Death and Resurrection
John 11:38-44
SS Lesson for 01/31/2016

Devotional Scripture: Isa 25:6-10

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Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson examines Lazarus’ Death and Resurrection and what that means to us today. The study’s aim is to understand the principles and reason behind death and resurrection. The study’s application is to structure our thinking and reactions to life's incidents to see the hand of God at work to bring faith to us and glory to Himself and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: John 2:1-2

43 Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" 44 And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

This climactic miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead was Jesus’ public evidence of the truth of His great claim, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Death is the great horror which sin has produced (Rom. 5:12; James 1:15). Physical death is the divine object lesson of what sin does in the spiritual realm. As physical death ends life and separates people, so spiritual death is the separation of people from God and the loss of life which is in God (John 1:4). Jesus has come so that people may live full lives (10:10). Rejecting Jesus means that one will not see life (3:36) and that his final destiny is “the second death,” the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15).

This Lazarus is mentioned in the New Testament only in this chapter and in chapter 12. Bethany (cf. 11:18) is on the east side of the Mount of Olives. Another Bethany is in Perea (cf. 1:28). Luke added some information on the two sisters Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). This Mary... was the same one who later (see John 12:1-10) poured perfume on the Lord and wiped His feet with her hair. However, John may be assuming that the original readers of his Gospel already had some knowledge of Mary (cf. Mark 14:3-9). The sisters assumed, because of the Lord’s ability and His love for Lazarus, that He would immediately respond to their word about Lazarus’ illness and come. Jesus did not go immediately (see v. 6). But His delay was not from lack of love (cf. v. 5), or from fear of the Jews. He waited till the right moment in the Father’s plan. Lazarus’ sickness would not end in death, that is, in permanent death. Instead Jesus would be glorified in this incident (cf. 9:3). This statement is ironic. Jesus’ power and obedience to the Father were displayed, but this event led to His death (cf. 11:50-53), which was His true glory (17:1). In spite of Jesus’ love for all three (Martha and her sister and Lazarus), He waited two more days. Apparently (vv. 11, 39) Lazarus was already dead when Jesus heard about him. Jesus’ movements were under God’s direction (cf. 7:8). His disciples knew that His going to Judea, would be dangerous (10:31). So they tried to prevent Him from going. Jesus spoke in a veiled way to illustrate that it would not be too dangerous to go to Bethany. In one sense He was speaking of walking (living) in physical light or darkness. In the spiritual realm when one lives by the will of God he is safe. Living in the realm of evil is dangerous. As long as He followed God’s plan, no harm would come till the appointed time. Applied to people then, they should have responded to Jesus while He was in the world as its Light (cf. 1:4-7; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5). Soon He would be gone and so would this unique opportunity. Jesus then said, Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. The word “friend” has special significance in Scripture (cf. 15:13-14; James 2:23). This “sleep” is the sleep of death. Since the coming of Christ the death of a believer is regularly called a sleep (cf. Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 15:20; 1 Thes. 4:13-18). Dead Christians are asleep not in the sense of an unconscious “soul sleep,” but in the sense that their bodies appear to be sleeping. The disciples wrongly assumed that Jesus meant Lazarus had not died, but was sleeping physically (cf. John 11:13) and was on his way to recovery: If he sleeps, he will get better. As was often the case in the Gospels, Jesus was speaking about one thing but the disciples were thinking about another. The words
Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there seem shocking at first. But if Lazarus had not died, the disciples (and readers of all ages) would not have had this unique opportunity to have their faith quickened. Lazarus’ death was so that you may believe. Didymus means “twin.” Thomas is often called “doubting Thomas” because of the incident recorded in 20:24-25. But here he took the leadership and showed his commitment to Christ, even to death. That we may die with Him is ironic. On one level it reveals Thomas’ ignorance of the uniqueness of Christ’s atoning death. On another level it is prophetic of many disciples’ destinies (12:25).

Apparently Lazarus had died soon after the messengers left. Jesus was then a day’s journey away. Since Palestine is warm and decomposition sets in quickly, a person was usually buried the same day he died (cf. v. 39). The fact that Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem points up two things. It explains why many Jews from Jerusalem were at the scene of this great miracle (vv. 45-46). It also prepares the reader for the coming climax which was to take place in the great city. When a person died, the Jews mourned for a prolonged period of time. During this period it was considered a pious duty to comfort the bereaved. Martha, the activist, went... to meet Jesus while Mary, the contemplative sister, waited. (cf. Luke 10:39-42 for a similar portrayal of their personalities.) Martha’s greeting is a confession of faith. She really believed that Jesus could have healed her brother if He had been there. No criticism of Jesus seems to be implied since she knew her brother was dead before the messengers got to Jesus. Her words But I know... God will give You whatever You ask might imply by themselves that she was confident Lazarus would be resuscitated. But her actions in protest at the tomb (John 11:39) and her words to Jesus (v. 24) contradict that interpretation. Her words may be taken as a general statement of the Father’s blessing on Jesus. Your brother will rise again. Since the word “again” is not in the Greek it is better to omit it in the translation. This promise sets the stage for Jesus’ conversation with Martha. She had no thought of an immediate resuscitation but she did believe in the final resurrection at the last day.

I am the Resurrection and the Life. This is the fifth of Jesus’ great “I am” revelations. The Resurrection and the Life of the new Age is present right now because Jesus is the Lord of life (1:4). Jesus’ words about life and death are seemingly paradoxical. A believer’s death issues in new life. In fact, the life of a believer is of such a quality that he will never die spiritually. He has eternal life (3:16; 5:24; 10:28), and the end of physical life is only a sleep for his body until the resurrection unto life. At death the spiritual part of a believer, his soul, goes to be with the Lord (cf. 2 Cor. 5:6, 8; Phil. 1:23). Martha gave a great confession of faith in Christ. She agreed with Jesus’ exposition about eternal life for those who believe in Him. Then she confessed three things about Jesus. He is (a) the Christ (“Messiah”), (b) the Son of God—which is probably a title of the Messiah (cf. 1:49; Ps. 2:7)—and (c) the One who was to come into the world (lit., “the Coming One”; cf. John 12:13). She believed that Jesus is the Messiah who came to do God’s will, but as yet she had no hint of the coming miracle regarding her brother. Martha then told Mary that Jesus the Teacher was asking for her. He evidently wanted to have a private conversation with Mary. His purpose was probably to comfort and instruct her. “The Teacher” is a notable title for it was unusual for a Jewish Rabbi to instruct a woman (cf. 4:1-42). Mary’s sudden departure to see Jesus caused the crowd of Jewish comforters to follow her. So a private session with Jesus became impossible. Reaching Jesus, Mary fell at His feet. This is significant, for on a previous occasion she had sat at Jesus’ feet listening to His teaching (Luke 10:39). Her greeting to Jesus was the same as her sister’s (John 11:21). She felt the tragedy would have been averted if He had been present. Her faith was sincere but limited.

In great contrast with the Greek gods’ apathy or lack of emotion, Jesus’ emotional life attests the reality of His union with people. Deeply moved may either be translated “groaned” or more likely “angered.” The Greek word enēbrimēsato (from embrimaomai) seems to connote anger or sternness. (This Gr. verb is used only five times in the NT, each time of the Lord’s words or feelings: Matt. 9:30; Mark 1:43; 14:5; John 11:33, 38.) Why was Jesus angry? Some have argued that He was angry because of the people’s unbelief or hypocritical wailing. But this seems foreign to the context. A better explanation is that Jesus was angry at the tyranny of Satan who had brought sorrow and death to people through sin (cf. 8:44; Heb. 2:14-15). Also Jesus was troubled (etaraxen, lit., “stirred” or “agitated,” like the pool water in John 5:7;
cf. 12:27; 13:21; 14:1, 27). This disturbance was because of His conflict with sin, death, and Satan. Jesus’ weeping differed from that of the people. His quiet shedding of tears (edakrysen) differed from their loud wailing (klaiomai, v. 33). His weeping was over the tragic consequences of sin. The crowd interpreted His tears as an expression of love, or frustration at not being there to heal Lazarus. Disturbed emotionally (cf. deeply moved, in v. 33), He came to the tomb.

Tombs were often cut into limestone making a cave in the side of a wall of rock. A stone was placed over the entrance. Jesus commanded that the stone door be taken away. To do so was to risk defilement. But obedience was necessary if Jesus’ purpose was to be realized. The scene was highly dramatic. The crowd watched and listened. Mary was weeping and Martha objected because after four days putrefaction had set in. Jesus reminded Martha of His earlier promise (vv. 25-26; cf. v. 4). If she believed His word that He is the Resurrection and the Life and trusted Him, God would be glorified. But unless the sisters had trusted Jesus, permission would not have been given to open the tomb. With the stone taken away, the tension mounted. What would Jesus do? He simply thanked His Father for granting His request. He knew He was doing the Father’s will in manifesting His love and power. His prayer of thanksgiving was public, not so that He would be honored as a Wonder-Worker but so He would be seen as the Father’s obedient Son. The granting of His request by the Father would give clear evidence to the people that He had been sent by the Father and would cause the people to believe (cf. Elijah’s prayer; 1 Kings 18:37). On other occasions Jesus had said that men would hear His voice and come out of their graves (5:28) and that His sheep hear His voice (10:16, 27). After His brief prayer He called (ekraugasen, lit., “shouted loudly”) in a loud voice. This verb is used only nine times in the New Testament, eight of them in the Gospels (Matt. 12:19; Luke 4:41; John 11:43; 12:13; 18:40; 19:6, 12, 15; Acts 22:23).

Jesus shouted only three words: Lazarus come out! Augustine once remarked that if Jesus had not said Lazarus’ name all would have come out from the graves. Immediately, the dead man came out. Since he was wrapped in strips of linen, a special work of God’s power must have brought him out. Jesus’ directive to the people. Take off the grave clothes, enabled Lazarus to move on his own and at the same time gave evidence that he was alive and not a ghost. This event is a marvelous picture of God’s Son bringing life to people. He will do this physically at the Rapture for church saints (1 Thes. 4:16), and at His return for Old Testaments saints (Dan. 12:2) and Tribulation saints (Rev. 20:4, 6). Also He now speaks and calls spiritually dead people to spiritual life. Many who are dead in sins and trespasses believe and come to life by the power of God (Eph. 2:1-10).

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Funerals tell us a lot about how the family and friends of the departed view death. For Christians, there is sometimes a celebratory mood that almost becomes a blissful denial of the death. This is usually not satisfactory, for the loss of a loved one is sad even for believers. Funerals for unbelievers can only be described as awkward since there are few words of comfort for those who die without the hope of resurrection to eternal life with Jesus. Last week’s lesson was about a village wedding, one of the most joyous events in rural life. This lesson’s setting is a village funeral, also a major event but with a completely different tone. It was a time of wailing instead of dancing. Both events were significant in the life of a village. And in both cases Jesus intervened to change a dire situation into a happy ending.

The household of siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was in the village of Bethany. Bethany was on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the lower eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. This mountain is situated directly east of the temple area in Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley. To travel between Bethany and Jerusalem, one would skirt the southern flank of this mountain, a walk of about two miles (see John 11:18). Bethany also was located on the Jericho Road. Thus pilgrims from Galilee would pass through the village as they made the final ascent from the valley of the Jordan River to Jerusalem. Jesus may have used the household of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus as a convenient base when he visited Jerusalem (see Mark 11:11). The two-mile walk, 30 minutes
each way, was inconsequential in a society where everyone was accustomed to walking. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus are described as “loved” by Jesus (John 11:5). Luke records a story about the sisters (not mentioning Lazarus) that involved another visit by Jesus in their home (Luke 10:38-42). This story shows a familiarity with Jesus similar to that which he had with his chosen 12. The home may have been large and comfortable, although we have no information regarding the household’s source of income (note Mary’s possession of expensive ointment in John 12:1-5). When a person died in that time and place, the interment of the body followed very quickly. Embalming was not practiced by the Jews of Jesus’ day (contrast Genesis 50:1-3, 26), so a decaying corpse would soon begin to smell of decomposition—thus the urgency to have the body entombed. Nonetheless, the body would be washed, wrapped in linen shrouds, and perhaps have spices and various sweet-smelling concoctions included in the wrappings to mask bad odors (compare John 19:39, 40). After the body was placed in a ready tomb, the entrance would be sealed using a stone carved for this purpose (compare Matthew 27:60). That is all very different from the modern custom of using a casket and concrete vault, digging a suitably deep hole, and marking the spot with a headstone in a community cemetery. In Bethany, there would be no burial in the sense of shoveled dirt filling a hole. Family tombs in places like Bethany were ready to be used on short notice. Today’s lesson is prefaced by what may seem to be curious inactions by Jesus. While he was some distance from Bethany and Jerusalem, Jesus received word that his friend Lazarus was gravely ill and that the man’s sisters wanted Jesus to come (John 11:1-3). But without apparent reason, Jesus delayed (11:6), arriving days after the interment (11:17). Yet comparing the time frames of John 11:6 with 11:17 leads to the conclusion that Lazarus would have died even if Jesus had started toward Bethany immediately. Even so, Jesus could have healed Lazarus from a distance (compare Matthew 8:5-13), so why didn’t he? Jesus explained that the death of Lazarus was to result in faith (John 11:15). Indeed, the question he asked Martha after he arrived was “Do you believe this?” (11:26). Her confession of faith contrasted with the voices of skepticism (11:37), leading into today’s text.

Major Theme Analysis

(SCRIPTURAL TEXT FROM THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION; CROSS-REFERENCES FROM THE NIV)

The Death (John 11:38-39)

38 Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it.
39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days.”

Time of grief (38)

**Though God allows grief, He will show compassion (Lam 3:32-33)**

32 Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unfailing love. 33 For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men.

**Even in grief, God's presence brings eternal joy (John 16:22)**

22 So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

**God promises that His children who mourn will be comforted (Matt 5:4)**

4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

**God promises that those who weep for His sake will one day laugh (Luke 6:21)**

21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.
God turns wailing into dancing (Ps 30:11)

11 You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Jesus' view of death (39)

The death of saints are precious in God's sight (Ps 116:15)

15 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.

The death of saints brings them to the bosom of God and His angels (Luke 16:22-27)

22 'The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' 25 'But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

The death and lives of saints are in God's hands (Ps 31:15)

15 My times are in your hands; deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me.

The Faith (John 11:40-42)

40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"

41 Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. 42 And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me."

Trusting in God (40)

Trust in God because He is our shelter (Ps 32:7)

7 You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah

Trust in God because there should be no fear of death (Ps 23:4)

4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Trust in God because He is our refuge (Ps 46:1)

46 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Trust in God because God He is our fortress (Prov 18:10)

10 The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe.
Prayer (41)

Prayer because there is confidence in approaching God's throne (Heb 4:16)
16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Prayer because Jesus is interceding for us (Rom 8:34)
34 Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Prayer because the prayer offered in faith is effective (James 5:15-16)
15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Prayer because God hears prayers (1 Kings 8:39)
39 then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart (for you alone know the hearts of all men),

God's attentiveness (42)

God hears and is attentive to the prayers of the righteous (Ps 34:15-17)
15 The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; 16 the face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. 17 The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

God is attentive to the needs of obedient servants (Isa 58:6-11)
6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. 10 "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, 11 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. 11 The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

God is attentive to the righteous (1 Peter 3:12)
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil."

The Resurrection (John 11:43-44)

43 Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!"
44 And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."
God's power over death (43)

God's power over death for God's children (Luke 20:35-36)

35 But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage. 36 And they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.

God's power over death in heaven (Rev 21:4)

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

God's power over death because He is the only one who can destroy the soul (Matt 10:28)

28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Freedom and restoration (44)

God restores into salvation (Ps 80:3)

3 Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

God renews and restores one's spirit into a new creation (2 Cor 5:17)

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

God renews and restores the inner being (2 Cor 4:16)

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Twice already, John has written of our Lord’s deep emotional response to the death of Lazarus, and more specifically, in response to the sorrow of Mary and those gathered there with her at the tomb of Lazarus. A sob erupts from Jesus, trembling as He continues to sob inwardly (verse 33). As He draws near the tomb where the body of His friend lies, Jesus bursts out in tears (verse 35). Now, in verse 38, John tells us that Jesus is “intensely moved again.” Jesus is truly touched with compassion as He enters into the grief of those gathered there to mourn the death of Lazarus.

Lazarus is buried in a cave, with a stone covering the opening. This sounds strikingly similar to the burial sight of our Lord (e.g. Matthew 27:60). The raising of Lazarus almost looks like a dress rehearsal for the resurrection of our Lord in the near future. Jesus orders the stone to be rolled away. We can’t be sure who Jesus orders to move the stone, or who actually does move it. It could be the disciples, of course, but it may just as well be others, such as some of those who have come to mourn with Mary. I am inclined to think that Jesus deliberately employs those other than His disciples to remove the stone. Doing this would seem to require some measure of faith on their part. Today, we must go through a very strict legal process to gain access to a body once it has been buried. In Judaism, contact with a dead body is defiling. Besides that, it is disgusting, especially after four days. I suspect those who removed the stone received a good whiff of the smell of decaying flesh. These witnesses will not easily be persuaded by a “swoon theory” or any attempt to explain away the literal death (and raising) of Lazarus. Such personal involvement in this process makes these participants even better witnesses to the miracle which is about to occur.
It is Martha, however, who objects to our Lord’s instruction to remove the stone. She protests that too much time has passed. The body will certainly smell very bad, she explains. But beyond this, it just seems to reopen a very painful wound. It seems quite obvious that Martha is not expecting Jesus to perform any miracle here, and certainly not the raising of one who has been dead for several days. Earlier, Jesus assures her that if she believes, she will see the glory of God (verse 40). By calling this to her attention once again, Jesus is seeking to stretch her faith. Martha relents, and the stone is removed.

Our Lord then lifts His eyes to heaven and begins to pray to His heavenly Father. This is one of the few times in the Gospels that a public prayer of our Lord is recorded. Earlier He warned about the misuse of public prayers, which are only for show (Matthew 6:5). But Jesus consistently claims that He does His Father’s work, and that He works with God (see John 5:17, 19-23, 30, 37, 43). Martha has just testified that she believes whatever Jesus asks of the Father, He will give to Him (11:22). Our Lord’s prayer is intended to demonstrate that the miraculous raising of Lazarus is something that the Father does through the Son. It is a public testimony to the fact that the Father hears the Son, demonstrating His power and glory through Him. Jesus does not pray this prayer for His own benefit, but for the benefit of the crowd looking on (11:41-42). His prayer does not specifically petition the Father to raise Lazarus. Jesus does thank His Father because He hears His prayers. Our Lord’s petition here is that men might believe that He has been sent from the Father, and we know that this prayer was answered (see verse 45).

Having prayed in this manner, Jesus now cries out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” (verse 43). It has quite often been observed that if Jesus had not specified “Lazarus,” every dead body in the region would have arisen from the dead. In shouting with a loud voice, Jesus reveals His confidence that the Father will hear Him, and that Lazarus will rise from the dead. He does not mumble these words under His breath, so that no one will hear what He is saying. No one comes away from this burial place wondering if there is a connection between that shout and Lazarus’ coming forth. It is a clear case of cause and effect. Jesus is the cause of Lazarus’ rising from the dead.

Lazarus emerges, still wrapped up in his burial attire. Some think his coming forth, bound with these restrictive wrappings, is a miracle in itself. Jesus instructs those standing nearby to release Lazarus from his bindings, and so they do. The witnesses to this resurrection are very much involved in the outworking of the miracle. They see and hear Jesus calling Lazarus out of his tomb. They help roll the stone away from the tomb, and they remove the cloth that has been wrapped around the body of Lazarus. I am inclined to wonder how some of the more scrupulous Jews dealt with this. The Old Testament clearly forbids touching a dead body. When they touch the body of Lazarus, who used to be dead, are they still defiling themselves? Here is a legal question the Jews have not dealt with before.

Conclusion

By way of application, several things come to mind from our text. The first is related to evangelism. In this incident, the first thing that strikes those who witness this great miracle is the love which Jesus has for Lazarus. John also stresses the love which Jesus has for Mary and Martha as well. It is after this that our Lord’s power becomes very evident, through the raising of Lazarus. You will remember that Jesus tells His disciples later that men will know them by their love for one another. This combination of God’s love and power—evident in the lives of His people—is a powerful testimony to the lost.

The repetition of these words (or their equivalent), “If you had only been here…,” appearing three times in John 11 (verses 21, 32, 37), is significant. How many times have you raised the same question? I read an article in Moody Monthly years ago entitled, “Things I’ve Learned in the Night,” written by Vance Havner. It was the essence of a message he had given to Moody Bible Institute students, the outgrowth of his own loss of his wife through a very terrible form of cancer. Havner pointed out how unprofitable the question, “If I had only …” This question usually betrays a functional unbelief in the sovereignty of God. It assumes that our destiny is in our hands. We heap guilt upon ourselves because of what we think we should have done, supposing that in so doing, we might have prevented something painful from taking place.
The question, “If you had only …” in our text second-guesses God. It is a question that both Martha and Mary would not have asked, had they known the outcome of their situation. I have had several occasions in my own life when I have second-guessed my actions in the past. One was when my mother was seriously injured by a hit-and-run driver. I agonized because I might have done something differently, so that my mother would not have been where she was when the accident occurred. Such agony is unprofitable, and it fails to grasp the fact that God is in control of everything that happens in our lives. When we can see our sufferings from afar, we can also see that God uses everything which happens to us for our good, if we are His children. Beware of second-guessing the past, and thereby second-guessing Him who is in control of our lives.

Speaking of the sovereignty of God, notice how He is able to accomplish a variety of things at the same time, through one event. The event in our text is our Lord’s delay, and the resulting death and raising of Lazarus. Through this one apparent tragedy, God (1) strengthens the faith of the disciples, (2) brings many to salvation, (3) produces an active unbelief in those who go straight to the Pharisees, (4) provokes the Jewish religious leaders to a serious course of putting Jesus to death, which is God’s will, and (5) produces a statement from the chief priests and Pharisees that will soon pave the way for the betrayal of our Lord by Judas (verse 57). God is able to achieve His purposes with ease, using the same event to harden some and soften others.

As I read our text, I notice the relationship between two very different “if” statements. The first comes from Martha and Mary; the second comes from our Lord. The two sisters say, “If you had only …” (verses 21, 32). Jesus says, “If you believe …” (verse 40). We would do far better to ponder the second “if” statement than the first.

I am struck by the repeated statements made by John in this chapter regarding our Lord’s deep emotional response to the death of Lazarus. I have heard a number of attempts to explain these statements, and somehow they do not quite satisfy my own heart and mind. They just don’t seem to fully explain John’s emphasis on our Lord’s emotions here. I do not believe that John wishes us to think that Jesus is angry at sin, or death, or unbelief. Even though this may be true, I don’t sense that this is what John is trying to get across to the reader. I believe the text means what it appears to say, namely, that Jesus is deeply touched by the death of Lazarus, and by the sorrow and grief it causes those whom He loves.

I have heard it said that this text shows the “humanity” of our Lord. The inference is that it does not reveal His deity. First, after our Lord’s incarnation—when undiminished deity took on perfect humanity—I am not sure we should speak of our Lord’s human side or of His divine side. He is the perfect union of deity and humanity. Second, I am somewhat troubled by the inference (or so it seems to me) that our Lord’s humanity has feelings, but His deity does not. All through the Bible, we read of God as a person, who has emotions like anger, (righteous) jealousy, and love. Why do we restrict these emotions of our Lord outside the tomb of Lazarus to His human side? God is deeply touched by human sorrow and grief.

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/raising-lazarus-john-1138-53)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

The raising to life of a man who had been dead four days was among the greatest of Jesus’ miracles. Jesus was working out God’s plan to bring faith to his followers, but this faith did not come without personal pain. For the raising of Lazarus to happen, he first had to die, resulting in grief to loved ones. As marvelous as the raising of Lazarus was, we should remember that it was different from the resurrection of Jesus. On that day outside Bethany, Jesus broke the power of death over Lazarus temporarily since it’s fair to assume that he rose only to die again. Jesus’ own resurrection, however, broke the power of death permanently. Traditions claim that Lazarus eventually became a bishop on Cyprus and that his remains are still in the Church of St. Lazarus in the city of Larnaca on that island. This is referred to as the “second tomb” of Lazarus, the final resting place for his body after his second death. Wherever his final resting place, the account of his raising in John 11 points to the hope of his permanent resurrection on the final day; it points to ours as well. Martha held on to this hope even after the untimely death of her brother (John 11:24); we must hold on to it when losing a loved one or facing death ourselves. The key to having such faith is the resurrection of Jesus himself. His
resurrection is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). He was the first to be raised permanently. As such, Jesus opens the way to life eternal for all who believe in him. He is the “resurrection and the life,” and those who place their faith in him, even though they die, will live again (John 11:25, 26). Our lesson today is therefore not the final chapter in the story of Lazarus. He, like you and me, will be raised when the resurrection trumpet sounds (1 Thessalonians 4:16). In prefiguring the final resurrection, Lazarus played a key role on that dramatic day in Bethany centuries ago. On the final day, Lazarus, Mary, and Martha will be joined again to feast at the banquet table of the Lord. And we will be there too, if we maintain our faith in the Lord of the resurrection. This is our eternal hope.

**Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator**

1. Like Jesus, we should grieve over the destruction brought on by sin (John 11:38)
2. Jesus can move any obstacles out of our way (vs. 39)
3. We will see God's glory when we believe Jesus (vs. 40)
4. Publicly thanking God for answered prayers and blessings can help others believe (vss. 41-42)
5. No matter how loud or soft Jesus' call to us is, we should know His voice and respond to His call (vs. 43; cf. 10:27).
6. We become alive and are set free when we answer Jesus' call (11:44).