

The Death of Lazarus

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[0 : 00] I want us to consider this section that we read, verses 1 to 16. Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha, and so on.

As we've been following through this letter, we see that Jerusalem was becoming very dangerous, a dangerous place for the Lord Jesus Christ, because the Jewish leaders were trying desperately to get him and to put him to death.

In fact, we see that in chapter 10, that they picked up stones and they were going to stone him. And Jesus said, is it because I have done good works that you're trying to stone me?

But they're saying, no, it's for blasphemy, because you've made yourself equal with God. So Jesus, he has left that part of the country and he crosses.

We read that in verse 39 there, where they sought to arrest him. In verse 40, he went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained.

[1 : 14] And so while it was there, word came to him that this man, Lazarus, was seriously ill. This family of one of the, I suppose, best known families in the Bible, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.

Now, I suppose we often assume that Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived together. Well, we don't know. Mary and Martha certainly did. But whether Lazarus actually lived with them or not, we don't know.

We sometimes assume so, but there's nothing to tell us that he did, and nothing to tell us that he didn't. It's quite possible that Lazarus had his own place, because in chapter 12, when it tells us of how Jesus was in the home of Mary and Martha, that it also says that Lazarus was there too.

So that would, if this was the home that Lazarus normally resided in, it wouldn't say that. So there is every likelihood, every possibility, that Lazarus had his own home, but he was very much part, an integral part of this family.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were a very close-knit family, and obviously were often together, and a home that Jesus loved, and a family that Jesus loved.

[2 : 31] But again, in the incident in Luke chapter 10, where Martha is complaining that Mary's not doing anything, where there's no reference there to Lazarus being so.

It's quite possible that though Lazarus was often in that home, and was such an integral part of that family, there is every possibility he had his own place. So maybe, maybe he didn't, maybe he actually lived there.

Anyway, they, as we say, they were a very close-knit family. And we find that Lazarus becomes very, very ill. And I think it's one thing that we've always got to highlight, is that while it tells us that Jesus loved, that's what we're told, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

And the love and affection of the Lord does not immunize his people against trouble, and against problems, and against death.

Because sometimes people have this idea, the Lord's people have this idea, that when trouble, and difficulties, and trials, and sorrows, and problems come into their life, they see it as a, they say, that the Lord has a controversy with them, or that the Lord is not with them, or that the Lord has abandoned them, or that they were never in the first place the Lord's.

[4 : 06] Sometimes people very, very wrongly come to that conclusion. And in fact, this idea that it's an evidence of the Lord not being present with them, people have this idea, we find that that's exactly what Martha thought.

She said, Lord, if you had been here, my brother, my brother wouldn't have died. And even Mary, who is so spiritually minded, as one of the most spiritually minded followers that Jesus had, she came to the same conclusion.

She also said the same thing. Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Now, of course, Jesus shows us here, and that's one of the great things about the Bible, is that it's like it pulls back the screen so that we're able to see in a new dimension, in a different dimension, and see things a wee bit from God's perspective, and to see that there's more than just ourselves, because we can only judge things with regard to ourselves, and how things are happening in our lives, and how it affects ourselves, and what is happening round about us.

But we see here that the picture is much bigger, and the Lord shows us something of that. And we see here that Lazarus, his illness and his death, that it's all tied into the glory of God, of people coming to faith in God, and of people, the people of God, having their faith strengthened.

These three things are shown us in this particular chapter, that through the death of Lazarus, and the subsequent the resurrection of Lazarus, that it was to the glory of God, it was to the people coming to faith in Jesus, and those who were already in faith with Jesus, to that faith being strengthened.

[6 : 08] And Jesus, in fact, uses amazing language, because he says in verse 15, I am glad, this is what he says of Lazarus' death, I am glad, he said, that I was not there.

And you would say to yourself, that's quite extraordinary language. This is the Savior saying about the death of Lazarus, I'm glad I was not there. But then he adds, so that you may believe.

So we see here that belief, faith, the strengthening of faith, the growth of faith, is that which is the most important thing to the Lord.

And sometimes we don't understand this or grasp it. And that's why one day we will, one day we will see things from heaven's perspective. We will see things from God's perspective.

Right now we can't. And often we're left, we're left in the dark, we're uncertain, we're confused. And things don't add up, things don't make sense. And we go to Isaiah chapter 55 and we say, oh, God says, you know, my ways are not your ways.

[7 : 25] And my thoughts are not your thoughts. And he says, just as the heaven is so far higher, a way above the earth, he said, so are my ways and my thoughts far higher than your ways and your thoughts.

And we say, I can understand that to a certain extent. But when things happen, we've got to lay hold upon that fact that although we are in a maze and often in a painful maze of distress and brokenheartedness, God is saying, wish you could see there is another side to this altogether.

And to a certain extent, this chapter is a chapter that kind of highlights that a wee bit that shows us a little something of that. And so, we find that the word comes to Jesus about Lazarus' illness.

And we find that the message comes, and of course, in those days, the message, there was no phones or anything like that, it would be a message sent by foot.

So there would be a wee bit of time delay between the messenger leaving Bethany, which was southeast, some miles from Jerusalem, southeast from Jerusalem, several miles, so it would take the messenger quite a distance, quite a time to cover the distance to bring this message to Jesus.

[8 : 50] And so we see there's an urgency in this appeal, but when we look at the appeal from Mary and Martha, and we can look at it as a prayer from Mary and Martha, the first thing really that strikes you is that it's a prayer that leaves everything to the wisdom of God.

Because very simply, the sister sent to him saying, Lord, he whom you love is ill. That's all they say. He whom you love is ill.

And really what they're saying to the Lord is, please come and help us in our situation, in our need. Now I know that sometimes we say to ourselves that we're maybe not as specific in prayer as we should be, as we ought to be.

And while it is important to be specific in prayer, it's also important for us sometimes to leave things to the wisdom of God.

Because I'm sure, like me, there are times you come and you say, I don't really know what to pray for here. You sometimes come into a situation and you really don't know what to pray for.

[10 : 03] And you can be in a situation where you're in a crisis and where there's so much uncertainty and you really don't know exactly what to pray for because you're not sure should you pray in this particular way or in that way.

And that's how these sisters are teaching us here. Sometimes what we have to do is to leave all to the wisdom of God. They have brought the situation, the heart of the situation is Lazarus is ill.

And they really say, that's all they're saying. They're telling Jesus that Lazarus is ill. And we have to say that we often don't know what is best for us.

Now, naturally, when sickness or some crisis comes into our life, the automatic response, if we bring it to the Lord, is, Lord, take this away.

We ask the Lord, that's what we want. Because we want, we want, every one of us wants a reasonably comfortable life. We don't want to be going through difficulties and sorrows and pains and trials and distress.

[11 : 13] And so, when these things come into our life, our automatic response is, Lord, take this away, remove this. But, sometimes, that might not be the best thing for us.

Now, that's because we don't know what is best for us. God does. And this is where faith has to come into the equation. Because without faith, we can't go down this road. We can't understand. But with faith, we've got to learn to leave things in the hand of God. And that's, that's what, really, the sisters are doing.

Lord, we might, I suppose we should go to the Lord and say, Lord, remove this. But, Lord, if it is for my good and for your glory, then, let this remain.

Now, it's only great faith that can say something like that. And we know, of course, that there are, there have been many people, the likes of Joni Erikson, whose life was, has been an amazing testimony to the, to the grace of God, whose, whose life in a wheelchair.

[12 : 28] She has, her faith has shone. And she said from her wheelchair, where she's been bound up like that for years, she said, she is content to remain there if being in this wheelchair brings glory to God.

Sometimes you have to say to yourself, that's, that is, that is amazing faith. I think it was Hudson Taylor who, who said that the trials of God, the trials of God are a platform for his working in our lives because without these trials and God working in our lives, we would never know how kind and how powerful and how gracious he really is.

Sometimes when you read things like that, you say to yourself, my word, these are Christians, these, these people have, these people have developed and they've grown and they're just so far ahead of me.

And yet, that is really where the Lord wants us to go to. But then again, we find that the sisters base their prayer, their appeal, not so much on their brother's love for Jesus or even their own love for Jesus, but on Jesus' love for him because that's what they're saying.

They send the message and they say, he whom you love is ill. And then we find that Jesus, when he gets this message, when Jesus heard it, he said, this illness does not lead to death.

[14 : 08] It is for the glory of God so that the Son of God may be glorified through it. Now I'm sure as Jesus said that the messenger who had come, and we've got to remember there's a distance here, the messenger who would have come would have heard these words, this illness is not unto death but unto the glory of God.

This messenger would have made his way straight back. With these words ringing in his ears, this sickness, this illness is not to death. It doesn't lead to death.

And he'll be going back and says, oh I've got a great message for Mary and Martha. And a great message for Lazarus. Maybe he was imagining by the time he got back that Lazarus would be on the mend or if he wasn't he would soon be.

And so as he arrives back here, this is the message that he has for Mary and Martha. And I think that Lazarus, although there's a time factor, I believe that Lazarus was still alive when Jesus came back, sorry, when the messenger came back because the way that both Mary and Martha said to Jesus, Lord, if you had been here, in other words, if you had come, Lazarus wouldn't have died. Really, that's what they're saying. So the idea is that when the messenger would have arrived back, Lazarus would still be ill, very ill, seriously ill. Maybe, maybe just hovering over, just as it were, death itself.

[15 : 37] And the sisters would be saying, what's in you? What did he say? And the messenger said, this sickness, this illness does not lead to death. And you could see just the relief in the sisters.

Oh, they hug each other. This is wonderful news. Praise the Lord. And so they're waiting for Lazarus to begin to turn.

They're waiting to see this serious illness. They're waiting to see the turn and to see him getting a little better and a little better. But he doesn't.

He gets worse and he gets worse and he dies. And I can't quite imagine how the sisters would have felt at that moment, the moment of Lazarus' death.

Because here's the word of Jesus. This illness does not lead to death but to the glory of God. and they must have been perplexed and confused because it's just not adding up.

[16 : 47] And you know, there are times you will find yourself in a similar situation where the words of God, where you have, where you feel that you have the promise of God, where God's word has come with meaning, with reality, into your heart.

and you've kind of built your hopes and maybe a bit of your future on what God has said. And yet, everything is going against what God has said.

And it's like the very promise that he gave you is in tatters at this moment. And nothing makes sense anymore. Maybe there's some of you in here tonight and that's exactly how you are.

That God's promise to you, it's like it's a lie. It's like it was held out there before you and you would say, oh, this is great. You built so much of your dreams and future around it and bang.

And it's like the promise is dead. It's in pieces. It's broken. But you know, you go through God's word and you'll find so often that very same thing.

[17 : 56] God gave Abraham a promise and he said to him, you're going to be the father of a great nation. He tried to help God, remember, with Hagar. God said, no, it's with Sarah.

And on and on the years went until we're told that Sarah was too old to have children. It had gone right past that time. The promise lay dead.

But God's word eventually revived and we know the story. It's the same with Joseph. Joseph had the promise that his brothers were going to bow down before him.

He had a promise from the Lord of greatness. And that promise must have mocked Joseph for years and years and years in the prison in Egypt.

It just mocked him. It would come back to haunt him. Satan would have used it. See the promise of God? Dead. Dead. Dead.

[18 : 55] Dead. But we know the final outcome. The promise revived. God brought it out. Same with David. God had promised David, you're going to be king. And for years David's sleeping place was a cave.

He was running for his life. Saul, year after year, had a band of men, thousands of men scouring the hillside and the caves to find David, kill him.

The promise seemed utterly gone. And that might be your experience tonight. You're in that place, in that hole where it's as if the very promise of God is mocking you tonight.

And you're saying, it's dead. All that I built, my dreams and my hope upon, it's no longer. But my friend, it's not the end.

And that's one of the things that we see from this particular chapter here. Because the Lord is showing us, although this is an actual experience, all this is factual and actual, the Lord, it's also illustrative of how God is working.

[20 : 08] And he's showing us, look, don't just judge things as they are just now. Trust me. That's really the message that comes out of here. Trust me in the dark.

Trust me when nothing makes sense. Trust me when all hope is lost. Continue to trust me. It's just like, I suppose, little children.

They live in a completely different world to their parents. Because they don't have the experience, they don't have the knowledge, they don't have the abilities, they don't have the understanding.

And often in their little world, things that happen in an adult world don't make sense. And sometimes they don't understand why parents will say, you can't do this.

Or parents will hold certain things back from them and discipline them and all these sort of things. It's just a world sometimes they don't understand. And it's the same for ourselves.

[21 : 05] We live in a world that so often we don't understand, as we were saying earlier on, the ways of God. But as we say, we've got to learn to trust the Lord because He has a purpose in everything.

And the raising of Lazarus teaches us certainly not to judge things as they appear. It shows us that death is not the end.

And Jesus is showing here, look, I have power over death. I have power over the grave. It wasn't very long until just a very short period after this that Jesus Himself was dead and in the grave. But Jesus demonstrated there His own power over death and over the grave. And so Jesus, as He talks to the disciples, He tells them, Lazarus has fallen asleep.

They, of course, thought, first of all, that He was having a sleep. And they thought, oh, that's good for Him. Our sleep will help Him. But Jesus had to explain to them that it was a sleep of death. And you know, that's one of the ways the Bible describes death as sleeping.

[22 : 19] Now, to us, it's very different. But that's the way, remember when Stephen was stoned to death in the most brutal, barbaric, horrific way possible.

You cannot imagine, I can't think of many worse executions, which is a terrifying thought that still happens in parts of this world.

Being stoned to death. Well, that's what happened to Stephen, the first Christian martyr. And it tells us, describing his end, that he fell asleep.

I can't, it's just quite extraordinary. His body battered and hammered by stones until he dies. That he fell asleep. Fell asleep in Jesus. But you know, that's really what happens because our body is put into the grave.

And it's like it's just going in, as it were, into bed at night. And the dust and the turf that's rolled over is just like the clothes covering us. Because there's going to be a resurrection morning.

[23 : 21] That's what Jesus has won for us. Where the graves will open. I often, as I spend so much of my time and life in cemeteries.

And I quite often walk around and read the inscriptions and think about some of the people who are there, particularly people that I've known. I think, you know, this is only for a wee while.

What, what a sight that is going to be when all the graves open. And the, not only the graves open, but the sea is going to give up, sea is going to give up its dead as well.

All going to rise. What an amazing thing. And the bodies which, which have decayed, and in fact our bodies even just now are decaying, but the thing is they're going to be renewed, revitalized, refreshed, and they're going to be fitted exactly for the new environment, the spiritual environment, the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwells righteousness.

And that's part of what this, we're going on to see this, what this whole chapter is speaking to us about. The great Christian hope. And my friend, tonight, if you're without Jesus Christ, you don't have that.

[24 : 40] And that's the great news. I cannot think of anything worse than living life where we actually have no hope. Tonight, your life might be really satisfying and things are going really well for you and you might be as content as anybody.

But you know, without Christ, it won't stay like that. Let me, that's the one thing I'll tell you. Tonight, you could be as happy as anybody in Stornoway. But without Jesus Christ, it won't stay like that. So remember that it won't stay like that. You need, you need Jesus. And so we find that Jesus is saying to them, look, I'm good, we need to go up.

And of course, the disciples, very briefly, the disciples are saying to him, of course, we'll see it back in verse 8, when Jesus said, let us go to Judea again, the disciples said to him, Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?

And Jesus, of course, says that he is going to go up. And verse 14, he tells him that Lazarus has died, but for your sake, I'm glad that I wasn't there so that you may believe, but let us go to him.

[25 : 50] Then in comes Thomas. This is doubting Thomas, who gets his name because he refused to accept, to believe the appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. Thomas was one of these people who, you know, there's some people who always see the worst in everything.

The bottle is always half empty, he's never half full. Thomas was one of these Christians, you know, he's a good man, but he always saw the dark side of things and it wasn't going to work.

And that's why straight away he says, so Thomas called the twin and said to his fellow disciples, oh well, let us go that we may die with him. The Jews are going to stone Jesus and they're going to stone us as well, so we'll just go up and we'll die with him.

See, this is the kind of person that Thomas is. But Thomas, you know, was that kind of person, again, he was kind of the, when Jesus was telling them that he was going to go away from them, he was going to heaven.

Thomas was the one who said, Lord, we do not know where you're going. So Thomas was one of those, he was maybe a wee bit slow in the understanding, and he was always looking on the dark side.

[27 : 05] He was, and I've got to remember, I think we say it so often, Lord's people are all different, and we're not all at the same stage of development. We don't all have the same personalities and the same characteristics.

some Christians are so positive, they're naturally positive people, and that carries on into their Christian life. Some people are really negative, that carries on sometimes into their Christian life. Some people look on the bright side, some look on the dark side. Some are so enthusiastic and courageous, others are really fearful. We're a mixed bag.

The Lord's working individually in us all, shaping us, in our own characters and personalities, personalities, but still in that conforming us to the image of Christ.

But that's what I love about Thomas. Even although he's looking at it and he says, they're going to stone Jesus and they're going to stone us, but let us go. And this is our love that is not prepared to let Jesus go.

[28 : 07] I love that about Thomas. He was as far as he was concerned, although that's not what happened, he thought going up to Jerusalem is going to be the end of me, but I'm ready to go because if Jesus is going there, so am I.

And this is a Thomas who a wee while later, when after the resurrection of Jesus and Jesus appeared to Thomas, Thomas was able to say, my Lord and my God.

Tonight, are you able to say that? This morning we were looking at the theme of assurance. Are you able to say tonight, my Lord and my God?

The Lord is my God. I hope you are. You know, that's probably the greatest thing that you can say. It's the greatest thing that you can know.

Ask the Lord tonight, help me, to know you as my God. let us pray. O Lord, we pray that all of us tonight will know the Lord Jesus as our Lord and as our God.

[29 : 20] May we see sufficient of the work of salvation to know, to understand, to realize, and be persuaded. We ask, O Lord, to enter into our experience with your love and with your grace.

And we pray to encourage us, each and every one of us, as we journey on through life. Take us to our home safely, we pray. Pray to bless the youth fellowship tonight.

Pray to bless Dunny and Liz, whose home fellowship meets in. Watch over us all, we pray, and take away our sin in Jesus' name. Amen.