

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Object Lesson on the Resurrection: Lazarus

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. (John 11:41–43, KJV 1900)

Scripture nicely punctuates its clear teaching of Biblical principles with lessons that apply those principles to the personal lives of individual people. It seems that God intends to remind us that His truth is not an impersonal philosophical idea that never really touches where we live and breathe. In our study passage, the New Testament devotes a rather lengthy chapter, fifty seven verses, to the experience of Lazarus and his two sisters. In such a focused account of Jesus' time in this world as we see in John's gospel, this much "Ink" deserves our interest and attention. The issue on the line is not a matter of casual interest or importance for us. Our study of Scripture should advance through two essential steps, interpretation and application. Our interpretation of this lesson embraces that the narrative gives us an account of a real event in the lives of those involved. Where do we go to learn the right application of this truth to our lives today?

The narrative begins in the first verse of the chapter. In the first two verses, we learn that Lazarus is sick, and that this family has a close and loving history with Jesus. They are not strangers who have heard of His miracles. They are close friends and believers in Him and in His purpose in Incarnation, in becoming flesh and living as a man in this world. Verse five emphasizes the point; Jesus loved these three people. Jesus' love in Scripture is never the superficial or casual kind of friendship that might shift with the slightest offense. His love is a reliable and permanent fixture in the lives of all His children.

At the time of the illness, Jesus and the disciples are some distance away from the Jerusalem suburb where Lazarus and his two sisters live, probably at least a two-day walk, the normal method of travel at the time. From the time that Lazarus becomes ill, the sisters send word to Jesus, Jesus delays going back to Jerusalem for two days. By the time Jesus and the disciples reach the community where Lazarus and his sisters lived, Lazarus has died and been buried for four days. From the human perspective, whatever He might have done had He been present earlier, Jesus is too late to make a difference. His intentional delay is puzzling at best for Mary and Martha. But God is not subservient to time. He created it (Genesis 1:1; "In the beginning...."), and He is Lord over it. Given the

details of this lesson, no one can credibly ignore or deny that Lazarus physically, literally died, and the family buried his dead body in a sealed grave. Jesus' reference to Lazarus sleeping (Verse 12) refers to his physical death, not to his soul. Scripture never teaches the idea of "Soul sleep."

Mary and Martha's accurate faith in Jesus should serve as powerful encouragement to us. They have known Jesus for some time. They have been with Him. He has spent time in their home. However, they accurately understand that He is their Messiah, God come in a human body. Martha's plea when she learns that Jesus has arrived is therefore understandable.

Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. (John 11:21–22, KJV 1900)

She has not given up on the possibility of a miracle. Jesus can still raise Lazarus from the dead. Think about her faith. When we read about her complaining to Jesus while Mary ignored household duties and sat at Jesus' feet, we are far too prone to criticize her. Don't be too hard on Martha. Every church needs a few faithful Martha types. Just imagine what the table would look like if your church had only Mary type women in it. You might have great fellowship, but you'd go home hungry. A healthy church needs both kinds of godly women.

Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. (John 11:23–25, KJV 1900)

Jesus doesn't tell Martha that He shall bring about the resurrection; He tells her that He *is* the resurrection and the life. Further, we learn from Martha that she believed in a literal, bodily resurrection. In this context, how could we conclude any other idea? And Jesus in no way corrected her belief; he thereby affirms her faith.

Given the focus in this whole chapter on Lazarus' literal, physical death, Jesus' point is clear. He speaks of His being the resurrection, the antidote to Lazarus' physical, bodily death. Despite Lazarus being dead, His spirit was alive, even as Jesus spoke the words to Martha, "...though he were dead, yet shall he live." Any effort to interpret this lesson as referring to anything other than to the resurrection of a literal physical body is inexcusable.

Despite their strong faith, Mary and Martha also wrestled with the reality of their brother, now dead four days and buried. Open the grave? By this time, Lazarus' body would be well into its cycle of decomposition. Why rub salt in the wound by opening the grave and smelling the solemn reminder? Ah, but Jesus has something better in mind for His beloved friends.

Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. (John 11:41-43, KJV 1900)

Jesus knew that the Father always heard His prayers. He prayed to the Father in full confidence of the Father's presence and answer. Do not overlook a key point. In the midst of grief at Lazarus' death, the one record of Jesus weeping during His Incarnation, Jesus begins His prayer to the Father with thanksgiving. I fear that our prayers are too often a laundry list of wants, especially when we pray in the heat of distress. In our eager despair for Jesus' help, we should never forget to thank Him for the abounding blessings that He showers into our lives constantly. However black the clouds of trial and disappointment in this world—and those clouds can be ominous—the Lord's presence and blessings abound. Jesus didn't pray because He needed to vocalize His request for the Father to respond. He prayed audibly for the benefit of those who stood by.

Lazarus, come forth. The sentence seems so simple, only three words. They are structured to a living man who has the ability to hear and to respond to instructions. We could easily overlook the obvious, that Jesus spoke these words to a man who died several days ago and has been in the tomb for now four whole days. But in the time that Jesus spent before the tomb, He had already brought Lazarus back from death. Now that resurrected man needed to get up and exit the tomb. He no longer needed that space.

It is admittedly difficult for us to grasp the reality of this chapter. A real man, a friend to Jesus, and brother to his sisters, actually died and was buried. Jesus spoke to him, and he arose from the grave.

To help us grasp the reality of this experience, consider this example. Eugene Peterson offers a scenario. Imagine that you have been by the bedside of a dear friend through an extended illness. Perhaps you were present when he breathed his last breath and slipped away into death. You help the family prepare for the memorial service. You attend that service and even witness your friend's burial. A few days later, you are trying to put your life back together and get back to normal. You go shopping for groceries. As you walk through the parking lot with your basket full of groceries, you look across the parking lot and see a familiar figure. You do a double take. That image looks disruptively like your just died friend. But you know it can't be. He is dead. You can't get that image out of your mind. You put your groceries in the car. The man is still there. You can't resist. You lock your car and walk over to where the man is standing. When you get to the other side of the parking lot and look at this man face to face, you are speechless. ***It is your friend! He's alive!*** You engage him in conversation. He knows all the details of your relationship together, including intimate and private knowledge that no one else knows. There can be no doubt. You are looking at your friend, now resurrected from the dead. For those first disciples, this experience captures their amazement and surprise at Jesus' resurrection and His many personal appearances to them.

If these disciples had thought about their time with Jesus and His clear and repeated words to them, they should have expected nothing else. They had heard the words, but the full reality was more than they could wrap their minds around. Till they say Him, and He spoke to them. Then they could not deny. Even doubting Thomas reached the point of knowing. His resurrection was real.

Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. (John 11:24, KJV 1900)

The words are clear enough. However, in the context of Lazarus' death and resurrection, we cannot doubt their literal meaning. The "...resurrection at the last day" shall not be a "Spiritual" resurrection of some mystical sort. It shall be a resurrection that, true to the accepted meaning of the word, involves the reviving of our physical bodies that died and were buried. Our bodily resurrection at the Second Coming shall be just as real and just as literal as Lazarus' resurrection. Ah, but there is one difference. Lazarus was resurrected to return for a season to live with his sisters and friends in this life. Our resurrection shall be to glory, endless glory with our Lord and Savior.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor