

Jesus Raises Lazarus From the Dead

John 11:38-57

Warm-up Question: What's the worst smell you've ever come across? What was the reason for the smell and how did you encounter it?

The God Who Empathizes with His People

³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?” ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him (John 11:38-45).

In the story of the raising of Lazarus, we see a heart-wrenching picture of the pain experienced by the Lord Jesus as He encounters the bitterness of death and suffers alongside His friends. In this passage, we are given a glimpse into the emotion Christ displayed in His humanity. At the same time, while being fully human, we witness Him as Lord over death, performing a most miraculous display of the power of God! In our last study, we explored the things that led up to Jesus returning to Martha and Mary and the dead Lazarus. We saw how Jesus was moved with strong emotion at the weeping of Martha and Mary and the mourning Jews who were there at the tombs. In verse thirty-eight we are told again that Jesus was deeply moved. John seems to be emphasizing to us that Jesus was wracked with sobbing as His heart was moved at the raw emotion of each person there with Him at the tomb. Why does John tell us a second time that he was deeply moved? I think it is because he saw something in Christ that day that he could not just let go without drawing attention to the way His heart was touched by the pain of His friends around Him. Jesus was convulsed with sobbing. Here

we see something completely different from any other so-called god of this world. This God that we see in the scriptures really empathizes with His creation. What do we mean by empathy? A person with empathy has the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. The God of the Bible has the ability to feel what His people feel...the things that give us pain touch His heart. Isaiah the prophet wrote about Him saying, “surely he has borne our grief’s, and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:4). The writer to the Hebrews, talking about Jesus being our High Priest, says:

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to **empathize** with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15).

When Saul, the religious zealot who became the apostle Paul, was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians and throw them in jail, the Lord Jesus appeared to him on the road. He said to Saul, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14). Saul had no idea that Jesus; God in the flesh, felt what His people feel. The Lord said to him, “Why do you persecute **me**?” Saul had been blindly persecuting Christians, but did not understand that these were indeed the Lord’s people! The Lord makes it clear to Saul that He empathizes with His people and feels what they feel. The Lord had been prodding Saul’s heart with the goads of conviction, such as when he saw the death of Stephen, the first martyr (Acts 7:57-60), but Saul carried on, even while under conviction at the godliness that he saw in Stephen that he himself lacked. Our own wrestling and resisting against God’s conviction; (kicking against the goads) is only hard on us. God in His mercy showed Saul (Paul) His pain at what he was doing to His church.

What is your picture of God? Do you see Him as a lofty judge, impassively surveying His creation, or can you really imagine Him being touched, deeply moved by your pain? Can you think of a time when you were deeply moved with sorrow? How does it feel now to think of Christ entering into your pain?

At the Tomb of Lazarus

The city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas are built on the mountainous region of Judea. The difficulty this presents is that there is insufficient soil depth for burial places, so those that are well off are buried in caves that are hewn out of the mountainous rock. This was the case at the tomb of Lazarus. The entrance to the tomb or cave would have had a round stone like a huge coin or cart-wheel often weighing several hundred pounds, as at the tomb of Jesus. We are told that when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came to Jesus' tomb, they were afraid that the three of them would not be strong enough to roll the stone away due to the size and heavy weight (Mark 16:3). The stone would have a slot carved below the entrance, and would be rolled into place effectively closing the tomb. Often whole families would be in one tomb. Jesus commanded the disciples and those gathered there to roll back the stone from the entrance. Martha, still unbelieving, complained that the smell of death would be very strong since Lazarus had been dead for four days. I wonder if there was an odor coming from the tomb? There couldn't have been an airtight seal on the door; it was only a rock-hewn door. We must ask ourselves at what point did the miracle take place? I think that as they moved back the stone, there was the stench of death coming from the tomb. After Lazarus had come back to life, we are told that many of the Jews who were there to witness this miracle, put their faith in Him. That kind of evidence would be hard to ignore. It is very possible that the evidence of the smell of death was before them at the opening of the tomb. The Lord looked up to heaven and prayed to His Father before calling out to Lazarus with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" (verse 43). I think that if He did not refer to Lazarus by name, those Jews may have witnessed all those who were dead in the vicinity coming out of the graves, back from the dead!

Can you imagine looking at the crowd around the tomb at that moment? As we look at the faces of those who heard the commanding words of Jesus, what do you think they were thinking? It's easy for us because we know the details. We already know the end of this story. But for them, when they heard the command of Jesus, I'm sure there were plenty who smelled the smell of death and scoffed at the thought of Lazarus coming out of that tomb. How long did it take? Are we talking seconds or two or three minutes of silence, before Lazarus

stands at the doorway? In that gap of time, did the smell of death disappear noticeably first? The mind boggles at what they might have witnessed. One thing is sure, when Lazarus stood at the door there were gasps of astonishment, and screams of delight. Death had been conquered! We have a Savior that conquers death and the grave!

If you had been standing around the tomb, what would you have thought when you heard the words of Jesus telling Lazarus to come out?

Optional Question: Do you think that most of the people watching expected to see Lazarus come forth? Put yourself in the crowd and imagine the tension of those watching, perhaps judging Jesus for a lack of sensitivity to the mourners. What do you admire most about Jesus at this moment?

Jesus was and is always practical. For instance, elsewhere in scripture we see that when Jesus brought back from the dead the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue ruler, as soon as she awoke from death, He told them to give her something to eat (Luke 8:55). As soon as Lazarus appeared at the entrance to the tomb, He told those standing aghast to "take off the grave clothes and let him go" (verse 44). It would have been difficult for Lazarus to stand, let alone walk due to the bandage-like wrappings that were around him. The Israelites at the time were not practitioners of Egyptian embalming techniques; the bodies were allowed to decompose. What they did do, however, was to wrap the body in aromatic spices. Merrill Tenney in his book, *The Reality of the Resurrection*, tells us about the customary procedure for the burial:

"The body was usually washed and straightened, and then bandaged tightly from the armpits to the ankles in strips of linen about a foot wide. Aromatic spices, often of a gummy consistency, were placed between the wrappings or folds. They served partially as a cement to glue the cloth wrappings into a solid covering. When the body was thus encased, a square piece of cloth was wrapped around the head and tied under the chin to keep the lower jaw from sagging."¹

We are told that the weight of the spices that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea put around the body of Jesus weighed seventy-five pounds in weight (John

¹ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection* (New York, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963, Page 117.

19:39). If that was normal, and we are told that it was, it would have been difficult for Lazarus to even get up, let alone get to the doorway. He was bound up with the grave clothes. Even though we have been given new life, sometimes we are still bound with the things that hold us to our old dead life in sin. The body of sin can be so lethargic in walking toward Jesus.

What grave clothes still cling to you, and what of your old life do you need to let go of and walk away from?

I wish John had told us more about the celebration back at Martha's afterwards, don't you? Instead of reminiscing about the life of Lazarus, they are avidly listening to his experience of dying and being with the Lord in heaven. I wish that I could have been a "fly on the wall" at that party! I would have loved to hear their conversation, see the relief and delight of the sisters as they wept and embraced their brother, recounting the whole episode from the time they thought they had lost him for good, to the time when he came forth at Jesus' command. I'm sure there was quite a praise party to the Lord.

The Plot to Kill Jesus

There always seems to be someone who will rain on our parade, and that is what we see next. Some of them who opposed Christ saw the danger to the religious elite that this wonderful miracle had posed; they went to the Pharisees and told them what had happened in Bethany.

⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation." ⁴⁹ Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. ⁵³ So from that day on they plotted to take his life. ⁵⁴ Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the people of Judea. Instead he withdrew to a region near the wilderness, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. ⁵⁵ When

it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. ⁵⁶ They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all?" ⁵⁷ But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him (John 11:38-57).

An emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin was called when they heard the news of Lazarus being raised from the dead. The Sanhedrin was a religious body of men who were seventy in number. The High Priest presided over them, making their number seventy-one. This was a pattern that had been established at the time of Moses and the elders of Israel. When Moses was overwhelmed with work, the Lord took some of the power of the spirit that was on Moses and put it on seventy of the elders of Israel to help him in the work (Numbers 11:17). By the time of Christ, the Sanhedrin had reached the pinnacle of its importance, legislating all aspects of Jewish religious and political life. The Sanhedrin was composed of Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were completely focused on living their lives in complete obedience to the Law, and they didn't involve themselves or care so much for the politics of the nation except for as it related to the keeping of the law. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were aristocratic, wealthy and intensely political. All of the priests were Sadducees, and they did not believe in the resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did.

A Defining Moment

We don't know if all of the seventy men were gathered, but there is evidence that suggests that those who were sympathetic to Christ were not called. These men who had gathered together to talk about this recent development regarding Jesus faced a "defining moment." What is meant by the term defining moment? It is a time in our lives that defines who we are and whom we will come to be, an event that typifies or determines all subsequent related occurrences. What does a defining moment look like? For Peter the apostle it was when he heard Jesus preach and Jesus told him to drop down his nets for a catch. Even though he complained that he'd fished all night, nevertheless, he let down his nets and caught a massive amount of fish. The defining moment was when Jesus told him to leave his nets and follow Christ and from then on Peter would catch men (Luke 5:1-11). To use a popular moment from fiction

and film, it was when Luke Skywalker decided that he would rather die by falling from the top of Cloud City instead of serving the Dark Force and Darth Vader. I can remember one less dramatic, but important defining moment in my own life. For me, it was a time when I was working with my father on his fishing boat and the government had placed a herring ban on all the fishing boats because the quota for the year had already been fulfilled. My father decided that because there was no other fish to be caught at that time of the year, he would carry on fishing and continue to sell the fish (illegally). I understand his reasoning at that time. The government had made it very difficult for fishermen to earn a living by the bans they were placing and it was considered unfair by a lot of fishermen, my dad being just one. Being a Christian at the time, I was torn between two options; carrying on with my father and fishing illegally, or quitting the business and walking away from my nets, so to speak. God spoke to me from the scriptures, “come follow me and I will make you into fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). I decided at that time to give up commercial fishing and I never went back. My life was changed due to the decision that I made at that moment.

Defining moments don’t occur often, but they change your life depending on how you react to the moment. The defining moment that was in front of the Sanhedrin was their response to this current event. The surrounding area must have been buzzing about the miracle that had been witnessed. Perhaps there had been some who, once skeptical, were now convinced that Jesus was truly the Messiah. How would they react to this miraculous event that had just happened? Would they explain it away and seek to justify their position? Would they ignore it and try to focus on controlling the “movement” that they now considered dangerous?

Can you think of an event that you would describe as a defining moment that changed your values or your life completely? Did it bring changes in your life from that point on?

We have already seen that the defining moment in front of the Sanhedrin was the decision they now had to make. Everyone would have been looking to them, as many must have been wondering if He (Jesus) was really the Messiah, the one that had been foretold as coming. Previously, the religious leaders had rejected Him as a whole. This would have caused a dilemma for those who had been devoutly following these re-

ligious leaders. What should they do about Jesus the Nazarene? The Sanhedrin’s concern was that if they did not stop Jesus, all men would go over to Him and this would undermine their authority. They would lose their life of ease and comfort, milking the system that they had built up, the system upon which they had come to depend for their livelihood and social standing in the community. Again we see the person of Jesus forcing people to make a decision that will affect their eternal destinies. The High Priest, Caiaphas, influenced them to the degree that they would murder Jesus rather than see religious division among the Jewish people leading to the Romans taking away the authority of the Sanhedrin. This was a decision they felt that they had to make for their own survival, and so, they reasoned, for the good of the whole Jewish community.

⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, ⁵² and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one (John 11:51-52).

Was this prophecy that Caiaphas spoke a true prophecy inspired by the Spirit of God? What do you think?

Not all prophecy, I’m convinced, is inspired by the Spirit of God, otherwise why would Paul be advising the church to weigh up or judge the prophetic word that is spoken:

²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should **weigh carefully** what is said (1 Corinthians 14:29).

Even Biblical prophets got things wrong. When Samuel was sent to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the future king, when Samuel stood before he eldest and tallest, he thought that God’s anointed was before him. God had to speak to him that Eliab was not the one that God had chosen (1 Samuel 16:6). When King David had a desire to build a temple for God in Jerusalem, he shared his plans with the prophet Nathan. Nathan’s response was, “whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you” (2 Samuel 7:3-5). During the night the Lord spoke to Nathan that he was wrong, and that he was to tell David that a son and heir of David would build a temple and not David himself. Again, a prophet got it wrong. Then in the Book of Acts, we are told of a prophet named Agabus who took hold

of Paul the apostle's belt and tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "the Holy Spirit says, 'in this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:11). He wasn't far off, but it was the Romans, not the Jews who bound Paul—the Jews wanted to kill him! Don't get me wrong, I do believe in the gift of prophecy, but I will always seek to use the Word of God as a plumb line to see if the word of prophecy could be something that the Spirit of God is speaking as a word of strengthening, encouragement or comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

In this instance, I believe that this prophecy of Caiaphas was spoken with a motive behind it that was self-seeking. However in God's sovereignty, He allows it to be recorded as a true prophecy, for even the enemy's plan was working out God's eternal purpose. When Caiaphas spoke these words, it seems to me that it was a means of manipulation on his part to get people to side with him in the act of giving up Jesus, a righteous man. He saw that some of the religious elite were considering that the more they objected to Jesus' actions, the more it drew attention to Him; "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:19). Their defining moment forced them either to accept Him or to reject Him, and they chose to keep their authority and comfort and their place instead of bowing the knee to the Lordship of Christ—even in the

midst of signs and miracles that was powerful evidence of Christ's true identity.

As students of the Book of John and the life of Jesus, maybe this is a defining moment for you. How much evidence does it take before you too come to a decision as to the person of Christ? Is this a defining moment as you consider what your response will be to the Holy Spirit? Is there a sin or habit that you are harboring, which is keeping you from following the Lord? Will you walk away from something that you know in your heart is not God's will? Or will you reject the still small voice of the Spirit of God that says, "this is your day, this is your defining moment." If you choose to follow Him, He promises to be with you helping you to change. The choice before each of us today is awesome. Eternity weighs up our decisions. Abandon every thought of position, ease and comfort and bow your knees to the God of creation and ask Christ to forgive you for your sin and begin to walk with Christ. If you have already made this decision, take time to consider the things that hold you back from walking whole heartedly after Christ.

Prayer: Thank you Father for the power of your words. Thank you for calling us from darkness into your marvelous light. Help us to be aware of life's defining moments and say yes to your Holy Spirit. Amen.