

Living Proof

Wonder-Working Power – Part VIII

John 11

Introduction

I have read of a sad custom, observed by many on the Fiji Islands, related to the handling of bereavement. It is in the practice of lamenting the loss of the dead. The one who has suffered bereavement climbs a high tree or stands on a cliff and, after calling out the name of the deceased, he cries out, “Come back . . . come back.”

The heartrending wail is filled with despair.

Today, we are going to enter the valley of the shadow of death and observe people lamenting the death of a man who had filled the shoes of dear friend, close brother, family man, and committed disciple. More importantly, we are going to watch Jesus Christ interrupt the funeral with an incredible display of humanity and deity – so much so, that we will, like those early observers, have to make a decision – a decision to believe Him or reject Him.

The story opens with John, chapter 11, verses 1 and 2.

Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.

By putting the gospel pieces together, you learn that Jesus was very close with all three of these individuals and often used their home as a “bed and breakfast” resting place and retreat. Continue to verses 3 and 4.

The sisters therefore sent to Him, saying, “Lord, behold, he whom you love is sick.” But when Jesus heard it, He said, “This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified by it.”

Lessons Taught by Jesus From Lazarus’ Illness

Now, throughout this chapter, Jesus Christ will teach a number of different truths to those who care to search for them.

Sickness can be a divine laboratory where new discoveries are made . . .

1. Lesson number one is from verse 4, that sickness can be a divine laboratory where new discoveries are made about the nature and character of God.

You should underline the motivation for this miracle of resurrection, in verse 4. The key word is “glory,” and also the word “glorified” at the end of the verse. The word comes from the root word “doxa,” from which we get our word “doxology”. It refers to the glorious attributes and splendor of God’s character. The Hebrew counterpart is “kabod,” which means, “weight or heaviness”. When the Hebrew or Greek word is used of God, it refers to God’s weighty and glorious honor or reputation.

Jesus . . . said, “This sickness is . . . for the glory of God, and that the Son of God may be glorified . . .”

In other words, Jesus says, in effect, “I’m going to do something about my reputation – and is it ever going to challenge your thinking about who I am!”

Now look at one of the most fascinating things Jesus did! Verse 6.

When therefore He heard that he was sick, He stayed then two days longer in the place where He was.

Later in the passage, we discover that by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the body of Lazarus had been in the grave four days.

If you are thinking that Jesus waited around because He really did not care, you need to notice John’s answer for that in verse 5.

Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus.

But this just does not make sense. If Jesus loved them, then why did He wait?

Let us begin with the obvious answer and work backward. There is no doubt that you and I need to be reminded of the obvious principles.

First, Jesus knew what they did not know! They wanted Him to arrive immediately, to reveal his power to heal. He wanted to wait, so that He could reveal His power over the grave.

Waiting on God and waiting for God can be the will of God!

2. But, there is more to it than that. A second lesson, and one of the harder principles to learn, is that waiting on God and waiting for God can be the will of God!

People often say, "I'm waiting for the Lord to reveal His will to me."

The truth is, at that moment, they are doing it! And when we do that in the present, we never need to fear missing it in the future.

God is never rushed!

3. Another obvious truth, of course, is that God is never rushed!

We are always in a hurry! I raced through a yellow light at an intersection, some time ago, and my daughter, who was sitting next to me, observed the whole thing and asked, very innocently, "Daddy, does yellow mean to speed up?"

Most often, it does!

I thought I was bad until my second grade son asked me the profound question, "Dad, when I blink, do I miss something in life?"

He was determined not to blink, if that meant he would miss something somewhere. What a terrific attitude!

I was talking with the gentleman who, a few weeks ago, led our worship. We were talking about our pace and he told of one of the most convicting things to him. If you asked his children the words he most often said to them, their answer would most likely be two words, "Hurry up."

The amazing thing about Jesus Christ is that He only had three years to reveal his message and prepare his messengers – and He never said, "Hurry up."

We've got to move faster. We're never going to make it . . .".

Jesus Christ never panicked. And the more like Him we become, the less frantic we will become.

Continue to verse 7.

Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

Skip to verse 11.

. . . Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, that I may awaken him out of sleep.

Now there are a number of false beliefs that have taken this verse out of context to teach that a soul sleeps. That is, upon death, the body ceases to exist and the immaterial part of your being enters a state of spiritual limbo – an earthbound wandering. However, scripture clearly teaches, in II Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 8b, that,

. . . to be absent from the body [is] to be home with the Lord.

Paul also wrote, in Philippians, chapter 1, verses 23 and 24,

I . . . having the desire to depart and be with Christ, . . . yet also to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

The spirit goes to be with the Lord, and the body sleeps; that is, the body awaits the resurrection of the rapture. This is when, according to I Thessalonians, chapter 4, the body will be recreated from its decomposed dust, glorified, resurrected, and reunited with its spirit to live with the Lord forever.

The metaphor for "death" is "sleep," and it appears fourteen times in the New Testament. In fact, the word "cemetery" is from a Greek word that means, "sleeping place".

So, for the time being, in the cemetery, the body is dead; that is, it sleeps. Yet the spirit of every one of us will never miss a second of action – our spirit never blinks!

Well, the disciples misunderstood the metaphor of sleep. Look at verses 12 through 15.

The disciples therefore said to Him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. Then Jesus therefore said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and I am glad for

your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.”

Did you catch that, in verses 14 and 15?

... Lazarus is dead, and I am glad ...

Why?

... so that you may believe ...

Sorrow often creates the ideal environment for growth in our faith.

4. Another truth emerges from this passage, that sorrow often creates the ideal environment for growth in our faith.

The disciples will learn the most powerful, faith deepening truth about Jesus Christ’s deity – not at the wedding in Cana, but at the funeral in Bethany; not in a storm on the sea of Galilee, but among the mourners at a cemetery. The setting for the revelation of Jesus Christ’s greatest miracle was not a synagogue, but a cemetery – and the emotion was sorrow!

Skip to verses 20 and 21.

Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him; but Mary still sat in the house. Martha therefore said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Bless you, Martha – she is one hundred percent wrong, but she put into words what so many of us have felt! She has looked the Lord in the eye and given Him a speech that we have all wanted to give Him.

“Lord, if you’d been a little quicker, this wouldn’t have happened. Lord, if you had only been listening, my spouse wouldn’t have died . . . my child would have lived . . . my business wouldn’t have failed . . . my health would still be with me . . . Lord, if you’d just been quicker on your feet, my life would be more comfortable!”

She had come to the wrong conclusion, that we so easily make, that the presence of Jesus erases the potential for suffering. If God really cared, there would never be a reason to cry.

Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in just a moment, God Himself is going to cry!

Now let us go on to Jesus’ response to Martha, in verse 23.

Jesus said to her, “Your brother shall rise again.”

And Martha replies, in verse 24.

Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”

The Old Testament taught enough for them to know that there would be a general resurrection. The New Testament adds enough revelation to inform us that there will be more than one resurrection.

Continue to verse 25.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies”

For believers, there is another life beyond the grave.

5. When He says, “. . . he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies,” He is teaching her, and us, that, for believers, there is another life beyond the grave.

We need to reverse our thinking. We are not in the land of the living, headed for the land of the dying; we are in the land of the dying, headed for the land of the living. And, if you know Jesus Christ as your Messiah, you are not walking toward the sunset of life, you are walking toward the sunrise.

For unbelievers, there is another death beyond the grave.

6. But He also teaches another truth, in verse 26, that for unbelievers, there is another death beyond the grave.

Look at the first part of that verse.

and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die.

What does that mean? That Christians are never going to die?! No. Dying, in this verse, is a reference to the eternal death, eternal separation from God that the Bible refers to as the second death.

Turn to Revelation, chapter 20, verses 13 through 15. Just prior to John’s revelation of the new heaven and the new earth, the eternal destiny for sin, Satan, demons, and all who have rejected Christ, is revealed in a terrifying finale.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, . . .

What is?

. . . the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

John, in his gospel and here, in his revelation, has clearly taught us two things:

- if you have been born twice, you will only die once; that is, if you have been born physically and you have been born again spiritually, you will only die physically – and that death is merely the hand that opens heaven's door. *But,*
- if you have only been born once, physically, you are going to die twice; that is, you will die once physically, and a second time eternally separated from God in the lake of fire.

In other words, born twice – you die once; born once – you die twice.

Now, turn back to John's gospel.

The Lord has just taught the truth of the resurrection to Martha and then, He asks her, in John, chapter 11, verse 26b,

Do you believe this?

In other words, Jesus asks, "Do you believe this specific doctrinal truth of the resurrection abiding within Me?"

I am so glad Jesus did not ask Martha, "Now, Martha, how do you feel about this?"

According to Jesus, how she felt was not important, but what she believed was!

What do you believe?

There are a lot of Christians like the man who was being interviewed for church membership (not at our church, mind you). He was asked, "Sir, what do you believe?"

He replied, "I believe whatever the church believes."

That did not exactly satisfy the interviewing committee, so they asked further, "And could you tell us, sir, what the church believes?"

The man answered, "The church believes what I believe."

"And just what do you and the church believe?"

He answered, "We believe the same thing."

Do you know what will carry you through the sorrow of a death experience? Do you know what will carry you through the death of a loved one; the death of a business; the death of a relationship; the death of a lifelong dream? Not what you feel, but what you believe about Jesus Christ!

Now it is Mary's turn. Look at verses 30 through 32.

Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. The Jews then who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."

These two sisters had reached the same conclusion.

Continue to verses 33 through 34.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit, and was troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord come and see."

Practical Lessons From Lazarus' Funeral

Before we go any further, allow me to draw a few, very earthy, yet practical lessons from the funeral of Lazarus that, in our day, will benefit us all.

When it comes to material trappings, be simple.

1. First, when it comes to material trappings, be simple.

Let me explain. This was a time in the history of the Jewish people that funerals had become incredibly costly things. The body was clothed in the most magnificent robe possible, and all kinds of valuables were buried in the tomb along with the body. They

had adopted some of their Egyptian past, without considering the implications. Naturally, no one wanted to be outdone in the expression of their love for the deceased, so more and more expensive clothing was purchased, and the treasures left in the tomb became more and more expensive, as well.

Midway through the first century, people were becoming bankrupt by burial traditions. *Until*, a famous rabbi, named Gamaliel the Second, gave orders that he was to be buried in the simplest possible linen robe, and thus he broke the tradition once and for all.

I have read that at Orthodox funerals, even today, a blessing is offered to the rabbi who rescued the Jews from their extravagance. From Rabbi Gamaliel's time onward, the body has been wrapped in a simple linen dress, which has been given the beautiful name, "the travelling dress".

That is good advice for all of us who will, at some time, make similar decisions. For many of us, in order to keep up with the ever increasing costs of funeral extravagance, we cannot afford to die.

Now, I have a life insurance policy, and my wife knows that, if I die first, she is not to use that money to bury me in splendor. No hand carved oak with satin cushions, monogrammed with my initials. I will not be in there thinking, "I wish she'd bought me the mahogany one!"

The truth is, at that moment in time, I could not care less!

By the way, do not use extravagance as a way to make up for guilt over the past. Do not shackle yourself with a ten year debt. It is not the time; it is not the place; it is not the way to deal with those issues.

When it comes to emotional responses, be sincere!

2. Secondly, when it comes to emotional responses, be sincere!

Do not put on the mask; do not hide the tears; do not suppress the feelings; do not quote a verse and suppose that the lump in your throat will get any smaller!

Look at this passage – Mary and Martha are angry and frustrated; they are in tears; friends and neighbors are in tears!

When it comes to the bereaved, be sympathetic!

3. This leads me to the third lesson, when it comes to the bereaved, be sympathetic!

Look back at the emotional sympathy and empathy in verse 33.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her, also weeping,

(note this)

He [Jesus] was deeply moved in spirit

(that is internal)

and was troubled

(that is external).

The word translated "troubled" is a Greek word that is also used of a working horse that is breathing heavily and snorting under a heavy burden. It could be translated, "shuddered or shook".

Phillips translates it well, "He was deeply moved and visibly distressed".

Now look at verse 35, and underline it, circle it, memorize it!

Jesus wept.

Can you believe it? God is crying?!

Now, to the Greek reader, this was an astonishing thing. That world believed that God's primary characteristic was "apatheia," from which we get our word, "apathy". That is, God was unable to experience any emotion whatsoever.

They reasoned this way – if we can feel sorrow or joy, it means that someone can have an effect upon us. If a person has an effect upon us, that means that, for a moment, a person has power over us. No one can have any power over God; thus, God is essentially an emotionless, devoid of feeling God!

In verse 35, the tense of the verb translated, would read, "Jesus burst into tears."

One of the greatest things Jesus did was show us God in tears.

Now, I have uncovered about nine different views as to why Jesus wept. The text does not tell us, but it is interesting that the crowd came to a unanimous opinion. Look at verse 36.

And so the Jews were saying, "Behold how He loved him!"

Do you know what the prophet Isaiah means, in chapter 53, verse 3, that Jesus was,

. . . a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . .

It means that Jesus experienced grief, and being the God-man, He could experience grief to depths we could never imagine!

Jesus, the God-man, entered into our most common, universal grief. And, if God can cry, so can you!

The tears are about to cease, however. In fact, this provides a prophetic illustration of our future, where, in the new heaven and the new earth, as we are told in Revelation, chapter 21, verse 4,

. . . He shall wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; and there shall no longer be any death . . .

Now look at John, chapter 11, verse 38.

Jesus therefore again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

Let me put the story on “pause” one more time, and give you a final reason I believe Jesus waited until Lazarus had been dead for four days. It may be the primary reason, although we cannot be sure.

I want you to understand that, in this day, the rabbis held to the belief and taught the people that the soul hovered over the body, intending, if at all possible, to reenter it, but, as soon as it sees its appearance change, it departs. The oral law held that a body had to be identified within three days of the person’s death, believing that the appearance began to change after three days.

Is it coincidental that Jesus waited until Lazarus had been dead for four days – perhaps, so that there would be no question that Lazarus was not somehow mistakenly declared dead or that he had some near death experience and the spirit reentered his body? No. There would be no doubt, even in the minds of superstitious people, that Lazarus was “D” “E” “A” “D”!

The stone had been rolled in front of the cave. The people were involved in, what was called, deep mourning. Lazarus was not coming back, or so they thought!

Now note verses 39 through 43.

Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her,

“Did I not say to you, if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” And so they removed the stone. And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank Thee that Thou hearest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.” And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.”

Literally, “Lazarus, here, outside.”

Augustine was the one who first said that, if Jesus had not called Lazarus by name, at that moment, He would have emptied the cemetery by means of resurrection.

Continue to verse 44.

He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Now, you need to tie this miracle together with the proclamation of Jesus earlier in the gospel, in chapter 5, verse 25b, where Jesus said,

. . . the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live.

Jesus displays his deity by means of power over the final enemy – death!

I would have loved to have been there and to have seen funeral mourning turned into joy! What a wonderful picture of the future resurrection.

The Response to Lazarus’ Resurrection

Now the response is not surprising.

There is belief.

1. First, there is belief.

Look at verse 45.

Many therefore of the Jews, who had come to Mary and beheld what He had done, believed in Him.

Do you remember the motive for the resurrection of Lazarus? Go back to the last part of verse 42.

. . . that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.

We so often refer to the empty tomb of Christ as the living proof of Christianity's authentic claim to the world's only true faith. It is interesting to consider that, in the mind of Christ, (and this is the final lesson in this chapter), the empty tomb of Lazarus was proof enough that this He was indeed God.

Lazarus is living proof!

There is tragic blindness.

2. The other reaction to the miracle is tragic blindness.

Look at verses 47 through 50.

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, "What are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But a certain one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."

In other words, "Let's kill this imposter before the Roman army comes in and wipes us all out for following a false king."

John adds his own commentary, in verses 51 through 53.

Now this he did not say on his own initiative; but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.

On the one hand, belief – which you would expect. On the other hand, blindness and rejection – which is almost too hard to comprehend.

There was an empty tomb, a family reunited, a man who was indeed dead, now alive! Yet, the leaders refused to hear and see.

James Montgomery Boice, in his commentary, *The Gospel of John*, tells the story of something that happened in a church pastored by one of his assistants. A man lived next door to the church in St.

Paul, Minnesota. He did not want to go to church. In fact, he refused all invitations. However, one week the church had a series of special meetings featuring exceptional music. The neighbor heard the music and was so taken with it that he decided to go and hear it. He reasoned, "I'll go in, just for the music, and then leave before the sermon."

So, he went in and sat near the back of the church. When the musical portion of the evening was over and the preacher was standing up to preach, the man realized he was hemmed in by the packed auditorium – there was no way he could get out without being noticed. So he said "I'll do the next best thing, I'll put my fingers in my ears so I can't hear him."

So, there he sat, with his fingers in his ears. God, who was at work in this man's heart, was not deterred. Soon, a little fly began to buzz around the man's nose. He ignored the fly as long as he could. But finally, that little fly, buzzing around his nose, got to be too much for him. He took one hand and swatted at the fly. At that moment, the Pastor said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear what God says."

The religious leaders had their fingers in their ears and their hands over their eyes, and even the resurrection of Lazarus did not phase them, "Lazarus who? What resurrection? We don't see anything. We don't hear the laughter and joy resonating from Bethany, outside an empty tomb."

How tragic. How sad.

My friend, if you do not know the Lord Jesus as personal God and Savior, do not cover your eyes, do not cover your ears. Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

I want you to know why I will never stand on some high cliff or climb some tall tree and shout after my departed loved ones, who, like me, have placed their faith in Christ. Do you know why I will never shout, "Come back . . . come back"? Because I know that, one day, they will; one day there will be a resurrection and a reunion.

And Lazarus is the living proof.