

ISSUES OF LIFE AND DEATH

John 11:1-46

John recorded seven miracles Jesus did that attested to the fact that Jesus was not just an ordinary preacher or teacher. Most Christians are familiar with these accounts and have heard sermons related to these. It may just be coincidence, but one might make a case for an increasing impact significance of these miracles as the ministry of Jesus unfolded during the three and a half years between His baptism and the crucifixion.

1. Water into Wine: John 2
2. Nobleman's Son Healed: John 4
3. Healed Invalid Man at the Pool: John 5
4. Fed Five Thousand: John 6
5. Walked on the Water: John 6
6. Blind Man Healed: John 9
7. Raised Lazarus: John 11

The seventh miracle was so significant (or high profile) that it was what convinced the Jewish leader that Jesus needed to be eliminated. This was not the first person whom Jesus had restored to life, but it was certainly the most dramatic and was convincing proof that something really significant had happened. We find the setting for this final miracle before Jesus was arrested and crucified in the first part of John 11.

The Urgency of Illness – 11:1-7

¹ Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² It was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. ³ So the sisters sent *word* to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick." ⁴ But when Jesus heard *this*, He said, "This sickness is not to end in death, but for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by it." ⁵ Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ So when He heard that he was sick, He then stayed two days *longer* in the place where He was. ⁷ Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." John 11:1-7 (NASB95)

We tend to view sickness from a very personal and immediate standpoint especially when the sickness is ours or a family member or a close friend. Sickness comes along and alters our plans, it changes the details and the direction of our life. Usually, the change is a short term event and we go on with whatever plans we had and think little about it. In the case of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus the sickness that they encountered would prove to be more than a temporary set back of their life's plans. But I'm getting ahead of the story. What was the association of this family with Jesus?

It turns out that during a previous time that Martha and Mary had opened their home to Jesus and His disciples when He was passing through the town of Bethany. The occasion mentioned here (verse 2) regarding the anointing of Jesus with the perfume occurred after the resurrection of Lazarus. So the point is that they knew Jesus. He had fellowshiped with them (likely on more than one occasion) and when the events of life took an unusual turn, they looked to Him for help.

Word came to Jesus about the sickness and He did not take immediate action to restore the lives of these people to the same old direction in which they were headed. He waited so that a change in direction could be made that would result in a better life for them and, at the same time, bring glory to God. This may explain why our answers to prayers are not immediately answered. God sees the bigger picture and is using events that we encounter for our ultimate good and His ultimate glory.

As we look at what was going on, we can identify the characteristic Jesus modeled about

how to interact with each other. These are compassion, courage, commitment, confrontation, commencement, cognizant, care and communication.

Compassion - The request from Martha and Mary to come help Lazarus was not ignored even though it was delayed.

Courage - Jesus knew what the outcome would be from the trip to Jerusalem and would go anyway.

Commitment - He was resolved to complete what He came to do.

Confrontation - He was willing to face the Jewish leadership and confront their unbelief at the right time.

Commencement - Jesus started the trip back to Judea and the disciples followed Him.

Cognizant - As they were going up to Jerusalem, Jesus was aware of the amazement and fear of the disciples.

Care - Jesus continued to show that He cared about the disciples because He stop to explain to them what was going to happen.

Communication - this is so important to be successful in any endeavor where others are involved in what is happening.

Action and Awareness – 11:8-16

⁸The disciples said to Him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone You, and are You going there again?” ⁹ Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. ¹⁰“But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” ¹¹ This He said, and after that He said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep.” ¹² The disciples then said to Him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” ¹³ Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that He was speaking of literal sleep. ¹⁴ So Jesus then said to them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, so that you may believe; but let us go to him.” ¹⁶ Therefore Thomas, who is called Didymus, said to *his* fellow disciples, “Let us also go, so that we may die with Him.” John 11:8-16 (NASB95)

Life is not without risks and perils and we should be alert and aware of what is happening in the general overall culture in which we live and aware of individual and specific threats and dangers that may apply to us. Awareness of dangers should not keep us from taking the actions that are needed to accomplish our objectives, but such knowledge will allow us to go into such situations with our eyes open rather than find ourselves stumbling around in the dark.

The disciples were well aware of the dangerous situation that had developed because of the increasing boldness of Jesus’ ministry. The Jewish leaders were looking for an occasion to eliminate Jesus but they were restrained in what they could do for fear of an uprising among the people who had listened to His teaching and had witnesses some of the miracles. We all have a natural tendency to back away from doing something if we recognize the danger; however, there are times and situations where and when we need to press on with what has to be done because of the urgency or importance of the job.

From the conversation Jesus had with His disciples, we see the benefit of being able to see the “big picture” of everything that is happening versus the limit vision that the disciples had. There is a lesson for all of us when it comes to things we do and what we try to accomplish based on the limited knowledge we have. Based on what they knew, the disciples would have taken prudent action of staying away from the risky situation that existed in Judea. Jesus had a different perspective and He chose a radical course of action. This is why we need to pray and seek guidance and direction from the Holy Spirit before we take actions and make decisions.

A clear example of just doing what would appear to be the right thing is found in the statement Jesus made about it being better that He was NOT in Bethany when Lazarus became

ill. It would have been very difficult for the family and perhaps impossible to explain why Jesus would not have healed His friend if He were there. By delaying, Lazarus was allowed to die (which seems to us to be a bad outcome) so that a better outcome could be experienced that would bring glory to God and would attest to Who Jesus is.

The statement Thomas made could be taken in several different ways. It could have been that he realized there was danger and that the outcome was likely to be bad; however, he was willing to die along side of Jesus. If that is what he meant, then we know from later action of all the disciples at the arrest of Jesus his statement was more bravado than sincere. It could also have been somewhat of a flippant statement that he did not really expect anything of consequence to actually happen. It could have been that he did not take the impending danger to be a really serious threat. It is somewhat like knowing that the airplane on which you will be flying to go on vacation could crash, but you take the chance and fly on it anyway.

Unfaltering Faith – 11:17-27

¹⁷ So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. ¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off; ¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary, to console them concerning *their* brother. ²⁰ Martha therefore, when she heard that Jesus was coming, went to meet Him, but Mary stayed at the house. ²¹ Martha then said to Jesus, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² “Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.” ²³ Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” ²⁴ Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” ²⁵ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” ²⁷ She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, *even* He who comes into the world.” John 11:17-27 (NASB95)

John was careful to include significant time-line details that would reinforce the point that Lazarus had actually died and that a significant miracle was about to occur. Not too many years ago we did not have medical technology that could provide proof positive evidence that a person was dead. Most of us can remember times when a family member passed away that people would sit up all night with the body. The term used for this practice was a “wake.” This practice was a carry over from times before embalming became the general procedure in preparing a body for burial. It was not unheard of that a person who was thought to be dead would revive from what was a deep coma rather than death. That possibility led to the practice of holding a “wake” for a deceased family member – just in case they revived.

In the time of Lazarus, the general practice was that someone would be near the tomb of a deceased person for up to three days since there was no evidence that anyone ever revived after three days. With Lazarus having been buried (in the tomb) for four days, this “proved” that he was dead.

Martha’s initial words to Jesus have been described as being somewhat of a rebuke for not being there when they needed Him. Whether it was intended to be a rebuke or not, it was a very strong statement of faith in His power and willingness to heal those who were sick. This faith was also evident in her next statement that even after the finality of four days in the grave, the situation was not without hope. All of us have heard people say that they had prayed for a good outcome in a tragic situation and when their prayers were not answered they concluded that now it was just too late and there was no hope left. Martha had not come to that point of being hopeless.

Jesus’s response was to assure her that Lazarus would “rise again.” It is likely that the phrase He used was commonly used to speak of what would happen in the resurrection associated with the “last day.” Martha immediately thought of that eventuality and, while that gave her some objective assurance for that future time, it was not a lot of help for her present

grief. This “misinterpretation” or perhaps limited-scope interpretation of what Jesus told her can be a present-day problem for us as we read God’s word. There are many promises and we have been taught that a particular promise or scripture passage applies to “the end time” or only to the time when the Apostles were alive or some other restriction and we then we limit our faith to believe that we cannot experience the reality of that promise in our present day situation.

Is there anything that Jesus said that would indicate that we should not put such time limitations on what God has promised? Let’s look carefully at what He then said to Martha. “I am the resurrection and the life.” The point is that Jesus (God) is the great I AM and He does not change. Since He is ever and eternally “Who He IS” and since He never changes why do we think that His promises do not “always and ever” apply for those who believe and trust in Him and His word.

Jesus then followed this statement with the truth of the gospel message that was similar to what He had told Nicodemus. Then He asked her if she believe the gospel and Martha gave Jesus an answer that was a simple affirmative of “Yes, Lord.” She then followed that with a comprehensive statement of faith that went beyond what Jesus could DO but addressed the more important question of Who He Is. The NAS translation includes the word “have” along with believed and it correctly tells us that for some time Martha had believed the truth she stated when asked directly. This was the same confession that Peter made to the question that Jesus had asked His disciples of “Who do you say that I am?”

Being There for Each Other – 11:28-37

²⁸ When she had said this, she went away and called Mary her sister, saying secretly, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” ²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and was coming to Him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha met Him. ³¹ Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and consoling her, when they saw that Mary got up quickly and went out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³² Therefore, when Mary came where Jesus was, she saw Him, and fell at His feet, saying to Him, “Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.” ³³ When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her *also* weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, ³⁴ and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.” ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!” ³⁷ But some of them said, “Could not this man, who opened the eyes of the blind man, have kept this man also from dying?” John 11:28-37 (NASB95)

In this passage we see several levels of the way we respond to one another in times of loss and grief. Most of us realize that just “showing up” or “putting in an appearance” has benefit for those who are experiencing the deep hurt of the loss of a loved one. This is why we go to an event that we commonly call “receiving friends” that occurs before a funeral or memorial service. This is why we show up at the grave side service. It does little good to go to such events if you do not make your presence known the surviving family members whom you know. Mary needed to know that Jesus was there.

The fact that He was there was very important to her as seen by the fact that she immediately got up to go see Him. Being able to say the “right thing” at such a time is a challenge for both the family members and for those who are there to “pay their respects” as we typically say. Mary’s first words were essentially the same as those spoken by Martha. I would imagine that they had said those same words many, many times to each other over the past four days since Lazarus had died. It was then quite natural that this would be the first thing they would say as soon as they saw Him.

In the Jewish community of that day the presence of many mourners coming to “comfort” the family was an important tradition. We see a continuation of this tradition in most of the Middle Eastern countries even today. There are many mourners and they are loud in their

expressions of grief. To some extent much of this display is contrived in that they think that the loudness of their wailing shows the depth of their grief. In our culture, we have “evolved” into a quieter expression of our grief at the loss of someone close to us. If there is weeping, then it is usually subdued and we almost seem apologetic for showing our emotions.

The Jewish friends who were following Mary did not have the inhibitions that we have today. They were openly weeping. How do such emotional displays affect us when we see it? It depends on whether we believe that it is sincere or contrived. In recent months, there have been some well publicized tragedies involving the loss of young children in senseless killings. The television cameras are there and the parents are interviewed and the sense of deep loss is evident in their voice and the choking back of tears and we find ourselves having tears in our eyes as we empathize with them in their grief. It is not surprising to see that Jesus was touched by the grieving of His friends over the death of Lazarus. Many commentators have tried to figure out “why Jesus wept” and have suggested many different reasons that want be discussed here. Most of us are satisfied to say that this was a tender expression of His humanity.

Often in our grief, especially over the loss of a loved one, the tears will subside and we gain composure. However, when someone else comes to provide comfort, their kindness and compassion will trigger another wave of release of our emotions. Because of our empathy for those we care about, their grief resonates in us and we feel the same emotions they do though it is not felt as deeply. Jesus experienced the same passions as all humanity and He too was touched deep down inside.

Jesus was on the verge of demonstrating His power over death and yet He asked where Lazarus was. He did not dilute the focus of the message He was going to leave with the people that day. He could have demonstrated His omniscience by telling them where the body was but people could have argued that He knew where the family grave site because He had been told in previous visits with the family. Such a demonstration would have added little to His purpose of providing evidential proof of His divinity.

Making a Difference – 11:38-44

³⁸ So Jesus, again being deeply moved within, came to the tomb. Now it was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.

³⁹ Jesus said, “Remove the stone.” Martha, the sister of the deceased, said to Him, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been *dead* four days.” ⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, “Did I not say to you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they removed the stone. Then Jesus raised His eyes, and said, “Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. ⁴² “I knew that You always hear Me; but because of the people standing around I said it, so that they may believe that You sent Me.” ⁴³ When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” ⁴⁴ The man who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings, and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” John 11:38-44 (NASB95)

Jesus knew what He was going to do even before Lazarus died. He then proceeded to the work at hand. Martha had faith, but she also had a practical side to her. Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days and, consequently, there would be no doubt that he was really dead.

Jesus prayed and in His prayer told the reason why He was doing this: so that people could see the glory of God. He prayed so that the people would know that He was relying on the power of God. Then Jesus called Lazarus from the realm of the dead. He walked out of the tomb bound with the clothes of death. Jesus commanded them to “loose him, and let him go.” That is God’s desire for each of us. Once He has given us new life in Christ, then He does not want us bound with the graveclothes of the old life. We are to cast those off and put on the garment of praise instead of the spirit of heaviness. We are to replace the darkness with the light and walk in the power and glory of the resurrection.

The Jews who were observing the events were mixed in their reaction to Jesus. Some

were only observant of the obvious and noted that He loved Lazarus and was mourning over the loss. However, others were openly critical in their skepticism. Some thought the previous miracles were staged and that Jesus did not show up before Lazarus died because He would have been embarrassed when Lazarus died. Are we reluctant to ask God to heal someone because we fear criticism of people more than we trust God to miraculously heal someone?

Responding to What God Does – 11:45-46

⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who came to Mary, and saw what He had done, believed in Him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them the things which Jesus had done. John 11:45-46 (NASB95)

Most of us have seen two people who will witness the same series of events and one will be drawn to God and the other will take a negative approach and do something detrimental to the work of God. Arrogance and pride prevent people from being open to the truth of what God is doing.