

Hostility Against Lazarus

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[0 : 00] John chapter 12 and that little section verses 9 to 11. John 12 at verse 9. When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him, many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Lazarus is a fascinating figure in John's gospel. We're never told much about him. We never hear him speak.

We don't know what he did in life. Nothing really out with this short reference in these passages, chapter 11 and 12. All we know about him was that he was ill, that he died, that he was buried, that he was raised by Jesus, and that he's here sitting at dinner as Jesus is an invited guest in the home.

We know that he belonged to this family, along with his two sisters, who love Jesus and who are very devoted to Jesus in following him and his teaching.

[1 : 17] But that's about it. Nothing else about him is recorded, and we don't ever hear anything of by way of a confession or a statement about Jesus, nothing about his faith, nothing of that.

And yet, as you look at John's gospel and the passages referring to Lazarus, they really provide a very powerful narrative of Christ's own power and place and person.

The account we have is a very powerful narrative, and the place that Lazarus has in it is absolutely central and crucial to presenting the message that Jesus has, and especially of illustrating this message that he said about himself, one of the great I am statements in the Gospel of John, here in chapter 11, where he says to Lazarus' sister, Martha, I am the resurrection and the life.

Whoever believes in me shall never die. Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? And the raising of Lazarus is really, in a sense, the physical outworking of that statement, that Jesus, as the resurrection and the life, gives evidence and credence to that by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Only somebody who is the resurrection and the life could do such a thing. Only somebody who has life in himself greater than the strength of death could actually do something like raising Lazarus, bringing him back from the dead.

[2 : 52] Now imagine that you are here at this time, that you were there at this time, when all of this excitement was taking place in Jerusalem.

Not only did this event take place, but it was also approaching the time of the Passover. Many, many people have been crowding into Jerusalem from country parts in order to celebrate the Passover.

And just imagine that you're one of those selected or invited to come and partake of this dinner. We told here that they had prepared a dinner for him, for Jesus.

Martha was serving. And Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. How many others there were, were not told. But just imagine that you're there yourself.

And imagine looking at Lazarus. What would you be thinking? What questions would be going through your mind? What thoughts would you have as you looked at this man?

[3 : 51] And as you could say assuredly, I know that this man was dead some days ago. I know that he was buried. I even know where his sepulcher was. And here he is at this table with me, eating of this dinner.

Just imagine the thoughts that would go through your mind, because this is a real event. And these people knew that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, as indeed did the authorities themselves, as we'll see in the passage.

Here's the man who was in his grave days before this. And he's now alive. And he's sitting here with others partaking of this dinner.

What an amazing sight. What an amazing situation. And you can just imagine, as I said, yourself or myself, putting yourself there and somehow trying to imagine looking at Lazarus.

I'm sure I'm sure I would certainly have my eyes fixed on him, just trying to fathom out what had happened. How has this man come to be sitting here at the table with me, having been in a sepulcher not that long ago?

[5 : 02] And, of course, that all points to Jesus himself. And what we find here is that there were two reactions to Lazarus sitting here at the table. And the two reactions are very clear from the passage.

Now, it's not surprising that you have, as you find in verse 9 here, a large crowd of the Jews. When they learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

Obviously, the news about this would have spread very quickly. And especially with so many people crowding into Jerusalem at this Passover time, the news of this would have really spread. You didn't need social media in such a context as that to make the news known.

It would have passed from person to person very quickly. And the news would have spread to such an extent that, are you going to see Lazarus? Are you coming to Mary and Martha's house? Because Lazarus is going to be there.

They're going to make a dinner for him. And we're just curious to see this man. We're curious to see, is it really him? Did this really happen? And the crowd would make their way to see Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

[6 : 15] Because after all, this, of course, was not an everyday event. This was something that the crowds had never witnessed or heard of before.

And they came just to see Lazarus. But that actually led to two reactions, two responses to the whole event.

And the two responses are, first of all, that some believed when they saw what Jesus did. If you go back to chapter 12, verse 9 here, when the large crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only on account of him, but to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

And so some, when they heard about Jesus having raised Lazarus, they believed in Jesus. And we read back in the previous chapter as well that a plot was hatching.

That started actually before this. You can go back as far as chapter 7, and you can see it brewing from there onwards. And it reaches its climax of push in Jesus coming to be delivered over, to be crucified.

[7 : 22] But what was happening was that many of them actually came to believe in Jesus himself because of what happened with regard to Lazarus.

That's what happens with changed lives, really, isn't it? One of the things you've seen through social media, through news reports in the election of a potential leader for the country is that a lot of the focus has really gone on to Kate Ford because of her testimony.

Because she's testifying that Jesus is her Lord and her Savior, that her life was changed by him. And therefore, people take note of that. And people begin to ask a question, well, what is she really saying?

A lot of vitriol, as Martin mentioned in prayer, of course, has gone out towards her. And that's why we have to pray for her particularly, that God will keep her and God will maintain her in her own strength of faith and of will.

But, of course, what's attracted people is that here's somebody in public life who actually believes the Bible, who actually believes the Bible to be true, who actually believes in this Jesus.

[8 : 34] And these people have been drawn, not necessarily to believe in Jesus, but still drawn nevertheless, to try and figure out what is it that moves this woman?

What is it that makes her life so different? Why is she so clearly and obviously certain about what she believes, even though many other people ridicule that?

What's going on with that? And that's why it's important for ourselves, of course, to be lights in the world, as Matthew chapter 5 puts it for us. Chapter 5, verse 16.

Let your light also shine, so shine. Before men shine, we saw it not so long ago, that passage. Let your light so shine. Why does it say so shine?

Well, in the same way as a lamp shines when it's put on a stand. Like that, let your light so shine, so that people may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

[9 : 34] That's the purpose. We're not shining to draw attention to ourselves. We're not shining so that people will admire our good works and say what good people we are. We're shining as lights in the world so that their eye may be drawn to this Christ, the light of the world.

This man, this savior, this person, this great figure who transforms lives, who changes lives, so that people come to take note of the change in their lives.

That's the first reaction. People believed in Jesus because on account of how many Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

Second reaction, though, is very different because some actually went to the Pharisees. Back in chapter 11 there and verse 45, many of the Jews who came with Mary and seen what he did believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

Which is a very different reaction on the part of others who, instead of coming to believe in Jesus, actually were siding with the Pharisees, with the religious authorities who were determined to get rid of him.

[10 : 50] They didn't like what they had seen. And that's a remarkable statement itself of the hardness and of the sinfulness of the human heart. That you could actually know that Jesus had raised this man from the dead.

That you could have all the evidence you needed. That this Lazarus who had been dead was now alive. That he had come to be alive by the power of Christ. And yet instead of coming, as some did, to believe in Jesus, to give their lives over to him, it has the opposite effect, the opposite reaction.

They want to get rid of him just like the Pharisees and the religious leaders do. Now it's always like that, isn't it? It's always like that, these divided opinions over Jesus.

It will always be like that. It's been like that since human beings first came out on the side of God all the way through time back to the Old Testament. Because you'll find some people and they will simply not be prepared to accept the testimony that's put before them.

Whether it's in the Bible or in lives that Jesus has changed. Here are other people with a divided opinion, a different opinion.

[12 : 03] And you know, it's strange, isn't it, how sometimes the plainer the evidence, the more compelling the evidence, the more determined some people are to put it behind them, to stamp it beneath their feet, and to go on in unbelief and in resistance to Jesus.

There's a mystery to that, but it's the mystery of sin. It's the mystery of rebelliousness against God. And you would imagine that virtually everybody who saw Lazarus and knew that he had been raised from the dead and now knew that he was sitting here at a table as a guest at dinner, you'd imagine that most people would say, I really need to get to know this Jesus.

Instead, some were saying, we really need to get rid of this Jesus. He's a threat to us. He's a threat to what we believe and threat to our authority, as the religious leaders were saying about him.

And that's, of course, true about Christ all the way through the record you have of his life. And it's true even to this day when we find the church and when we find the church's witness in the world.

Take, for example, the two who were crucified on each side of Jesus, one on each side. The two malefactors of criminals. One of them accused Jesus, passed things in his teeth, just abused him verbally and said, Are you not the Christ?

[13 : 32] Then come down from the cross and save yourself and us. Whereas the other one said to him, Do you not fear God, seeing we're in the same condemnation?

And that justly or rightly, but this man has done nothing wrong. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. You see the difference. There's Jesus, the cross in the middle. And on each side of him, you might say are representatives of humanity.

On the one side, rejection. Hatred. On the other side, knowledge, acceptance.

This is something I need to accept. What's happening, this person, what he's doing. And all the way through history, that's what you've got.

Because the cross divides. The cross, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, it divides humanity. It divides people. And there's a great gulf between faith and unbelief.

[14 : 34] And that's what it is like to this very day. Where you find faith and unbelief divided over. The very person of Jesus. And the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And I think in these days itself, we've seen. That the more evidence is given plainly and tactfully and lovingly of love for Jesus, of faith in Jesus, the more virulent opposition and enmity against Jesus comes to the fore.

Social media is not a place really to have great discussions in any way. And in fact, it certainly lends itself, like Twitter or whatever, lends itself just to short, snappy statements, which, when they're really negative and critical, they just jump out at you and are very sarcastic and biting and bitter.

But you can see that the reaction to suggestion, even that Christ is living, that Christ is actually alive, that Christ is one who is worshipped, that, well, that's just, to some people, that's just anathema.

But it proves the point, doesn't it? It proves the Bible to be true. It proves the record of Scripture that responses to Jesus are divided either against him or for him.

[15 : 58] And it will always be like that to the end of the age. So these are two reactions to the raising of Lazarus and to Jesus and what he did. And then there's the plan here to kill Lazarus.

So you go back to chapter 11, verses 50 to 53, you can see there the high priest, Caiaphas, he says to the people, you don't understand, it's better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation and not for the nation only. And, of course, the fear was, as it's saying there in verse 48, if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.

We're just going to lose everything. The Romans will take over completely, is what they were saying. And as Caiaphas said, no, one person, only one person needs to die, and that'll be the salvation of the nation.

That'll be sufficient. That'll convince the Romans. But, of course, he didn't realize that he was actually speaking a prophecy.

[17 : 14] Without really understanding it, he was actually fitting into the prophecies of the Old Testament, that the Messiah would come, and that by his death, salvation would come to human beings like ourselves.

That's why John is putting it there. He doesn't mean that he prophesied in the sense that he knew what he was saying. But as John is presenting this to us, he's presenting this as within the greater plan of God.

This is really how it's worked out. So, isn't it really pretty solemn that here's the man Caiaphas, the high priest that year, and what he's really saying, really, is that, you know, if we kill Jesus, we can be excused to do such a terrible thing because it's going to save the nation.

As an excuse for you to try and cover up how horrible a thing it is, he's contemplating in giving his authority to Jesus being put to death.

But the reason, that's really the reason that they want to kill Lazarus, is because people are going over to this Jesus. The authorities can't actually stop people leaving their traditional religion and going over to follow Jesus and be his disciples.

[18 : 30] That's what's angering them. That's what's really troubling them. And they're concerned that this should actually be brought to an end. And the only way they can think of bringing it to an end is to just get rid of both of them.

Let's kill Lazarus as well. Let's get Jesus by all means. But if we leave Lazarus alive, he's going to be a thorn in our flesh. He's going to keep coming up with this testimony to Jesus. He's going to be the very visible evidence of the power of Christ.

But hostility against Lazarus is ultimately hostility against Christ himself. And you know, it's always like that.

Whenever you find somebody openly Christian, openly professing their Christianity, their faith in Christ in a public way, opposition to that is not just opposition to that person.

It's opposition to the person they're testifying to. That's the underlying reason why they wanted to put Lazarus to death. Because people were going away and were following Jesus.

[19 : 36] They were coming to believe in Jesus. Jesus is the problem. Jesus is the one that they just cannot stand. You can see John 15, if you cast your eye forward for a minute.

John 15 and verses 18 to 21 connects the two things together. Where Jesus is saying to the disciples here in the upper room now, If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world.

Remember the world hate. Therefore, the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you. A servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

If they have kept my word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name. Because they do not know him who sent me.

[20 : 42] You see what he's linking together there. Jesus linking together there. The reaction to himself and that of his disciples. Well, they're joined together. It's essentially the same attitude.

And it ultimately is against himself. They've kept my word. So they're going to keep yours also. Because they know that you're one of mine. That you're my followers. That you're concerned to present my words to the world.

If you go forward to Acts chapter 9, you'll find the same thing. Acts chapter 9. And these opening verses. The famous account that you have there of Saul of Tarsus. How he came to faith in Christ.

The chapter begins. And Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. Went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus. And so the narrative goes on.

And as he was approaching Damascus. Suddenly this light from heaven flashed around him. Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying. Saul, Saul. Why are you persecuting me?

[21 : 46] Jesus didn't say to him. Saul, why are you persecuting these people? Why are you actually causing these people such harm? Even to the point of some of them being imprisoned.

Not even put to death. That's not what he said. Why are you persecuting me? In other words, whenever the world persecutes the church for its testimony to Jesus, it's addressed particularly against Jesus himself.

That's the underlying cause. That's the underlying grit, if you like, that gets in the eye of the world. The fact that it's Jesus that's being obeyed.

Jesus that's being worshipped. Jesus that's being presented. The claims of Christ over human life presented in the gospel. That's what it's about. Why are you persecuting me?

And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. He's making it clear to Saul of Tarsus.

[22 : 50] I'm the one you're getting at, even though you're aiming at my people. But you hate them because you hate me. And your hatred of me is the reason why you're hating them.

And that same Paul, of course, as he became Paul in Philippians chapter 3, that wonderful passage of testimony, his own personal testimony, we could take it.

And what he says in chapter 3, just how things happened in his life, what he was like, what he was brought up as. But whatever things were gained to me, I counted as loss for Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss. Because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish.

In order that I may gain Christ. In order that I may be found in him. In order that I may know him. And the power of his resurrection.

[23 : 51] And may share in his sufferings. Why did Paul suffer as he did as a Christian? Why did he suffer as an apostle? Why did he suffer for preaching the gospel that he preached in all these places?

Because he was presenting Christ. And because the Christ he was presenting was one that Paul was so united to. In fact, the same sufferings.

Christ's essentially were, apart from the fact that Christ were atoning sufferings. But sufferings in terms of standing for God. Standing for the righteousness of God.

The commands of God. All of these, the same reaction to Paul as it was to Christ. Jesus is at the center of it. It's a strange thing, isn't it?

That for so many of these people who say that Jesus, that God is just a figment. In fact, I saw one text yesterday, I think it was, against Kate Forbes' faith.

[24 : 51] And a number of things being listed that Kate believed in. And especially, as I was with this white guy in the sky. A description for what that person really believed wasn't, of course, through that white guy in the sky being God.

Well, here is what Jesus, what Paul is saying about himself sharing in his sufferings. Coming to have participation in the reaction of the world against him as against his people.

And, of course, that plan was really within the plan of God. The plan to put Jesus to death. They did put Jesus to death. It did actually lead to his accusation unjustly and to his crucifixion, of course, as we know.

But the plan that they had, the plot to kill Jesus, while in a measure that actually came to be true and carried out, it's within the overall plan of God, who by the death of Jesus was obtaining life for his people.

It's interesting, we looked at this in the Gaelic on Sunday morning. Acts chapter 4 puts it this way. And again, it's very interesting the way it's put. Acts chapter 4, verses 27 and 28.

[26 : 16] When these believers were looking that God would give them the boldness to continue. And when they reported what had happened in terms of their imprisonment and so on to their friends.

They then began a prayer meeting. And they quoted the second psalm. And as you come to verse 27, For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel.

You see the whole gathering? That whole gathering of all the ones that are mentioned there. They were gathered against you and against your anointed one, against Jesus, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to make place, to take place.

Now you'd expect maybe that that would say to do whatever they actually had proposed or planned against us, Jesus. But no, what it's saying is, Lord, they were gathered together in this city, all of these people together against you and against your anointed one, Jesus, to do whatever you, God, had purposed.

That's the bottom line, isn't it? Whatever God has purposed to come to pass, there is no power or ability anywhere that will prevent that.

[27 : 40] Whether it's the promotion of someone like Kate Forbes to office, to first minister, whatever it is. If God has purposed that that's what it'll be, that's what it'll be.

If God has purposed that that's not what the outcome will be, it will not be that outcome. But it's safe to leave it in the hands of God. There's no point in worrying about it, even though we support all who are actually suffering persecution such as Kate at this time.

Well, there's the two reactions and the plan to kill Lazarus. We'll need to leave it there for tonight because of the wake that's coming shortly. But this is really giving us an account of the world's reaction to the gospel, essentially, and to the way in which we ourselves have to continue to manage our witness for Jesus' independence on the Lord.

So let's conclude tonight by singing in Psalm 56. Psalm 56, that's on page 73, verses 9 to 13.