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THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Lesson 52

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John 11:28-45

Lazarus Loved and Raised

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Introduction

In this brief but arresting encounter, that between our Lord and the man who had been dead for four days, there are answers to many of life's problems. One thinks, first, of the question that has puzzled men from ages past, "Is there life beyond the grave?" Augustine once said, "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it rests in Thee." There is, many claim, an innate God-given conviction that there is such a life.

A second question naturally follows, "Can we obtain such a life?" Modern society is divided over the question, just as ancient societies have been, but Christians have always answered it in the affirmative.

And, third, "Is it possible to know that we possess such a life?" Again Christian believers contend for the affirmative, citing the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord Himself.

In fact, Jesus Christ is the only person qualified to give authoritative answers to the questions. He alone knows and has this life of which men speak. And His answer, too, like the answer of the believing Christians is a resounding, "yes!"

Some years ago Oswald Spengler wrote a strange book, entitled *The Decline of the West*, and in it he found the clue to history in nature. In the book he said, "We await today the philosopher who will tell us in what language history is written and how it is to be read."¹ No philosopher will not do, for his knowledge is limited by human reason. We need a divine Prophet and a divine Savior, and in Jesus Christ we have both. He has come, spoken, and finished the work by which we may know the language in which history is written, as well as how it is to be read. It is written in the red blood of Calvary, and it is read in the inspired records preserved for us by the Triune God, the Holy Scriptures.

The greatness of Jesus Christ may be partially measured by the fact that He does authoritatively open the curtains on the life beyond the grave. John Broadus, the well known Southern Baptist preacher and teacher, told the story of Robert Browning's letter, published after his death, in which he cited several utterances of men of genius as to the Christian faith, and one of them was Charles Lamb. "In a gay fancy with some friends, as to how he and they would feel if the greatest of the dead were to appear suddenly in flesh and blood once more—on the final suggestion, 'And if Christ entered this room?' he changed his manner at once and stuttered out, as his manner was when moved, 'You see, if Shakespeare entered we should all rise; if he appeared, we must kneel.'"² Even the unbelievers sense that Lamb's words are true.

But, He is great not only because He is God. He is great because He is also man, truly one of us. We will highlight this aspect of the matter and its force for us in the account of the story of the resurrection of Lazarus, of which there are seven stages.

LAZARUS DEAD

There are four movements in the progress of thought in the section. First of all, there is the coming of the news of Lazarus' sickness to the Lord (cf. John 11:1-6).

And, second, the disciples of the Lord seek to dissuade Him from His intention to go into Judaea again, reminding Him of the fact that, when He was last there, attempts were made on His life. He informs them that Lazarus is asleep, and that He goes to awake him from his sleep (cf. v. 11). Of course, He refers to the sleep of death, the beautiful metaphor of sleep being the characteristic Christian way of speaking of death. One who sleeps is resting, and the Christian in the presence of the Lord is resting from his earthly labors. Further, the one who sleeps is alive, and the Christian in heaven is alive. Finally, the one who sleeps in Christ will have an awaking, a spiritual one with a new body like Christ's, just as one physically sleeping will normally experience a physical awakening (cf. Phil. 3:20-21).

And, third, there is the account of the meeting of our Lord with Martha (cf. vv. 17-28) and with Mary (cf. vv. 29-32). We have spoken of that in the preceding lecture, and we will touch upon it again in a moment in this one.

Finally, John describes the miracle of the restoration of Lazarus to life (cf. vv. 33-46), with some of the attendant circumstances.

There are a couple of words that I would like to comment upon. In the first place, one should notice the "therefore" of verse six. Evidently our Lord wished to wait until Lazarus had not only died, but until there was no natural hope either in man or in tradition to expect a resurrection. Thus the abiding in the same place without beginning immediately to go to the aid of Lazarus is not a sign of Jesus' lack of concern or love for Lazarus and his sisters. It was really a sign of His desire for them to see the glory of God in the work that He would do for their brother. Restoration will come only by a new creative act, and by it they will be better able to understand the new creative spiritual act of the new birth, which our Lord as the Messiah is able to give.

And then I would like for the reader to note the clause, "Lazarus is dead" (cf. v. 14). The story of Lazarus is the climactic miracle of the seven, which say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that there is spiritual life in Him. What more beautiful picture of the new birth to spiritual life could be given than the resurrection of Lazarus? Naturally we are dead in our trespasses and sins. This is the word of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:1. The condition is the result of the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and it is the condition of all men as they are born into the life of this planet (cf. Eph. 2:1). Lazarus in the grave is a striking picture of the spiritual condition of all men without Christ. They are dead in their sins, unable to come to the knowledge of the Lord, except by divine enablement (cf. 6:44, 65).

There was a graveyard in Ayrshire in Scotland, where once a stranger was buried. It greatly distressed the people in the parish of the church. As a result they had a notice put up in the place to the effect that, "This graveyard is reserved exclusively for the dead who are living in this parish." There are many people, including church goers, who are in the same condition. They are living in the parish, it is true, but they are spiritually dead (cf. Eph. 2:1; 1 Tim. 5:6).

LAZARUS LOVED

There are some interesting points in the next section, and I want to call attention to a few of them. Since we have already considered in some detail the encounter of the Lord with Martha, we will not go over all of that ground. His words in verses 25 through 26 are remarkable in their relation of the resurrection and life to Him. He is the resurrection. In other words, resurrection and life are ultimately found in a relation to Him in a personal way. Martha is knowledgeable in some aspects of biblical doctrine. She knows that Lazarus will rise again in the resurrection at the last day (cf. v. 24), but Jesus points her to the possibility of the present possession of life. Life is both the cause and the consequence of resurrection. And only the one who has

His life has any hope of life and resurrection, for His life is the only life that has overcome our fearsome enemy, death.

With "believest thou this?" our Lord seeks a response from Martha, and He does get one, the magnificent confession of verse 27, a confession in which she illustrates the goal that John would have all of his readers reach, "Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world."

The next few verses describe the coming of Mary out from her house to meet the Lord. Mary, too, commented to Him as Martha had, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died" (cf. v. 32).

The weeping of Mary and the weeping of her Jewish friends had its effect upon the Lord, and we read, "When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled" (cf. v. 33).

The words, "groaned and the spirit, and was troubled" are not easy to fully understand. It is the opinion of Warfield that Jesus was not moved by "uncontrollable grief, but irrepressible anger."³ And why? He was angry at the violent tyranny of death, and He was advancing against it as "a champion who prepares for conflict." Gazing into the skeleton face of the world, He saw the awful reign of death everywhere, and He was deeply disturbed. Morris points out, however, that this does not seem to be the meaning of the two other places where the word "groaned" (Gr., embrimaomai) is used of our Lord (cf. Matt. 9:30; Mark 1:43). In these cases the word seems simply to mean that He was deeply moved.⁴ If this is the way the word is to be taken then it refers to our Lord's "deep concern and indignation at the attitude of the mourners."⁵ They completely misunderstood the nature of death and the great and mighty power of the Son of God. Even Mary's thoughts are fixed on earth and not on the delivering power of the One at whose feet she had so often sat.

Matthew Black, formerly Professor of New Testament at the University of St. Andrews, has contended that the word is a Syriacism, and that it emphasizes the turmoil of emotion in Jesus, apparently a kind of violent rage, and that it is not to be overlooked. This would fit either of the two interpretations.⁶

We cannot be dogmatic, but Warfield may be right. Death is the object of the Savior's wrath. Its effects He will soon nullify for His sheep. The groaning expresses His natural outrage at the deep inroads of the Evil One into the lives of the saints of God. "What John does for us in this particular statement," Warfield says, "is to uncover to us the heart of Jesus, as he wins for us our salvation. Not in cold unconcern, but in flaming wrath against the foe, Jesus smites in our behalf."⁷ In other words, not only is His deity set out in this story, but there also in strong tones is painted a picture of the perfection of His humanity.

As our Lord came to the place of the grave He sobbed (cf. v. 35). The shortest verse of the Bible is found here, and it is a remarkable one. The verse divisions of our Bibles were made by Robert Stephanus in 1551 on a journey from Paris to Lyons while on horseback. Many scholars have said that, when Stephanus put his pen on a point of the text on a number of occasions to make the beginning or ending of a verse, the horse must have jumped a log or something, causing Stephanus to put his pen on the wrong part of the text! It is true that there are many mistakes in the marking out of the verses, for the sense is often broken by the division of the words. In fact, this has happened so often in the New Testament text that one scholar has said that the first step in interpretation is to ignore the modern chapters and verses!⁸ I will not dispute that, but I will say this, I can forgive Stephanus for a number of mistakes in view of his magnificent division of the text here. "Jesus wept" is a beautiful and meaningful statement, and it is a touch of genius to give it the rank of a verse of the Bible.

"Jesus wept!" The great storm of distress in His soul over the rule of death in the lives of men subsides for the moment, and He breaks forth into a shower of sympathy for the believers and their loss. And what a magnificent picture we have of the great High Priest who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, tempted in all points as we are, yet apart from sin (cf. Heb. 4:15).

We must not pass by the remarkable truth that this short text enshrines. In the first place, "Jesus wept" points clearly to the reality of His humanity. As one possessed of true humanity, He was born, He was fed, He grew, He worked, and He experienced physical death (voluntarily, of course).

Spurgeon's words are appropriate, "Beloved, have a clear faith in the humanity of Him whom you rightly worship as your Lord and your God. Holding His divinity without doubt, hold His manhood without mistake."⁹

In the second place, the Lord was not ashamed of His holy emotions. The glory of His being does not conflict with the expression of the human nature which He had assumed. His Godhead does not make Him regret His manhood.

Three times we read that Jesus in the course of life and ministry wept. He wept as Lazarus' loving friend at his graveside. Later He wept as He looked out over His beloved city just before His triumphal entry. We might refer to that instance as the weeping of the promised Prophet, as He reflected upon the coming judgment upon the city and the generation that turned its back upon Him. And, finally, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, drawing upon some true tradition regarding Him, mentions His weeping in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was the weeping of the ultimate Priest of God, the true Substitute, who offers the atoning sacrifice for the people of God. On this last occasion it was appropriately the weeping of "strong crying and tears" to the One who was able to save Him out of death (cf. Heb. 5:7). Three

times He wept, and on each occasion it was a solemn, touching, and deeply significant outpouring of tears.

And, finally, He wept, although Lazarus was safe in the bosom of God and eventually to be raised by God in newness of resurrection life. And He wept, although He knew that Lazarus was soon to be brought to this life again! It is truly a remarkable illustration of the deep sympathy that Jesus felt for His friends and their experiences.

It is no wonder, then, that we read in the very next verse, "Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!" (cf. v. 36). Two misinterpretations must be avoided. This was not the love of human pity alone, nor was it frustration over the power of death, for He would deal with that soon. Also included was the love that is eternal, that special love that He has for his redeemed. He loves as the unseen Sovereign of the universe, although for a time dwelling in unglorified bodily form.

Charles Wesley wrote of this instance,

***"There for me the Savior stands,
Shows His wounds, and spreads His hands;
God is love! I know, I feel;
Jesus weeps, but loves me still."***

LAZARUS EVANGELIZED

In the fifth chapter Jesus had said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live" (cf. v. 25). Here is now the illustration of that remarkable claim.

Standing beside Lazarus' grave, Jesus offers a brief petition, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hear-est me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me" (cf. v. 41-42). Then there follows the brief cry in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth" (cf. v. 43). Augustine made the remark that, if Jesus had not called forth Lazarus by name, all the dead people in the vicinity would have come forth at His voice!" Well, one day, they shall hear, and they shall come forth to

a resurrection. Unfortunately, for some there is both a resurrection of life and a resurrection of eternal condemnation.

The command is exceedingly abrupt in the original text, and it could be rendered, "Hither, out!" Lazarus obeyed the authoritative word of the Savior God and came forth.

LAZARUS LOOSED

John writes, "And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go" (cf. v. 44). Lazarus is to have not only life, but liberty. Many Bible students have suggested that this is John's symbolic picture of the doctrine of sanctification, that is, that the working of delivery from the grave clothes of the life of death follows the return to true life, and that that work is accomplished in stages. It is probably doubtful that this was in the apostle's mind, although the truth supposedly represented is found in the Bible. After the reception of resurrection life through the new birth, there does follow the work of divine sanctification. And it is a work that touches the hands of our work for Christ, the feet of our walk with Him, and the face or our witness in His name. One thinks of the growth of Apollos under the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila (cf. Acts 18:25-26). Cf. Col. 3:8, 12.

One final comment by Hoskyns may be noted. He writes, "As the sheep hear the voice of the Good Shepherd when He calls them by name and leads them out of the cramped sheepfold (x. 30), so Lazarus is immediately drawn forth from the grave by the word of Jesus. It seems as though the author, as Basil suggested (Corderii Catena, p. 295), intends to record a miracle within a miracle. Lazarus does not walk out of the grave; he is rather drawn out tightly bandaged (for the Greek word cf. Prov. vii. 16) hand and foot (cf. xix. 40), with his face covered with a cloth (xx.7, cf. Luke xix. 20; Acts xix. 12). Only when he has been drawn out of the tomb does Jesus command him to be

loosed, in order that he may walk freely and of his own initiative. And yet the attention of the reader is not meant to rest upon a miracle once wrought by Jesus. The form of the record of the raising of Lazarus suggests the freedom that results from the mighty act of God by which the Christians have passed from death to life." ¹⁰

Footnotes

¹Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (Eng. tr., 1926-1928).

²John Broadus, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 10.

³Warfield, "The Emotional Life of our Lord," *The Person and Work of Christ*, p. 415.

⁴Morris, pp. 556-57. *Ibid.*, p. 557.

⁵Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1967) , pp. 241-43.

⁶Warfield, p. 417.

⁷A. T. Robertson, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1925), pp. 100-1.

⁸Spurgeon, II, 468.

⁹Hoskyns, p. 407.