

## **Our Greatest Comfort and Hope**

### **John 11:1-53**

The resurrection of Lazarus is the high point of our Lord's self-disclosure to men. This is the greatest miracle of His ministry. There was no hope of recovery, and yet at the point of absolute helplessness and hopelessness, Jesus gave life to the dead. The spiritual parallel--for all men are 'dead in their trespasses and sins' (Ephesians 2:1-3). When we reach the point of utter despair and self-distrust, we find that we can never merit the eternal life God has provided as a gift (Romans 3:20-25; Ephesians 2:8-10). Jesus Christ has come, not to aid men in their struggle toward heaven, but to give life to those who are dead. As He gave life to Lazarus, so He offers spiritual life to all men, based on faith.

As this miracle is the high point of Jesus self-revelation as the Messiah, the Son of God, so it is also the high-water mark of human resistance and rejection of the person of Christ. In the face of the most irrefutable evidence the Jewish leaders chose to set aside the evidence for the sake of expedience and sentence the Savior to death. Once again, the rejection of men was not based upon a lack of evidence, but upon moral decay and willful rejection of the truth. Our Lord was not taken by surprise, for He said in Luke 16:31, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead".

This miracle also anticipated the coming death of the Lord Jesus and guaranteed the fact that He would rise from the dead, as He informed His disciples (cf. Matthew 16:21; 20:18-19). If Jesus had power over death and the grave, then surely death could not hold Him in the grave.

#### **A. Our Comfort and Hope is Found in the Purpose of Death (11:1-6)**

At the end of Ch. 10, Jesus and the disciples are in Perea, about 20 miles from Bethany. By the time word had reached Jesus that Lazarus was sick, he had probably died already. The siblings, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were close friends of Jesus. Martha and Mary sent this message to Jesus with great confidence that He would do what was best.

Instead of going right away to Bethany, he stayed in Perea another two days. The disciples did not question His choice of staying for they knew that going back to Judea was suicide. Jesus did not delay because of expediency, but so that He and His Father could be glorified (11:4).

Here is where many people struggle. *It was God's will for Lazarus to die, while the Savior Who could have healed him was 20 miles away.* If God is God at all, He is God of all. It is impossible for God to be God and not to be ultimately responsible for all that occurs. By this I do not mean to say that God is the source of evil, but that God is responsible for including the existence of evil, tragedy, and suffering in His plan. He does not cause sin, but He does purpose to employ these to further His purposes (cf. Genesis 50:20).

The immediate outcome of God's will for Lazarus was for him to die (verse 14), but the goal was for him to live (verse 23). *God's purpose in the death of Lazarus was to glorify Himself, through the glorification of His Son (verse 4).* Others had been raised from the dead in out of the way places (Matthew 9; Luke 7), but this was in the heart of Judea. Jesus, more than ever, would show Who He is: He is the resurrection and the life.

This was the comfort and hope which Jesus sent back to Martha and Mary: Lazarus is only temporarily dead, and better yet his momentary death would be used to the glory of God through the exaltation of the Son. Every death is to the glory of God.

Even though, God has purposed death to glorify Himself, let us not miss something else that permeates these first six verses -- *that is the depth of the friendship and love which existed between Jesus and Lazarus and his sisters: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus" (John 11:5)*. And here is one of the most comforting of all principles to strengthen and comfort us in the face of death: *the purpose of God is never separated from His love for His own*.

God's purposes never sacrifice the best interest of His own. God's love for His own is never surrendered to His purposes. The two go together.

### **B. Our Comfort and Hope is Found in the Possibility of Death (11:7-16)**

The real concern of the disciples was not distress over the death of Lazarus, but over the probability of their own death if they went with Jesus into Judea. For the disciples, going back to Judea was suicide. At this point of fear of the future, Jesus introduced another principle for Christians concerning danger in the service of the Master in John 11:9-10. If Jesus, who is the light of the world, lives in us, then there is no danger of harm or injury outside of God's will.

Men only stumble in the absence of the light. The disciples need not fear physical harm for the light of the world is with them. The principle then boils down to this: "THERE IS NO PERIL IN THE PERFORMANCE OF GOD-GIVEN DUTY, ONLY IN ITS NEGLECT."

When we commit ourselves to doing God's will, we are safe so long as we are fulfilling God's purpose for our lives. When we are in real danger is when we depart from divine duty to pursue our own selfish desires. Men have suffered and died in the service of the King (as did our Lord Himself), but such was the purpose and plan of God for them when they did. No matter how great the danger may appear, it is a mere illusion when we are on a divinely appointed task. So long as God has work for us to do and we are busily engaged in that work, we are indestructible.

Jesus then explains to the disciples that Lazarus was dead, and his death was for the strengthening of their faith. The disciples, as expressed by Thomas, still believe they are going to Judea to die. They would rather die with Him, than to live without Him.

### **C. Our Comfort and Hope is Found in the Presence of Death (11:17-37)**

Jesus brought comfort and hope by His presence, His promise, and His person.

#### **1. Comfort and Hope is Found in the Presence of Jesus.**

It was the absence of Jesus at the time of the death of Lazarus which plagued Mary and Martha. "*Lord, if only you had been here ...*" (John 11:21,32). There are possibly two main thoughts here. One is that, yes, Christ's presence when Lazarus died would have helped in their grieving. The other thought is this: they knew Jesus could have prevented this death, but he had to be present to do so. It was in His physical presence that He manifested His deep concern and sympathy over the suffering of His own (John 11:33, 35, 38).

Both Christ's humanity and His divinity are on display here. Our Lord was deeply moved with the pains and sorrows of His children; it was not merely as man, but also as God. Compassion is a divine attribute, more so than a human one. God is deeply touched with our sufferings.

#### **2. Comfort and Hope Found in the promise of Christ.**

*"I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives by believing in Me shall never die"* (John 11:25,26a).

The promise of Jesus to these sisters, whether He was present or not, was that Lazarus' sickness was not to terminate in death (verses 3,4). That promise was forever guaranteed when our Lord Himself rose triumphant from the grave. Our hope of life beyond the grave is grounded on His promise, and His promise is certain because of His power over death and the grave (! Cor. 15:12ff).

### **3. Comfort and hope in the person of our Lord.**

The promise of our Lord to Mary and Martha was rooted in Who He was. Jesus said to them, *"I am the resurrection and the life"* (John 11:25a). Those who find in Jesus merely a good man, a famous teacher, will find no great comfort in Him at the time of death and sorrow. Even at this hour of great trial and testing, she could make this affirmation of faith in the person of Christ: *"Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of God, who is to come into the world"* (John 11:27). Those who trust in His person are assured of His presence (Hebrews 13:5) and can rest in His promises.

### **D. Our Comfort and Hope is Found in the Power of Christ Over Death (11:38-44)**

The most amazing feature of this miracle is its brevity and simplicity. Jesus simply ordered the stone to be removed, and with a loud voice, ordered Lazarus to come forth. Even after four days in the tomb, when all hope of recovery was gone, Lazarus came forth. This miracle was performed as a sign. Our Lord's prayer was primarily for the benefit of those who stood by. What was important was the response of men to the miracle which had taken place.

### **E. Culmination in the Condemnation of Christ to Death (11:45-53)**

For some of the Jews, this miracle compelled them to acknowledge Jesus to be their Messiah, just as Martha had previously affirmed (verse 45, cf. vs. 27). The raising of Lazarus was a sign that they could not be ignore.

To those who chose to disbelieve, this miracle was not a matter which could be ignored either. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (verse 46) called a meeting of the Sanhedrin to decide what should be done. They had to acknowledge it was a miracle. They even granted that it was a sign (verse 47). But they stubbornly refused to conclude what this sign demanded. Although they refused to believe, the masses seemed to be turning to Him as Messiah.

Vs 48 spells out why the Jewish leaders refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah: "If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."

The Jewish leaders refused to cast their money and power at the feet of Jesus. His kingdom was not the kind for which they had hoped. They desired their own position in the present regime far more than what He seemed to offer them. They, as do all who are part of 'the establishment,' want the status quo. They had power, influence, prestige. More than this, they had wealth. If Jesus were heralded as Israel's king, the Romans might view this as treason. The Jewish leaders would be held accountable, and the whole establishment would be snatched from their hands. This was too high a price for them to pay.

What all the Sanhedrin members had been secretly thinking was now boldly expressed by Caiaphas, the Sadducee who was the high priest: "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man dies for the people than that the whole nation perishes." (John 11:49b, 50). Caiaphas is to be understood on two levels. First, Caiaphas meant to say that it was only common sense that one man should be expendable for the protection and preservation of a nation. Better to sacrifice an individual

than a nation, we might say. What in times past had been the informal intention of the Jewish leadership was now the official policy and position. This was the beginning of the end.

But by virtue of his official position as high priest, his words were meant to convey a much deeper meaning. They were really a prophesy of the sacrificial death of Christ for the sins of the world (verses 51,52). Even as the Old Testament prophets had foretold, God was going to send His Messiah so that through His substitutionary death, men might be reconciled to Himself.

### **Application**

*First, this miracle confronts men with the same decision which men had to make in Jesus' day: What will you do with Jesus?*

*Second, we are presented with a Christian view of death. Death which is faced by faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ is not to be feared, for He is the resurrection and the life.*

*Third, there is much to learn on the matter of Christian suffering. God's purpose is not that none of His own should suffer, for even His Son suffered untold agony. God's purpose in suffering is to strengthen our faith (cf. John 11:14-15).*

This passage informs us that God's purposes and His power are never divorced from His eternal love for His own. "Jesus wept." Remember this verse, for it was His great love, combined with His infinite power which accomplished this miracle. It was His measureless love which motivated His fathomless purpose to employ suffering to bring glory to Himself and to strengthen the faith of His own. My friend, let us never attempt to make excuses for God's actions, for whether it is pain or pleasure, it is for the glory of God.