

Message #45

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John

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JESUS RAISES THE DEAD

JOHN 11:38-54

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Philip Larkin was dubbed by British newspaper *The Times* as Britain's greatest post-war writer. Larkin was both a poet and a novelist. In the latter years of his life, he was dominated by a fear of death. Perhaps his most famous poem was "Aubade." (PROJECTOR ON--- AUBADE POEM) It begins like this:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.

In time the curtain-edges will grow light.

Till then I see what's really always there: (NEXT SLIDE)

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,

Making all thought impossible but how

And where and when I shall myself die. (NEXT SLIDE)

Arid interrogation: yet the dread

Of dying, and being dead,

Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

It is a rather sad and grim perspective on death. Death is a reality. We do well to figure out how to cope with it. We are an older congregation. Probably the majority of us will be dead within the next twenty

years. For some of us, it will be much sooner. We had a service yesterday here for a 45 year old woman. It is a reminder that death can happen sooner than we expect. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The passage before us this morning provides a certain confidence that we can have in the face of death. It is a confidence based upon who Jesus was and is, and upon what He has done.

In our ongoing study of John's Gospel, we have reached #11. The entire chapter is focused upon the seventh of seven miraculous signs, around which the Apostle John has organized his biographical material about Jesus. It is the most dramatic of the seven signs. For it involves the return to life of a man who has been dead for four days.

Tensions between Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem reached a point where they tried to stone Jesus when He was in Jerusalem for Hannukah. This incident prompted Jesus and His disciples to move somewhere on the east side of the Jordan River. But word came to Him that Lazarus was very sick. Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary had apparently hosted Jesus and the Twelve on their visits to Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR ON--- BETHANY MAP) So now they headed to the home of the three siblings, who lived in Bethany, a couple of miles to the east of Jerusalem.

We looked last week at the emotional scene that resulted when Jesus and friends showed up. The point that I made was that in the midst of grief and tragedy, we can be confident that Jesus cares and that He is sovereign. Today we shall see how that care and sovereignty play out with Lazarus.

I.

In vv. 38-45 of #11 we will find that JESUS CAN BE TRUSTED BECAUSE HE HAS POWER OVER DEATH. (I. JESUS CAN BE TRUSTED BECAUSE...) Verse 38, which is on p. 898 of the black Bibles, says, **"Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it."**

There is a traditional understanding about the place where Lazarus was entombed that goes back many centuries. (LAZARUS' TOMB) A church was built at this site in the fourth century. Centuries later, a mosque was built by it. The Arab name for Bethany is El-Azariyeh, which is based on the Arabic name for Lazarus.

The fact that this family had a tomb and a house that was apparently sufficient to house Jesus and twelve disciples in some fashion suggests that this was a family with some financial resources. Note also that Jesus was again emotionally affected as he approached the tomb. The verb that is used here is the same one that appeared in v. 33, which we said indicates a very strong emotional reaction. Jesus cares about what has happened to Lazarus and his family and friends, even though He knows what He is about to do.

Verse 39: **“Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.’”** The Jews did not embalm bodies. They wrapped them with linen cloths and applied spices. But after four days, there would still be a smell.

The burial custom for Jews in the first century was to leave the body in a tomb for a year. After a year, the bones that were left would be placed in a burial box, called an ossuary, There they would be left in a burial cave indefinitely.

I pointed out last week that the reference to four days in the tomb had significance for the traditional Jewish understanding of death. According to the Talmud, the spirit of the deceased would linger by the body until three days had passed. The spirit would leave after the third day. By the fourth day it would be clear that there was no more hope for the dead person. Martha, the sister of Lazarus, had no expectation that Jesus could do anything about the situation at this point.

According to v. 40, **“Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?’”** There is no record in the Biblical text that Jesus said anything specifically to Martha about seeing the glory of God. It could be that He did speak about this, and it is not recorded. The other possibility is that Jesus is summarizing the gist of what He said to her in vv. 21 through 27 of this chapter.

In John’s Gospel the glory of God seems to have reference to the revelation of God’s character and attributes. Here Martha and Mary and the others who are present are about to witness a remarkable display of the power of God. Much of the mission of Jesus has to do with the promotion of the glory of God.

Then in vv. 41 & 42 we are told, **“So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.’”** The stones used to

block the entrance of a tomb were usually large and heavy. They were intended to keep away not only animals but also grave robbers. The “they” who moved the stone could have included the twelve disciples or other mourners who were present. Keep in mind that there are many elements of this story which will find parallels in what happens in the resurrection of Christ.

Some scholars point out that there were magicians in the first century who were known to mumble various incantations when they were about to perform their supposed magic. Jesus did not want to be confused with these charlatans. Thus He spoke loudly and clearly. Also He had a prayer of thanksgiving. He does not specifically pray here for Lazarus to be raised from the dead, although we could have here only part of the prayer that He uttered.

His example has implications for us when we are called upon to make public prayers. Jesus is clearly praying with an awareness of His audience. He is not pandering to these people. But Jesus is intending that His prayer and what happens in connection with it be remembered by these witnesses. He wants them to be aware of His connection to the God who is there and the power that He displays.

Verse 43: **“When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’”** Jesus has made extraordinary claims about Himself, but His claims have been rejected by the religious leaders. Back in #5 v. 25 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 5:25) Jesus told the religious leaders in Jerusalem, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.”** In the context, Jesus seemed to be speaking about His involvement with the resurrection of the dead at the end of human history. But now it seems as if Jesus is providing a glimpse of that power, a proof of the power that He will exert at that future time. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Jesus speaks loudly so that all of these mourners can understand Jesus’ authority. He wants there to be a clear recognition of the cause and effect for what is about to happen. Centuries later the church leader Augustine would observe: If Jesus had not uttered the specific name of Lazarus, the whole cemetery of people would have come forth.

The Apostle John describes what happened in v. 44: **“The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’”** This must have been an extraordinary sight. It must have been something which those present would never forget.

The description of the appearance of Lazarus is consistent with what we know about Jewish burial practices in the first century. Typically the body of the deceased was wrapped up with a long linen cloth. Spices were then applied to the wrapping. A separate cloth was put on the face. Typically the arms were bound to the body. So what a sight this must have been with this man coming out of the tomb. Perhaps he was hobbling. Perhaps he was hopping out of the tomb, with his face still covered. He was apparently unable to free himself. Imagine the shock of the observers. Imagine the joy of the sisters to see their brother restored to life. Some of the witnesses were connected to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Imagine their consternation and confusion.

We could see this also as a picture of the spiritual rebirth that Jesus has described. The Good Shepherd calls His sheep to become part of His flock. They are called out of spiritual death to new life in Christ. Yet they still have their grave clothes attached to them. It is a lifelong process to rid ourselves of these attachments to the old life, to our sin nature. The New Testament calls this process sanctification.

No words from Lazarus are recorded in the entirety of the New Testament. Wouldn't we like to hear about this experience from his vantage point! Jesus and Lazarus were clearly not trained in modern marketing techniques. We would have been signing Lazarus up for book deals and trying to buy movie rights. At the very least we would have been arranging speaking engagements for him. But the Scripture is silent as to what he had to say about his experience.

Verse 45: **“Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him.”** Back in vv. 18 & 19 reference was made to the Jews who came to Martha and Mary from Jerusalem. Usually the term “the Jews” refers in John’s Gospel to the religious leaders of Judea, most of whom oppose Jesus and His claims. The fact that some of these leaders, or at least their representatives, come to Bethany to show sympathy to the sisters suggests that this family had some prominence.

Verse 45 speaks of coming with Mary. That could mean that Mary had special prominence, or some connection with the religious leaders in Jerusalem. It could simply mean that Martha had first approached Jesus when He neared Bethany and stayed with Him. The Jews came with Mary when she came to Jesus a bit later. Together they all went to the tomb.

What they all saw was an amazing miracle. It was too much for even some of the skeptics to explain away. We saw earlier that some people were described as believers who had a very superficial interest in Jesus. I doubt that this was the case for these individuals. They knew about the hatred of the religious leaders toward Jesus and their plan to have Him killed. They realized that following Jesus would draw

the ire of the other religious leaders. Following Jesus would probably be costly to them. So I suspect that their belief was genuine.

We have seen that besides describing seven miraculous signs which Jesus performed, the Apostle John describes seven "I am" statements which Jesus makes. In #6 Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life." In that chapter He performed the miracle of multiplication of the loaves before a crowd of thousands of people. In #8 at the Feast of Tabernacles Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world." He followed that up by giving sight to a man born blind. In #11 v. 25 Jesus declared, "I am the resurrection and the life." Now He has raised a man from the dead.

The relevance for us is that Jesus has promised that death is not the end for those who believe in Him. Death is not even the end for our physical bodies. For Jesus has promised a resurrection from the dead. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 5:25) In v. 24 Jesus promised eternal life for those who believed in Him. Beginning in v. 25 He also says, **"Truly truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. (JOHN 5:26) For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; (JOHN 5:27) and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. (JOHN 5:28) Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, (JOHN 5:29) and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment."** Jesus is not saying that we are saved by our works. Rather those who have genuine belief in Jesus will be marked out by good deeds that follow their faith whereas unbelievers will have behaviors consistent with their unbelief.

The Apostle John is not writing a work of fantasy or fiction. He is a follower of One who calls Himself the embodiment of truth. John was an eyewitness to what He describes. He stakes His own life on the things that He witnessed. The main point for us is that we can trust in this Jesus, especially as we contemplate our own mortality, because He has demonstrated that He has power over death.

II.

In vv. 46-54 we find that JESUS CAN BE TRUSTED BECAUSE HIS CONTROL OVER ENEMIES PROVES THE VALUE OF HIS SACRIFICE. (II. JESUS CAN BE TRUSTED BECAUSE...) According to v. 46, **"...but some of them [the Jews] went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."** There is a clear contrast here with the Jews who believe in Jesus because of the miracle involving Lazarus. These Jews are not going to the Pharisees to win them over to Jesus. They are going to them to talk about the increased threat that Jesus poses.

The Pharisees have taken a lead in opposing Jesus. Most of the rabbis of Judea are part of this group which promotes a strict interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and applies rules and traditions that are not necessarily Biblical. The Pharisees here include members of the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism.

We see here the true nature of unbelief in regard to Jesus. It is entrenched. No amount of evidence will convince these guys that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Such is often the case today. The root problem is sin and pride. So many people do not want to change. They do not want to humble themselves before an awesome God. They do not want to acknowledge their sin and guilt before a holy God.

Verse 47: **“So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, ‘What are we to do? For this man performs many signs.’”** The original word here for “council” is “Sanhedrin.” The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy members plus the high priest who acted as chairman. The members were leading rabbis, who were mostly Pharisees, chief priests, who were Sadducees, and prominent laymen. The Romans allowed the Sanhedrin to have considerable civil power as well as religious power.

These religious leaders can no longer deny the miraculous powers that Jesus has displayed. There is just too much evidence. But this does not lead to a reassessment of their views of Jesus. They dislike this guy too much. He ignores too many of their rules. He heals people on the Sabbath. He is not one of them. In fact, Jesus opposes them. He is a threat to them. Something must be done.

Thus they conclude in v. 48, **“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”** This guy continues to do amazing miracles. Now even some of the Pharisees have believed in Jesus, as a result of His latest miracle. He must be stopped.

The danger is that the Romans may step in and take away their place and their nation. The term “place” seems to have been used by the religious leaders to refer to the Jerusalem temple. In Acts #6 the Sanhedrin, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, is seeking to deal with the growing Jesus movement. They are especially upset by the effectiveness of the evangelist Stephen. (ACTS 6:13B-14A) In #6 v. 13 they say, **“This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we**

have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place..." It would appear that the temple is in view.

As to the reference to "nation," Judea was actually a Roman province. (PROJECTOR OFF) But the Jews had proved to be so combative over the years, especially in regard to their religion, that the Romans had given more powers of self-government to the Jewish people than they had to most other Roman provinces. The Sanhedrin was the primary institution that represented those powers of self-government. Its members did not want to lose their status and power and prestige. If this Jesus movement grew and became more powerful, the fear was that there would be conflict and disorder, and the Romans would have to step in. That would not be good for the religious leaders.

It is obvious that their concern is not for truth or discernment of God's will or spiritual benefit to their people. It was all about power and influence and political expediency. In this election season, it is tough for us to imagine how major news events could all be examined in terms of their political expediency, isn't it?

The Sanhedrin, composed of priests and rabbis and leading laymen, should have had a primary concern about the promotion of God's truth to their own people and to the surrounding nations. But we will find that in a few days their leaders will be telling the Roman governor that they have no king but Caesar. Their primary concern is for what seems to be expedient.

That can be a temptation for us as well. Expediency can take our eyes off of what should be our primary concern to glorify God. Expediency can tempt us to be quiet when we should speak up for what is true. Expediency can keep us from using opportunities to share the gospel because we might fear what others will think about us.

Back in v. 49 of our passage the Apostle John writes, **"But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all.'"** Later it would appear that Caiaphas knew nothing at all. Caiaphas was high priest for many years. The reference to "that year" is probably intended by John to mean that Caiaphas was the one who was in office during this fateful year in which Jesus was crucified and resurrected.

The Roman governor who preceded Pontius Pilate appointed Caiaphas to be high priest in 18 AD. He remained in office until the year 36. The fact that he had such a long tenure indicates that he was

successful in negotiating his way through the minefield of competing interests in Judea in the first century. His leadership apparently satisfied both the Roman authorities and the other religious leaders based in Jerusalem.

Caiaphas and his extended family of priests belonged to the party of the Sadducees. The first century Roman historian Josephus, who came from the party of the Pharisees, said, **“The Sadducees were barbarous and wild, even to those of their own group.”** (Bel. l.ii.166) Thus it is that Caiaphas appears to call his fellow councilmen a bunch of idiots. Caiaphas and his extended family of priests were also rich. The area where they were believed to have lived has been excavated in the last few years. Archaeologists have found evidence that they enjoyed comforts and luxuries that few of their fellow countrymen had. It would appear that they lived to be served rather than to serve.

Thus he continues in v. 50, **“Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”** Literally, he says “die in behalf of the people.” The Apostle John recognizes the divine irony in this. Caiaphas has no concern for spiritual truth, or for God’s perspective on the situation. He is motivated by pure political expediency. But he unwittingly utters a profound spiritual truth.

Caiaphas is totally wrong in terms of long term expediency. Thirty-five years later the Romans would wipe out Jerusalem. The temple would be destroyed. The Sanhedrin would cease to exist. The Jews would lose all power of self-governance. Their Jewish nation would not exist again as a nation-state until 1900 years later.

Their rejection of Jesus as Messiah would lead to the judgment of God. A few days after this incident, Jesus would tell His disciples (PROJECTOR ON--- MARK 13:2) on the Mount of Olives, **“Do you see these great buildings [referring to the temple]? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”** So it is that the temple was destroyed in 70 AD. It has yet to be rebuilt to this day.

So it is that Caiaphas concludes that the best way to get rid of this religious leader who has just raised someone from the dead is to kill Him. Hmmm... I wonder if he should have realized that it would be harder to get rid of Jesus than he thought that it would be.

(PROJECTOR OFF) The Apostle John adds his comment in vv. 51 & 52: **“He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.”**

The high priest was intended by God to be a mediator of God’s revelation to His own people and to the nations, the Gentiles. Caiaphas was corrupt. He was evil. But the sovereign God used the words of this man to convey two truths. Jesus was going to die for the benefit of His own people. It would be a substitutionary death. He was also going to die for the children of God who were scattered abroad. Apparently he was referring to the Gentiles. It is interesting that the author describes them as children of God, though they have not yet become followers of Jesus.

Verse 53: **“So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.”** The Apostle John regards the raising of Lazarus by Jesus and the effect that the miracle had on the religious leaders as the primary event that motivated the Sanhedrin to put into action plans to put Jesus to death. Of course, John also recognizes the sovereign hand of God in all of this.

Verse 54: **“Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples.”** The raising of Lazarus seems to have happened shortly before Passover week, the week in which Jesus died. Jesus in His divinity was aware of this planning by the Jewish leaders. The location of Ephraim is uncertain. The leading candidate for the town of Ephraim is about twelve miles from Jerusalem. So Jesus and the Twelve may have been in this place for only a few days.

The thing to see here is that the Triune God was in control of this whole situation. He controlled even the words of the enemy of Jesus. Caiaphas had no awareness of the significance of what he was saying. But he was uttering words of spiritual truth. Jesus had to die for His own people and for the people of the world. Such a powerful God should be trusted.

The Apostle Paul described the importance of this substitutionary death in 2 Corinthians. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14) In v. 14 he wrote, **“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died...”** Death is the penalty for human sin. Jesus died in our place to pay the penalty for that sin. By virtue of our faith in Him, we share in the benefits of that sacrifice.

(2 CORINTHIANS 5:21) In v. 21 of 2 Corinthians, Paul adds, **“For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Paul is using legal language to describe our status before the Sovereign Judge of the universe. Because of our identification with Christ, who died in our place, we are declared righteous. We are still sinners. But the righteousness of Christ has been applied to our account, and we are regarded legally as innocent, as righteous. Therefore, we should trust in this Jesus.

There is one more point of application that comes from this chapter in 2 Corinthians. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:18) Beginning in v. 18, the Apostle Paul writes, **“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (2 CORINTHIANS 5:19) that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:20A) Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”**

Caiaphas should have been an ambassador for Christ. As the leading representative of the religious establishment, he should have been the first to recognize that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies made concerning the coming Messiah. But instead, he became the leader of the effort to kill Jesus.

If we have trusted in Jesus as our leader, then we have received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. We have become part of Christ’s spiritual family. We are also ambassadors for Him. We are to be mediators of God’s revelation to the world. That means that we are to be about the job of promoting Jesus to family and friends and coworkers and neighbors and the wider world around us. **“We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”**