

Jesus is Life John 11:17-37 www.bible-sermons.org January 18, 2009

Jesus was on the other side of the Jordan River ministering because of threats to His life in Judea. While there, He received a message that a dear friend, Lazarus was gravely ill. Instead of leaving immediately, He waited two days. Jesus always sought the direction of His Father. (John 8:28) When Jesus was led to go to Bethany, the disciples feared going back into a dangerous area, but Thomas said they should go and die with Jesus. Maybe it was a bit melodramatic, but it shows you the sense of foreboding they felt at this time near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Commented [notes1]: 28 So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. John 8:28 (NIV)

The Jewish funeral during the first half of the first century was quite elaborate. Because of the heat and humidity, the dead had to be buried quickly. Wealthier families had burial caves hewn into limestone in preparation for their death. If someone died, the word would quickly spread. It was considered a righteous act to console the grieving family so most of those in the village and even friends from nearby cities would stop work and come to the funeral.

Expensive spices and extravagant clothes adorned the dead body. Treasures were prepared to be buried with the dead. The greater the expense, the greater the show of love for the dead, and so it became a competition that was financially crippling. Finally, in the middle of the first century Rabbi Gamaliel the 2nd ordered his students to bury him in a simple linen cloth, which became known as a traveling-dress. That ended the expensive tradition.

While the body was in the house, meat could not be prepared, nor wine drunk, nor was any studying to be done. Any food had to be prepared in another house and could not be eaten in the presence of the dead. When the body was carried out all furniture was turned upside down and people sat on the floor or low stools. The crowd of mourners would follow the family to the burial site and were not permitted to engage in small talk with the grieving family. Friends would eulogize the dead, and then form two rows for the family to pass through as they returned to their home wailing over the loss of their loved one. It was quite common to hire professional wailers to add to the sound of grief.

Mourning continued for 37 days, the first week being the most intense. The first three days were days of weeping, for it was believed that the spirit of the dead stayed nearby for that time to see if it might return to their body. It was thought that the spirit of the dead would see the sorrow and make every effort to return. In the next four days, all hope was lost and mourning continued. The family did not wash, wear shoes, anoint themselves or do any kind of study or business. This was followed by a less severe 30 days of mourning.

¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Jesus arrived after the three days of weeping, but still in the first week. Friends and family would still be gathered to comfort Mary and Martha, but for

the typical Jew, all hope for a miracle would be gone. ¹⁸ *Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem,* ¹⁹ *and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother.* The Biblical story is completely consistent with historical customs of that time.

²⁰ *When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.* Remember, Martha is the one that was busy serving (Luke 10:40), and Mary was the outgoing one that sat at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:39; John 11:45). Perhaps Mary was surrounded by friends and didn't hear about Jesus arrival, but Martha was accessible. She would have run down the road bare foot, her face stained with tears.

²¹ *"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died.* Surely the sisters had witnessed Jesus perform healings. Martha's first words express her confusion at why Jesus had not come immediately. She couldn't understand why someone who loved her and her brother so much would not drop everything and run to her side. But she went on to voice incredible faith. ²² *But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."*

It's the fourth day. The spirit is thought to have departed, but Martha held out hope that with Jesus, anything was possible. "Even now", even after four days, even after decomposition has set in, God will do whatever You ask! That is rare faith indeed. Pastor Ed can tell you stories of some that have tried to express such faith today, yet it was the person's appointed time to go and no amount of expectant faith could change that.

This week Pastor Frank is leaving for Mozambique because some had the faith of Martha and it was not the child's appointed time to go. I told you before of the story of the little girl that drowned. A large group of newly converted tribesmen were on their way back home when they saw the little girl's body in front of her father's house and heard the wailing for the dead. He was a Muslim Imam. She had been dead for hours, but they believed that Jesus could raise the dead. The Imam insisted that the Koran forbids prayers for the dead, but this group of tribal people had just seen Jesus raise Lazarus in the Jesus film. They didn't know it wasn't supposed to happen today. No one had told them that those things don't happen today. So they prayed. The dead body came back to life. The Imam was converted. The church exploded in numbers and is now in desperate need of training new pastors. That is why Pastor Frank is going for a few weeks, to teach some classes to these new pastors.

Do you know that even now God will do whatever Jesus asks? If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (1John 5:14) Martha had traditional beliefs to overcome. We have education to overcome. Would you say, "You can't raise a dead person! Decomposition can't be reversed." Or would you say with Martha, "I know that even now, even with our knowledge of what happens to a body when one dies, the breakdown of cellular structure, the process of decay, God will give You (Jesus) whatever You ask!?" Martha knew Jesus. She may not have

Commented [notes2]: 40 But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"
Luke 10:40 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 39 She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said.
Luke 10:39 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.
John 11:45 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.
1 John 5:14 (NIV)

understood exactly His nature, but she knew His relationship with the Father. She'd seen God answer His prayers.

²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Jesus told her Lazarus would rise. Martha had heard Jesus' teach. She knew of His promise to raise those that believe in Him. (John 5:28-29) She just implied that He could raise her brother even now, but this statement from Jesus might mean someday in the future. She wanted to clarify, so she stated her belief in the future resurrection. It was a belief held by the Pharisees and most Jews of that day but not by the Sadducees.

Jesus' response is one of the most profound statements ever uttered. It was another of His "I am" declarations. "I am the resurrection and the life." Every "I am" declaration has to do with Him being the life giver, (Bread of Life 6:35; Light of the World 8:12; The Gate 10:7; the Good Shepherd 10:11; The True Vine 15:1) but in this one, Jesus declares that He is the Life that He gives. (John 10:28) He gives Himself. Jesus' response to Martha's faith was to reveal more of Himself to her. That was one reason He delayed. The delay gave the opportunity for a greater revelation of Himself to the family of Lazarus, the disciples and the mourners. It is still bearing fruit even today. We read this passage and realize that Jesus backed up His words with actions that showed His words are unmistakably true. (John 10:38)

In typical Hebrew teaching style, Jesus said what He meant in another way to illuminate the meaning. *He who believes in me will live, even though he dies;* ^{26a} *and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.* First, Jesus affirmed her declaration of a coming resurrection but added why it was true. Faith in Jesus is the prerequisite for resurrection of the justified. It is what guarantees your body will live again with Him (John 6:40), because He is life and He gives us Himself. Then He addressed the present reality; faith in Jesus means you have life that cannot be taken from you, not physical life, but spiritual life. Lazarus was still alive spiritually. He had life from the time he first believed in Jesus, and he is still experiencing that life. If you believe in Jesus, you have life that is everlasting, because Jesus is everlasting life within you.

And finally He asked her, ^{26b} "Do you believe this?" Do you believe that people will receive their body back from the dead because they believe in me? Do you believe that faith in me means you have life that no one can take from you, life everlasting, now and forever? The implication was that all of that applied to Lazarus. Jesus was consoling her with a dose of reality. When we are grieving over some loss or great pain in life, we often need to ask ourselves what we believe. Has Jesus made a difference in that area of life? Then why are you acting just like the world that has no hope? (John 14:10)

People sometimes come for spiritual advice and I remind them what the Scriptures teach. Often they acknowledge it is true, but act as if it wasn't. If we

Commented [notes6]: 28 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. John 5:28-29 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. John 10:28 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 38 But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." John 10:38 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:40 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. John 14:10 (NIV)

believe it, then we act on it. All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28) Do you believe this? When Jesus seems to delay the answer we were looking for, we have to ask ourselves if we believe His word in spite of what seems to be evidence to the contrary.

Commented [notes11]: 28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (NIV)

27 "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." Martha believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah. She believed He is the Son of God, but that isn't exactly what Jesus was asking. He was asking if she believed Lazarus' relationship with Jesus meant that he would one day see his body raised and was even now in possession of life. A little later she will voice some doubt about whether or not Jesus is indeed the Giver of Life. Do we say we believe He is the Son of God and yet live without any expectation of His miraculous life in us?

Martha went to Mary and whispered that Jesus had come. *32 When 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."* This is the exact same thing that Martha had said only Martha followed it with a statement of faith. Mary didn't. It makes me wonder how many times they had voiced that complaint to each other. "Where was He? Why didn't He come? Surely He could have healed him?"

The things we say when we feel God hasn't heard us! I am amazed at some of the things that come from the lips of us Christians. "Where is God? I've suffered long enough! Why doesn't God do something?" It is as if He hadn't done the greatest work of all for us already! We talk as if we had never been recipients of grace. What do you think that sounds like in the ears of the One who died for you? He is working in you the same thing He was working in Martha and Mary, a greater understanding of who He is, which means a deeper relationship, increased faith, a maturity that is not shaken by the circumstances in this life.

The psalmists often complained like Mary. (Psalm 22:1; Psalm 43:2) It's a very human thing to do. Yet, when we use their words as an excuse to murmur, we should remind ourselves that we are recipients of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We have the Word of God in our hands. We have so many spiritual advantages that we best not make excuses for ourselves. We need to yield to the Holy Spirit within us. We can certainly voice our lack of understanding about what God is allowing, but we should always follow it with an expression of faith like Martha did. That is usually what the psalmists did also. (Psalm 22:24; 43:5)

Commented [notes12]: 1 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? Psalms 22:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 2 You are God my stronghold. Why have you rejected me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy? Psalms 43:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 24 For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. Psalms 22:24 (NIV)

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. To be moved (NIV) or groan (KJV) is a word that means "to snort in anger, or to have indignation on" (Strong's Concordance). "The second word, *troubled (tarasso)*, is literally 'troubled himself' (*etaraxen heauton*). So a better translation would be, 'became angry in spirit and very agitated'" (Beasley-Murray 1987:192-93). All that

Commented [notes15]: 5 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. Psalms 43:5 (NIV)

weeping, much of it a show to say to the family that you really cared, bothered Jesus. It troubled His spirit. As we read the English translation it seems like He is just mourning with them. That is not the case. He is angry at their distortion of what is happening. Physical death is not the end. (1Corinthians 15:55) All this grief is glorifying death as if it was the final say. Death is not the victor. Lazarus has life! What will it take for them to believe that? What will it take for us?

Commented [notes16]: 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"[8] 1 Cor 15:55 (NIV)

Whenever someone credits Satan with more power than God, it irritates me. When a born-again believer says, "I can't help it. I'm powerless over this sin in my life," it makes me angry. Who do you think Jesus is, some cream puff, string for a backbone, terry cloth robed nice guy? He can evacuate the Temple and stand toe to toe with the chief priests. He can lay down nailed to a cross and let all the forces of Hell attack Him and still walk away with them all captive. (Ephesians 4:8) He'll take on every army and weapon the world can muster with the sword that comes from His mouth. Don't tell me He lives in you but you don't have the power to change! (Revelation 19:15)

Commented [notes17]: 8 This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." Eph 4:8 (NIV)

It was time for action. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. The word for "weep" here is silent tears streaming down the cheeks, not wailing as the others were doing. The question is why? Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. He knows death is not the end. But He also knows the pain in the heart of Martha and Mary. He sees the chaos that sin has brought into the world and felt the pain of mothers who have lost a child or brother or husband. Sin causes pain, and that too breaks the heart of the One who weeps with us. He is the lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5), but He's also the Lamb of God (Revelation 5:6). He can snort in anger at death in one minute and weep with us in our pain in the next. We mourn with those that mourn. (Romans 12:15)

Commented [notes18]: 15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. Rev 19:15 (NIV)

³⁶ Then 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 have kept this man from dying?" That statement will cause Jesus to be moved again in anger. Death defies Him as the Life-giver. It's like a wrestler taunting His opponent in derision. "Shouldn't you have done something earlier?" And behind it is the voice of the Accuser, "You trusted the Holy Spirit and now look at all the pain." Satan always accuses others of the destruction he creates. He destroys and then tries to get us to feel guilty about it. (John 10:10)

Commented [notes19]: 5 Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." Rev 5:5 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Rev 5:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Romans 12:15 (NIV)

And in this corner, Jesus the Christ, Son of the Living God, The Word made flesh, Creator, Redeemer, King of kings and Lord of lords, Eternal One! Ding – this round won't last very long. Who is your money on? Really? Do you live like you've bet it all on Jesus? Do you live like you know He lives in you?

Commented [notes22]: 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10 (NIV)