

## THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE A SERMON ON JOHN 11:17-44

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In the first half of chapter 11, we see that Jesus left his beloved in uncomfortable places for a time while he waited for the opportune moment to reveal himself in a new and exciting way. We saw that when Jesus waits, it is to advance God's glory and inspire our belief. This week, we move on to talk about how Jesus ultimately came through for his beloved. We look at one of the most famous stories in the Bible — the raising of Lazarus.

Before we look at the story, a question needs to be addressed — and it's a question that we encounter a number of times through the gospel of John. John is the only one who tells us the story of the raising of Lazarus. There are some who will say that it's unbelievable that the other gospel writers would omit such a momentous event and therefore this must be a made-up story that was invented by the later church to make Jesus seem more wonderful. However the people who make that claim are not very careful readers of the New Testament. We see in the gospels 2 other examples of raising from the dead — in Luke 7, Jesus raises the widow of Nain's son and in Mark 4, Jesus raises Jairus' daughter. Each of these three recorded raisings are different — with Jairus' daughter, Jesus goes to the home and raises the girl from her deathbed; with the widow of Nain's son, Jesus met the funeral procession as they were leaving town; with Lazarus he went straight to the already sealed tomb. They are three distinct stories that could not be mistaken for one another or confused. We have records of three raisings, and it is reasonable to believe that in his three years of ministry, Jesus performed more raisings than just those three. The point is that the fact that Lazarus' raising is only told by John should not dissuade us from believing the truth of the story. John himself, in the very last verse of the book, tells us "...there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

Now that we've addressed that concern, let's look at the story itself. John tells this story with a penetrating eye for detail. As he crafts his story, some very important cultural points come out. Verse 17 "On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days." What's the big deal about four days? Jewish documents from that time indicate that there was a common belief that after death, the soul hovered over the body for a period of time until decomposition set in. The climate of Israel encourages rapid decomposition, so within three days, a corpse will start to decompose. At that point, it was believed that the soul of the departed would recognize there was no hope of going back

and would depart. So when John says it's been four days, he's making the point that Lazarus is totally dead. In the mind of the readers of the gospel, they would recognize there is no hope of bringing Lazarus back. This is the same belief that's in play later in verse 39 when Jesus says to take the stone away and Martha replies, "... by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." I love the King James version here: "Lord, by this time he stinketh." Martha, who in this passage professes belief in Jesus as the Son of God, thinks that Lazarus is beyond all help because it's been four days and he really stinketh.

Verse 18 says, "Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother." Again, rich detail — Bethany is within a half hour's walk from Jerusalem, where Jesus had offended so many authorities. As we saw last week, Jesus is walking back into the mouth of danger. We also see the presence of many Jews — this is one of the clues that indicate to us that the family of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was a wealthy family. It is likely that in that contingent of Jews, there were a large number of hired professional mourners, which was customary at this time. Other indicators of wealth are the expensive perfume that Mary later pours over Jesus' feet and the method of wrapping Lazarus' body with strips of cloth and a separate cloth for his face, a mode of burial usually accompanied with a plaster of expensive spices and perfumes like frankincense.

I believe that John takes care to give us such lavish detail so he can show us that these were real people with real lives, not just cardboard characters used to propel a story about Jesus. We see this personal touch in the private moments Jesus shares with both Martha and Mary. Each moment is personal and unique — even though the women have different ways of expressing their grief, Jesus is able to meet them on their own terms and offer comfort.

As we've worked through the gospel of John, we've seen all along these personal encounters with Jesus. These personal encounters show us that Jesus is earthy and real — he gets angry. He weeps. He shows passion. He shows humor. But intertwined with these pictures of a real, earthly Jesus is the message that Jesus is the cosmic Son of God — the incarnate Word who was present at the creation of the world. John does this quite deliberately, and nowhere is the intertwining more striking in this scene. Here, in the midst of all the human emotion — the fear of danger, the excitement of seeing old friends, the tears shared in comfort. Here Jesus wallops us with a statement about his mission as the Son of God. Look at that exchange with Martha in verses 21-25. Focus in on verse 25 "Jesus said to her 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'" This is a powerful statement, and much of it we've covered before. We saw earlier in the good shepherd dialogue in chapter 10 that Jesus said that he came that his sheep might have

life and have it abundantly. We saw that statement indicated not just existence, but existence with meaning and purpose and joy in the pursuit of that purpose. We saw in the early part of chapter 11 the connection between our belief and the increase of God's glory — as we are strengthened and confirmed in our belief, then God's glory is magnified in the world. Now, here we see the connection between belief and abundant life — as we believe, so we are enabled to enjoy that abundant life that Jesus talks about and thus bring glory to God. As God's glory is made more apparent, our belief is strengthened and thus we are more empowered to live the abundant life. Do you see the cycle as it operates?

In this passage, John adds the theme of the resurrection — the Jewish belief was that at the end of the ages on the Day of Judgment, all the dead would be raised. That's what Martha has in mind in verse 24. The hope of future resurrection is intimately tied to the abundant life that Jesus offers through belief in him. Those who have belief in Christ will have life even though they die. Therein lies the hope — physical death does not end the enjoyment of the abundant life that is available to us through belief in Christ. Remember our cycle of belief leading to abundant life and thus giving God glory. The hope of resurrection, of the ongoing nature of the abundant life keeps that cycle growing and increasing in intensity for all eternity. People think the afterlife is about sitting on clouds and enjoying earthly pleasures. Have you seen that commercial for the cheesecake snacks — a woman sitting on a cloud begins to daydream about these cheesecake snacks — they float around her head, and she reaches up, grabs one and takes a bite. After a moment of rapturous enjoyment, she says, "Well, after all, it *is* heaven." The idea is that heaven is about being on permanent vacation of self-indulgence. If that were the case then resurrection would be boring — eventually we get bored with all that stuff. But instead, resurrection and life are about relationship with the only One who satisfies.

Notice however that the critical component that Jesus keeps coming back to is **believing** in him. Twice in verse 25 and 26 he makes this point. Later on when he is about to raise Lazarus, Jesus comes back to this point. Verse 40 "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" See again that intimate connection of belief and glory, then in verse 41, Jesus begins to pray, ending his prayer with "... that they might believe that you sent me." You see there's a content to our belief. We don't just believe in whatever. To get this cycle of belief, abundant life, and God's glory cooking, there's an objective content in which we must believe: Jesus Christ. That he is the one God sent. That he is Lord on high.

That belief might seem like an awful lot were it not for what Jesus does next — he comes through on the miracle. He raises Lazarus from the dead. As Jesus said last week and he reiterated just before he raised Lazarus, this event was simply to increase belief. In raising Lazarus, Jesus shows that he has

power and authority to give the abundant eternal life about which he talks. He shows that belief will not be in vain, for if he can bring life back to a four day dead corpse, how much more can he give eternal life to those who claim his name.

So the question for us is “where is God showing his glory in our lives?” Is that glory serving to strengthen our belief in Christ? Are we continuing in our personal progressive commitment to Jesus Christ so we may enjoy more of the abundant life? In other words, is the cycle of belief, abundance, and glory in effect in our lives? There may be some skeptic out there thinking “Well if God did this, then I’d believe” and the **this** could be anything. But that’s not how it works. We don’t make demands on God to make him prove his existence so we might have faith. That is assuming that we’re in control here. But God is the one in control, and He shows his glory in unexpected ways — remember that the raising of Lazarus caught everyone by surprise. It’s when God catches you off guard that he most shows his glory, and most deepens your faith.

So with this cycle of belief, abundance, and glory, there are three things we can do to feed the cycle — we can immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, going deeper with the cognitive content of what the Bible teaches about God and who He is and who we are in relationship to him. Secondly, we can live obediently. We can strive to make our actions and attitudes more in line with the clear teaching of scripture, and thus experience more of the abundant life. Finally, we can open ourselves up to perceive and enjoy God’s glory around us. Psalm 19 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” If you do those three things, your life will be transformed and your relationship to Christ will go to an all-new level. Let’s take that to heart. Amen.