait to go Lazarus.** (verses 5-10)

“Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.” “So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was.” “Then after this He said to the disciples, ‘Let us go to Judea again.’” “The disciples said to Him, ‘Rabbi, lately the Jews sought 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.” “”But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” Here our Lord Jesus is setting forth the truth that He was not afraid to go back to Judea once again, the place where He had been persecuted by the Jews, because He was trusting in His Father’s protective love and care, and was going about to do His Father’s business.

As long as this was so, and it was always so with Him, He had no reason to fear any man. His time to die had not yet come, and so He did not fear men. He also gives a parable to explain His thinking on this. He says – Are there not 12 hours of light in the day? And if anyone walks in the daylight, they will not stumble, because the sun is lighting their way, and they can see things clearly enough that they will not stumble. Similarly, in the heart of a person who is walking in darkness, walking in sin and ignorance, they will stumble into sin continually and they will not be able to go about to do anything or fulfill God’s purposes or keep His commands as long as they walk in spiritual darkness. If they walk in the light of God’s favor and countenance, then they will not stumble, and they will be able to see how they can glorify God in their words and works.

So when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, why did He stay two more days in the place where He was? He did this for two reasons. First, it was His purpose and the purpose of the Father, to allow Lazarus to die so that the glorious miracle of his resurrection would have its greatest impact upon all of the Jews, and thus some of them come to believe in Christ. The second reason was in order to test, and make stronger, the faith of His disciples. And more specifically, the faith of Mary and Martha who knew that Jesus loved Lazarus and them. At first glance, it seems quite cruel for Jesus to do this thing; that He would deliberately stay two days longer before he went to them. They were aware that Jesus could simply speak a word, and Lazarus could be healed; even from a distance. Why would Jesus wait?

We must understand this important truth of the reason why Jesus chose to wait to do what He was able to do at any given time. It is for our sakes, as His brethren, that He waits, so that our faith might be built and strengthened. And it is also for the witness that will be borne to those who have not yet believed in Christ. How does a trial of waiting build your faith? It teaches you, that in God’s good purpose, He has a time and a place for everything under heaven. There is a time to be born and a time to die. But there will be a time when Christ will raise all the dead. And in His doing that, the greatest of His works, we must learn to wait His time, and not think that His greatest works must be done in our time, in all things that we have a concern

about. God will often make us wait, so that He might give something which is much greater, and much better than our expectation, or more even, than what we were hoping for.

And in His making us wait, God gets more glory for Himself. While we wait, our attention is upon Him and what He will do. In the process of this waiting, He teaches us to look to Him all the more, for the things which are the best things. Hudson Taylor used to think upon these words when he was learning to wait. “Enough that God my Father knows, nothing this faith can dim.” “He gives the very best to those who leave the choice with Him.” God knows what He is doing, even when we cannot see what He is doing, right away. Faith is the evidence of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen. But faith not tested, will not grow up into Christ. It will always remain weak. It will always be depending on instance answers to be satisfied and to be joyful.

But faith tested will grow stronger and stronger. Romans 5: 3 – “And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” “Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Even the grace of love needs to be tested and built in our lives. Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. And that is why He stayed two more days in the place where He was. He knew that in their minds and hearts that they were crying out for Him to come to them; come immediately, to help their brother to be made well again; so that he would live and continue on with them and with Jesus; learning from Him, walking with Him, growing spiritually in Him.

But Jesus would even disappoint their loving expectation of Him. He would wait, so that they would behold the greatness of His power as well as the greatness of His love, in the demonstration of that power in the raising of their brother from the dead. So, too, we who are Christians in this generation are made to wait as well, for the practical, observable demonstration of Christ’s love to us. We must see our loved ones die, and not see them immediately raised from the dead. We cannot presently behold the greatness of Christ’s power in His doing all that He could do for us, or what He will do for us on the final Day. We cannot see now. This is so that we might understand that He is testing our faith and building it by this means.

We know that He demonstrated His love at the cross, in His laying down His life for us, and taking it up again. This, He knows, should be enough for us, for now. We believe that and by faith and hope we receive it. And so, don’t be upset when you find that He is testing your love for Him, in order to build it. But rather, ask yourself – Am I a willing participant in this process? Or do I fight against it? Am I disappointed and even discouraged in having to wait; in thinking of having to wait for the greatest of blessings in this life and the next? But will you not believe that our God and our Christ will give always give the greatest of His blessings according to His good purpose and the exact timing to bring those blessings? Will you not believe that this waiting is good?

Let us trust that what God will show us, what He will lead us into, and what He will give to us, will always be greater than our expectation, in a good sense; in the highest sense, things according to His eternal purpose in Christ? He does these things in this way so that we will learn to believe that He will always prove His love and goodness to us, in the most complete way possible, and at the best possible time. Oh, it is good that His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. For He also does all things for our highest good, and for His glory. Will you not believe that He always intends good for you, according to the greatness of His love for you? He has a purpose, to bless you in an exceedingly greater sense than you can presently conceive? And so, will you not trust in Him for this, dear Christian, and hope in Him continually, and praise Him yet more and more for the help of His countenance?

**And 3<sup>rd</sup> – Let’s consider Jesus’ words and deeds when He finally determined to go and wake Lazarus up.** (verses 11-16)

“These things He said, and after that He said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’ Now, here He discloses His purpose once again, but He does it in such a way as to show forth His special and particular love for Lazarus, and how great His power was, over death. His disciples do not understand what He has said, and so they say – “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get well.” In other words, they are thinking – If he is just asleep, he is still alive and there is hope for him, that he will get better. But Jesus then said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’ “And I am glad for your sakes, that I was not there, that you may believe.” “Nevertheless, let us go to him.” And Thomas, speaking for the rest of them, said – “Let us go also, that we may die with Him.” He was thinking that they would all be stoned by the Jews if Jesus returned to Judea, but he was willing, and so were all the others, with the exception of Judas.

It is apparent from these words that Jesus always spoke in a way that would make His disciples think more deeply about spiritual things. He did not always go into lengthy explanations of spiritual realities, but wanted His disciples to understand things simply and plainly. And so, here in this situation, He uses this word picture. He speaks of Lazarus as being “asleep” and He was going “to awaken him”. He speaks of Lazarus as “our friend”, speaking of him as one beloved by all of them together. This, by the way, is how we ought to think of each other; as Christ’s brethren, and His friends. If a person is Christ’s friend, they are also our friend. There is, as Matthew Henry says – “a covenant of friendship between Christ and believers, and a friendly affection and communion pursuant to it, which our Lord will own, and not be ashamed of.” Because He calls us friends, we ought, as Christians, to see each other as friends, and we ought to all have the same love for one another.

To wake a person out of sleep is not a very difficult thing usually. In this case, Christ was intimating that for Him, it was just as easy a thing to raise a person from the dead as to wake him out of sleep. Matthew Henry says again – “When Christ tells His people at any time how bad the case is, he lets them know in the same breath how easily, how quickly, he can mend it.” If this is the case, my brethren, then in the very reasonable sense of His blessing us, we ought look forward to our own death and resurrection, entrusting ourselves and all that is a concern to us, into the loving hands of our Savior. Let us realize how great and particular His love is for us, and let us glory in the fact that He will, in His good time, bring us to Himself.