

Death of Lazarus

Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. The death of Lazarus gave Jesus the opportunity to reveal himself as the resurrection and the life. There were *seven purposes* for Lazarus' death and each of those purposes is also applicable to the death of the believer. This sermon is based on the book of **John 11:1-16**. This is one of only **three** resurrection miracles performed by Jesus in the Gospels. One resurrection was in **Mark 5:41-42** where Jesus raised the daughter of synagogue ruler Jairus. The second resurrection is recorded in **Luke 7:11-17** where Jesus raised the son of a widow from the town of Nain.

Lazarus was sick. Jesus had previously said, "foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20; Lu 9:58). At this time, Jesus was being rejected by almost everyone.

Apparently, he was an unwelcome guest in most homes. He was walking about and proclaiming that he was One with God, the Son of God himself. Just imagine a man making such a claim. He was thought to be "mad" and demon-possessed (Mk 3:20-21; Lk 4:25). His own family was even having difficulty with him at this time. They

were apparently so embarrassed by his claims and the rumors of his insanity that on one occasion they traveled a great distance to bring him home, lest he be harmed.

However, there was one family who always opened their home to Jesus when he was in and around Jerusalem – the family of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, who were brother and sisters. They lived in Bethany, a suburb about two miles outside Jerusalem. Their closeness to Jesus is the reason the sisters felt so free to interrupt his evangelistic tour with the request to help their sick brother. Jesus' great love for this family should be noted throughout this sermon.

As I said earlier, there were *seven purposes* for Lazarus' death. The **first purpose** was to **glorify God** and to **proclaim Jesus is the Son of God** (v. 4). Lazarus' sickness was not for death. He was to die **for** the glory of God and Christ. He was sick, and he was to die so that the works of God could be demonstrated. Lazarus died so that ... **God could be glorified** ... by showing his desire for man to have life; by proving his power to give life; and by showing his approval of Christ by which he proved that

he really did love the world enough to send his Son to save the world. In addition, Lazarus died so that ... **Christ could be glorified** ... by having the opportunity to do the work of God; by demonstrating God's power; by showing compassion; by strengthening the faith of believers; and by leading unbelievers to believe.

In raising Lazarus from the dead, both Jesus and his Father were glorified as the **Life** of the world. In dealing with the blind man in **John 9**, both were glorified as the **Light** of the world. Which is also what we are told in **John 5:23**, "That all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him."

The **second purpose** of Lazarus' death was to **show Jesus' great love**. Note that each member of the family is mentioned personally. Jesus loved the family, but he also loved each one individually. This is a fact in the Scripture that needs to be stressed, for each one had a need, and each one needed and received the help of Jesus. Lazarus' death gave Jesus the opportunity to demonstrate his great love not only for the families of

the world but for each individual in the world. This is what we are told in **John 13:1**, “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.”

The **third purpose** of Lazarus’ death was to show the necessity for **waiting upon God** in great crises. Jesus was not waiting two days so that Lazarus would die and he could perform a great miracle. Jesus knew that Lazarus was either already dead or that Lazarus was going to die on the very day the person brought word of Lazarus’ illness. We know this because Lazarus had already been buried four days when Jesus arrived in Bethany (v. 17, 39). Jewish burial immediately followed death. The four days would be counted from ... the day of travel by the messengers in bringing word to Jesus (v. 3); the two days needed for Jesus to complete his ministry (v. 6); the day or two needed by Jesus to travel to Bethany (v. 17). [Remember huge crowds thronged Jesus, which prevented him from traveling rapidly. It is possible he

completed his ministry in one day and took two days for travel to Bethany.] The point is this: Martha and Mary were learning to **wait upon God** throughout the whole experience. In facing severe illness or death, there is no answer but to **wait upon God**. Jesus knows when to act. He knows the exact moment, the best time ... for us to bear the trial, for us to stand, for us to be helped, for us to learn the most, and for us to bear testimony of God's power and strength.

Whenever that moment arrives, the Lord rises to meet the need of the believer. What the believer must do is what Martha and Mary had to do: learn to **wait upon God**. The Lord will act at the right moment. We cannot dictate to God when to act nor how to act. Let me give you two examples. Mary, Jesus' mother, at the wedding in Cana wanted him to go and secure more wine. He rebuked her for interfering with his work, the work of God. He has his own way and time, the very best way and time for meeting the need (see John 2:3-4). Second, Jesus' own brothers tried to ridicule him into going by

caravan with them to the feast in Jerusalem. Jesus rebuked them for the same

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reason he rebuked his mother, Mary. He, the Son of God, knew how to conduct his ministry and when to go about doing it. He knew what was best. **Psalm 27:14** points out this concept of waiting: “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”

The **fourth purpose** of Lazarus’ sickness was to **teach the need to grasp opportunity**. It had been three days since Jesus received word of Lazarus’ illness. Jesus now said it was time to go into Judea, for Bethany was in the district of Judea. The disciples protested, for it was the Judean leaders who stood so opposed to Jesus and had threatened to kill him (v. 8). The disciples could not believe their ears. Why would Jesus jeopardize their lives? Jesus’ answer was forceful, and it stands as a great lesson for all of us. There are only 12 hours in a day. Jesus must walk, that is ... go and do his work while it is day, go and do what is right, regardless of the danger, go and do what is right lest the day pass and the

opportunity be lost (Jn 9:4). If Jesus had walked in the dark, failing to work and failing to do what he knew to be right, he would have stumbled. He would have shown that there is no light in

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him. The idea is, of course, that there is light in him. He knew the work to be done and right thing to do, so he must go into Judea. A lesson for us from this is that we must do the same as Jesus. We only have 12 hours of daylight (approximately). We must walk, that is, work and do what right, grasping the opportunity while it is day. If we walk in the night, we will stumble. When night comes, it is too late to walk. Works cannot be done in the night without stumbling about. The opportunity is lost. This is what it says in **John 9:4**: “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.”

Note the term, “this world’s light” in **verse nine**. Jesus is “the light of this world.” A person has only 12 hours, only a certain amount of time to see “the light of the world.” Once the night comes, the opportunity is lost.

Note also the statement “for he has no light [in him],” in **verse 10**. Man has no light within. All he can do is walk ... as he sees, as other men see, and as the world sees. The problem with such a walk is that no man or any combination of men can see beyond the physical and

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material world, and the end of the world is fear – the fear and trembling brought about by bondage and death. Remember the fear of the disciples I mentioned earlier in **verse 8**. The end of the world is not life. Life comes only from Jesus, “the light of this world.” Which is what we read in **John 1:4**: “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.”

The **fifth purpose** of Lazarus’ sickness was to **show Jesus’ great power over death**. Jesus stated very plainly what he was going to do. Lazarus was asleep; therefore, he would go and awaken Lazarus out of his sleep. However, the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was saying, **By sleep**, Jesus meant that Lazarus was dead, but the disciples thought he meant that Lazarus was resting in sleep. Note that Jesus gave his meaning of sleep, in **verse 14**: “Lazarus is dead.” There are **four** significant

things to make note of here. **One**, Jesus called Lazarus “our friend.” He was dead, but he was still “our friend.” This is a hint that Lazarus is still a friend despite being dead, that he is still living, still alive in another world. Note the strong feelings Jesus had for this believer,

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Lazarus. Jesus’ love reaches out for every believer just as much as it did for Lazarus. Jesus calls every believer his friend. And note the words, “our friend” in **verse 11**. Every believer is to be the friend of all other believers. There is a sweet fellowship between all believers.

The **second** thing to make note of is that Jesus predicted that he would raise Lazarus from the dead. He would “wake him up” he said in **verse 11**. This is a picture of the resurrection of believers, which is what we are told in **John 5:28-29**: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.”

The **third** thing to make note of is that the disciples misunderstood. Many still do. They misunderstand the meaning of death and the resurrection.

The **fourth** thing to make note of is that Jesus said that death is as “sleep.” Jesus said that Jairus’ daughter was asleep (Mt. 9:24). When Stephen was martyred, he is

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said to have fallen asleep (Ac. 7:60). Death is called “sleep” in order to picture the idea that the believer is resting in the presence and comfort of God, resting from the labor of their service on earth, and resting and refreshing himself for a greater service for God. Many within the world picture death as annihilation, as ceasing to exist. Scripture says it is not. Believers continue to exist, resting in the life and comfort of God. The body lays down and, so to speak, sleeps; but not the soul of man.

The **sixth purpose** of Lazarus’ sickness was to **help strengthen the disciples’ belief**. Jesus said an astonishing thing: he was rejoicing that he was not in Bethany when Lazarus was sick. Why? Jesus was joyed over what was to happen. Lazarus was to be raised from

the dead, which meant that every thoughtful believer, both then and in succeeding generations, would experience a great leap in faith. The glorious event of Lazarus' resurrection stirs the heart of sincere seekers, for it pictures the most glorious hope of life possible.

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Jesus Christ has the power to give life and to raise the dead. Any follower of Christ who truly experiences the scene of Lazarus' resurrection is bound to take a great leap in faith, to have their faith stirred to new heights, and to see their faith grow progressively. This is backed up in **John 20:30-31**, "Jesus did many miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

The seventh purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to **stir the disciples' courage and loyalty**. Note that in **verse 16** Thomas took the lead here. He showed great courage and loyalty to Christ, a dynamic example for every believer. He demonstrated a deep love for Christ, a love

that was ready to die for him. He demonstrated a willingness to stand and die with his fellow believers in the Lord's work. And he demonstrated that to die for Christ is better than to live without him. Which is expressed in **John 16:27**, "No, the Father himself loves

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you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God."

Though I purposely chose the seven purposes for Lazarus' death for today's sermon, I would be remiss to not include one added topic. That topic is not covered in verses 1-11, but in later verses. As I've already stated, Jesus loved this family of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary. When he came to Bethany, they go out to meet him, and first Martha, then Mary, speaks to Jesus. Jesus trembles with emotion when he sees them weeping and he is "deeply moved." Then **verse 35** simply says, "**Jesus wept.**" Jesus was no robot. He was a man with real emotions and friendships; he is moved to tears by death. But he is more than a mere man; he knows that his

Father's will is that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father.

Jesus is truly human. He is also truly divine. **Verses 25-26** contain Jesus' fifth "I am" statement: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." Already in this gospel,

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Jesus has claimed to offer the essence of life – bread, light, and water. Now he is the source of life itself. To support his claim, Jesus calls the four-day-dead Lazarus from the tomb.

Please bow your heads as I pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the beautiful story of Lazarus and the many lessons I can learn from this scripture. Thank you that sickness, sin, death, and hell, has been conquered forever through the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. Thank you that just as Martha and Mary's period of

misery was turned into laughter and joy, so my night of weeping has also been turned into a morning of joy with peals of singing, through faith in Jesus Christ my redeemer. Thank you that because he lives, I too shall live. May I sing forth your praise and glory in the eternal ages to come. In Jesus' name I pray. **Amen.**