

The Light Has Come to the Buried Dead

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[0 : 00] This is our last week of a short series around the topic of the light has come, and in this case it's the light has come to the buried dead. If you've been around Christianity for a while, you know that's one of the ways to read biblical stories to work out what's important, is to look at the surprises in the passage.

You know, what are the shocking elements? What are the unexpected turns? I mean, that's generally where the gold is. But if you have been around Christianity for a few years, some of these stories become so familiar to us that the surprises aren't always as obvious.

The story of Lazarus is one of those sort of passages, I think, very familiar. We kind of know it pretty well. So tonight, let's try and come to it with fresh ears, because there are three really shocking elements to this passage, to this story, and they are, one, Jesus' delay at getting to Lazarus, two, Jesus' emotions, three, the focus of the whole passage is not where you think it is.

So one, Jesus' delay at getting to Lazarus, two, Jesus' emotions, and three, the focus of the passage is not kind of where you think it probably should be. Okay, first, the delay. So we discover in verse one that Lazarus, brother of Mary and Martha, is sick.

He's very, very sick. And it says that Jesus loved these guys in verse five. And that word there it uses indicates a very precious kind of relationship, a very special relationship. The kind of relationship that Jesus had with his inner circle, like his kind of little crew within his big crew, James, John, Peter, right?

[1 : 35] So Jesus is very tight with these folks. Now, if that's the case, what's going on in verse six? How do we make sense of verse six if that's the case? Let me read from verse five.

Now, Jesus loved Martha and his sister and Lazarus. So when he heard Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

That's interesting, right? If he really loved them, like the passage said, and if he had the power, wouldn't he have marched to Bethany immediately to heal Lazarus?

I mean, he healed people he didn't even know. Like the centurion. You know the story of the centurion in the gospel? He has a slave and he comes to Jesus and he says, my slave's really sick.

Can you heal him? Can you come? And Jesus says, yeah, I'll go there and I'll sort that out. And the guy says, no, no, no. You just say the word and it'll be sorted. And Jesus says the word and it's all sorted.

[2 : 35] Jesus heals the unnamed slave of a member of the occupying forces. Some rando guy sorts it out just from a distance, right?

So how is, why is Lazarus so gypped here? It says in 14 that he actually waits until he's certain Lazarus is dead, even, before he sets out.

This is a great shock. This is an unusual part of the story. So why the delay? Well, the answer is in verse 15 and a couple of other places I'll point out. First in 15, it is for your sake I'm glad that I was not there so that you may believe.

He was talking to his disciples there. It's for your sake I'm glad I wasn't there so that you might believe. So he delayed not because he was callous or powerless or indifferent to this. He delayed because of love.

For your sake I'm glad, he says. For your sake I'm glad. See, Jesus knew if he waited, he could give these people an even greater gift than just a healed Lazarus.

[3 : 41] He could give them faith, which is immeasurably more important. And it's a great lesson here for us, I think. God doesn't work to our timetable or meet all our desires.

And he doesn't do that because he loves us. Perhaps you've thought in your head, if I was God I would do this, I would heal that sickness in that person.

I would organize money or a car for that struggling couple. I would give this to them and that to them and sort out this problem. If I was God, I would do that.

Perhaps you've thought that. Behind that thinking is a belief that you know better than God. Behind that is this belief that you're more compassionate than he is. And that's an attitude we need to repent of.

So let me say again. And this time using verse 6. Or reading from verse 5 actually. Now Jesus loved Martha and his sister and Lazarus.

[4 : 42] So when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Alright, that word so at the beginning of verse 6. It's helpful to have your Bibles over here. That word so actually means because.

So the whole idea of this, those couple of verses there is this. If you could sort of rearrange it, it would be this. Jesus loved Mary and Martha.

Because of that love, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was. So do you see, when God says no to you, there seems to be inaction.

He's not being cruel or indifferent. God's delays are delays of love. Now that's the first shock in the passage. Let's move on to the second one. The second surprise.

Are Christ's emotions? So we're talking about the weeping in verse 35 and his anger in verse 33. And it is anger, but we'll come to that.

[5 : 41] Let's talk about the weeping first. So why was he crying? I mean, he's at the tomb. And in the shortest passage of the Bible, it simply says, Jesus wept. Why the tears? It can't be because his friend Lazarus was dead.

And he was one of his mates, one of his really close mates. It can't be because Lazarus was dead. Because he was going to heal him. I mean, the story would make more sense, kind of, don't you think, if like, like Jesus didn't cry.

You know, if that was kind of your thinking, right? He kind of walks to the tomb with a bit of a swagger and he kind of, sort of with a presidential air about him. Everything's okay, everybody.

You know, I've got it under control. Don't worry. I'm on top of it. Calm down. No, he doesn't do that, right?

He weeps. He bawls. He cries. Why does he do that? Well, it's because in the death of Lazarus, his friend Lazarus, his close friend Lazarus, in the death of Lazarus, crystallized in that event, he sees our great enemy.

[6 : 47] He's confronted by our great enemy. Humanity's big problem. Jesus is confronted by the great enemy of the people he loves. And that enemy is death. Death, the thing that has held people captive since we were expelled from the garden, since we decided we could live better without God, since we decided that we will turn our back in God and be our own moral compass, our own authorities.

Death came into the world. That's our big enemy. As a side note, you know, I think this passage tells us something about what a faithful response to tragedy looks like.

A faithful response to tragedy is not trying really hard not to feel, to hold it together and give the appearance of strength. That's not trusting in Jesus. That's trusting in yourself.

That's just being, that's just a skill you have controlling your emotions. That's nothing to do with Christianity. It's just a thing you can do.

tears and great grief are wholly appropriate and faithful reactions to tragedy. Back to the story. Jesus is confronted by death, the reality of it, right in front of him in that tomb, and he weeps.

[8 : 11] But he doesn't just weep. He gets angry. And that's verse 33. It says he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. That is not sort of like a, kind of a, he felt all a bit shaky or something.

It's a soft translation. It means he was furious. The word there is used to describe the noise that an animal would make if it was like really riled up, like a horse snorting.

So it's this primordial anger. Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation, the message says this. This is how we translate this passage. He says, quaking with rage, Jesus approached the tomb.

I think that's brilliant. He's not just sad about death's intrusion into God's creation. He's angry. Dylan Thomas, the poet, watching his father slowly waste away, wrote these very famous lines.

Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rage at the close of day. Rage, rage against the dying of the night. He's right.

[9 : 16] He's absolutely right. Death is wrong. It's wrong. We should be angry about it. These two emotions, this weeping, this anger, right, are very helpful, helpful that we see them in Christ.

Because in the weeping of Jesus, we see something about who he is, about his humanity, and how he joins with us in our sorrow. But the rage tells us something.

It tells us he's going to do something about it. He's fired up. And what is he going to do? Well, that's the final shock. So the first shock is the delay of Jesus.

The second shock are the emotions of Jesus. The last shock is the focus of the passage. So I said, Jesus is fired up. He's going to do something about our great enemy, death. And what's really interesting here is the passage doesn't let us make the raising of Lazarus the climactic focus.

We know that because so little attention is given to it. Just two verses. Imagine if you're writing this. Imagine if you witness this event, right, and you've witnessed it and you're going to write it down and share it with it.

[10 : 26] Wouldn't you talk that part up quite a bit? You'd make a big drama out of it. You know, the stone rolled away, the crowd gasped. Lazarus haltingly staggered from the tomb, his eyes blazing with life.

I just wrote that. It's beautiful, isn't it? Fantastic. That's how I would do it because I'd want to make that miracle kind of like the high point of the passage. And you know what I think?

It's interesting. John plays it down. Verses 43 to 44. When he said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out. And the man who had died came out and his hands and feet were bound with linen strips and his faith wrapped with a cloth.

Jesus said, unbind him and let him go. I feel like he underplays it. Now, it's not that that's not important, but I think he wants the focus to be elsewhere.

You see, the real focus, the real shock if we came to this with fresh eyes and fresh ears would be verse 25. And let's look at the words, the passages leading up to that, beginning of verse 21. Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you'd been here, my brother would not have died.

[11 : 31] Both Mary and Martha were really disappointed in Christ. They put the word out that their brother was sick. They probably went to the gate every day waiting for Jesus to turn up to kind of sort this problem out.

If you'd have been here, everything would be okay, she says to him. Verse 22, But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you. Jesus said to her, your brother will rise again.

Martha said to him, I know he'll rise again in the resurrection on the last day. So Jesus says, your brother will rise again. And I think she thinks that's a bit of a pet kind of pastoral care kind of answer.

As I said at the start, Christ wanted to give them something more than they asked. More than a living brother. He wanted to give them faith.

A lasting hope. And here's where he does it. The surprising focus of the passage, verse 25. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life.

[12 : 43] Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. That's the guts of the passage right there. That's the heart of it.

Jesus disrupts the flow of Martha's heart. See, her heart can only at this point trust in this vague notion that everything's going to be okay at some point.

Like, it'll probably work out sort of over here at some point. And he disrupts the flow of her heart and he says, no, trust in me. He points these grieving women not to a concept of night, he points them to himself.

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me. So he's saying, if we trust in him, death can't take us forever. We will live with him for eternity.

So this is the promise of Jesus. As horrible and as painful and as tragic as death is, it does not have the final word in our life. Nor does it have the final word in the lives of our loved ones who trust in him.

[13 : 50] And that's what Jesus is saying. And it's incredible. And then to demonstrate that, that central idea, to demonstrate that, Jesus raises Lazarus with just three words.

And it's good to remember, right? And we've talked about this before. These miracles in the New Testament, they're not just random demonstrations of his power, like I can do these great things, you know. They're not just, and they're not just great results for the people at the receiving end of them.

Miracles in the Old Testament are signs, they're signposts, right? They're trying to tell us something about Jesus. And in this case, the signpost says, death is no match for Jesus.

Let me nuance that slightly. So Christ's authority over death here in the passage is clear. But his absolute defeat of death comes later in the story on the cross.

You know this. And this is because, you know, the only way for Jesus to interrupt our funeral is to cause his own, is for him to go through death for us.

[14 : 57] And so it's interesting, but no coincidence that this whole story was the impetus for the resolution from the Sanhedrin that Jesus must die.

You can see that if we kept reading verses 47 to 53, right? The religious leaders heard about this. They heard what's happened. They gather all together and in verse 53 it says, so from that day the Pharisees, right, they made plans to put him to death.

It's no coincidence here that by raising Lazarus Jesus signed his own death warrant and he does it willingly. He gives life at the cost of his own.

So finishing up, there are three shocks in this passage. One, God delays. He says no. He did it in this situation.

He's going to do it for you. He probably does it a lot because there is something far better for us, far better than we can ask for that he wants to give us.

[16:08] The second shock, Jesus got emotional and it's wonderful. So Jesus teaches Mary and Martha something amazing about himself, the truth about who he is, but he speaks, so he talks to them about himself, but not in a detached kind of way.

No, he cries with them. There's a great lesson here for us, I think, as we engage with our culture, as we engage with the world. Speaking the truth without tears, when they're appropriate, is remote and heartless.

And I think evangelicals can be guilty of doing that. Let's not do that. But we don't want to go the opposite direction either and sort of just be tears without truth.

That's liberal Christianity. That's, I weep with you, but, you know, who's to say who Jesus was and what he was really saying here and I don't know how I can comfort you exactly, but I weep with you.

So God delays. He weeps. But he also gets angry about death and he does something. He shows his power over death through the raising of Lazarus and sets in motion his own death so that we can have life.

[17:16] And before that though, the third shock. He gives Mary and Martha the amazing gift of knowing who he is and that is a surprising focus of this remarkable passage, this remarkable story we know very well.

In verse 26, Jesus asks Martha a question. He says, do you believe this? He's just said to them on the resurrection of the life and he says, do you believe this? Folks, I pray for myself and for all of us that we can be people who can say with her, yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God who is coming into the world.

Amen.