



Disciplers Bible Studies

JOHN
LESSON 12

Divine Power Over Life and Death John 11:1-57

Introduction

A. Climax and High Point

We come this week to the last and most remarkable of the seven miracles recorded in John's Gospel - the raising of Lazarus from the dead. It is the climax and highest point of Jesus' public ministry. The Jews had rejected Jesus for blasphemy and presenting Himself as God in John 10:33, so He went away beyond the Jordan River. In Chapter 11, His display of divine power and glory was His concluding appeal to the people of Israel to believe and accept Him as the Christ, the Son of God. Significantly, Chapter 11 demonstrates His authority over mankind's greatest and last enemy, death (1Corinthians 15:26.)

B. Biblical Understanding of Terms

As a reminder, we need to review the Biblical meaning of the terms "death" and "resurrection."

1. Death

The Bible speaks of death as: (a) the penalty and punishment of sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23;) (b) an inevitable fact of human experience (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2;) (c) something to be feared and avoided for those without hope (1Thessalonians 4:13-14;) and (d) a condition always within the control of God (Psalms 68:20.) It further describes spiritual death as being abolished by Christ for those who believe in Him (1 Corinthians 15:54; 2 Timothy 1:10.)

The term "death" may be distinguished in three different ways:

- physical death, the result of the entrance of sin into the world in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:17; 3:16-19;)
- spiritual death, the condition of all people from birth. Though all are created in the image of God, at birth each person is born separated from God as a result of Adam's and Eve's disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-3;)
- eternal death, the eternal separation from God for those who remain in spiritual death all of their physical lives and do not believe on

the Son of God (John 8:24; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9.)

2. Resurrection

Biblically, resurrection denotes restoring a person in body and soul either to temporal or eternal life.

a. Temporal Life

The Gospels describe three incidents of Jesus restoring people to temporal life after physical death: the twelve year old daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:39-42;) the widow's son in his funeral coffin (Luke 7:11-18;) and Lazarus dead and buried for four days. These were stunning miracles demonstrating Christ's power over death. These people returned to their normal activities, but would face physical death again.

b. Eternal Life

Eternal life is the glorious, incomparable blessing given to us at the time of being born again as true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:36; 17:3.) Positionally, because of Christ's righteousness, we are secured in heaven forever (Ephesians 2:4-7.) Practically, however, on earth we still have to contend with the old nature, our sinful flesh (Philippians 2:12-13.) Thus, like salvation, eternal life does not come into full fruition until we experience physical death. At the time of our physical death, our spirits and souls pass immediately into the presence of Christ without loss of consciousness (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23.) Eternal life now becomes a forever condition of love, joy, peace and fellowship with God. Our bodies are separated from our spirits and souls until the first resurrection (2 Corinthians 5:8; Revelation 20:4-6.) At the first resurrection, our spirits, souls and bodies are reunited to be glorified forever with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:35-44, 50-54.) Until that time, the spirits and souls of genuine believers remain in joyful fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. (Adapted in part from "What We Believe", Grace Community Church.)

3, Definitions

The soul is the real, living being in all of us (Genesis 1:7.) It is the subject or bearer of life, the seat and action of spiritual experiences and emotions. It has desires and is needy, but cannot acquire or preserve life by itself.

The spirit is the vital power given to man by God to cause life, the force that animates the flesh and produces the soul (Genesis 1:7.) It is the principle of life in which God implants the Holy Spirit, a new divine life of holiness.

C. Purposes of John 11

The miracle of Christ's raising Lazarus from the dead had three main purposes: (1) it emphasized unmistakably Jesus' true identity as deity, bringing glory to His Father and Himself; (2) it reinforced the faith and dedication of His disciples; and (3) it foreshadowed His own impending death and resurrection.

Outline of John 11:1-57

- I. The Death of Lazarus (11:1-16)
- II. The Claim of Christ (11:17-35)
- III. The Raising of Lazarus (11:36-44)
- IV. Jewish Reaction to the Miracle (11:45-53)
- V. Jesus' Reaction (11:54-57)

I. The Death of Lazarus (11:1-16)

A. Setting and Background

At the end of Chapter 10, the Jerusalem leaders of Judea had rejected Jesus and tried to seize Him. He escaped and traveled to the east side of the Jordan River where John the Baptist had first identified Him as the Lamb of God. Then, starting in Chapter 11, John introduced us to Lazarus who, with his sisters Mary and Martha, lived in Bethany back in Judea. This little family was probably the closest of any to Jesus during His earthly ministry. He had been entertained in their home often (Luke 10:38-41) and He loved them all with tender, personal affection. It was one of the few places where He experienced loving, human fellowship and where His bruised spirit found needed rest.

B. The Summons of the Sisters

The two sisters sent a message to Jesus saying that His beloved friend, Lazarus, their brother, was dying. They had hoped that their message would reach Jesus in time for Him to come and help His friend

in some way. Upon receiving the message, however, Jesus told His disciples that Lazarus would not die in the final sense, but that this temporary death would result in a new manifestation of God's glory. The divine glory of His Son would also be demonstrated as never before.

C. Jesus' Plan

Jesus decided to delay two more days to make it clear that Lazarus was truly dead and to encourage the sisters to deepen their trust in Him. He did not yield to human pressure but awaited God's timing for His trip to Bethany. He always worked in close connection with His Father every hour of every day, in every place and in each situation as it occurred. This submissive obedience resulted in a far greater miracle of God's working than if He had simply healed Lazarus.

Application:

Do you sometimes act on your own initiative instead of asking God for His direction on significant issues in your life? Or do you pray to Him, become impatient with His timing and take your own impulsive action? It is always best to consult and deliberate with God in prayer, acknowledge and trust Him in all your ways, and wait for Him to speak to your heart and direct your mind and will through His Word and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

D. Jesus' Decision

After waiting two days, Jesus told the disciples He wanted to return to Judea to awaken Lazarus. At first, they strongly opposed His decision and reminded Him that the Jews there were determined to stone Him. To help them understand His decision, Jesus spoke figuratively about (1) the twelve daylight hours symbolizing the duration of His earthly ministry and (2) the night signifying the end of His earthly ministry. These times were predetermined precisely by the Father and could not be changed by anyone or anything. Therefore, Jesus was absolutely safe from the hostile Jews for the prescribed time of His life on earth. Only at night when His earthly mission was over would He stumble and be killed. In the next verses, Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus was dead and for the sake of their believing, He was going to raise Lazarus. The disciple, Thomas, showed great courage and personal devotion to Jesus by saying that he and the others would go and die with Him.

Application:

God has given a specific life span to you to live in the light of His will and commands (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2; 12:13.) These years, months, days and hours are appointed for you to work out your salvation with fear and trembling and to do the works He enables you to do for *His* good pleasure (Philippians 2:12-13.) In thinking about God's allotted time for you, do you try to live each day as His obedient child knowing that you are in His care irrespective of cultural risks and dangers?

II. The Claim of Christ (11:17-35)**A. Lazarus in Tomb Four Days**

The funeral procedure was in full progress when Jesus arrived. Lazarus was dead and had been in the tomb four days. Many friends had come from Jerusalem to grieve and console Mary and Martha. Unknown to everyone present, they would be witnessing a supernatural event that would impact their lives forever - the divine power of Jesus Christ over death.

B. Martha's Grief and Faith

Consistent with her active, bustling personality, Martha went out to meet Jesus while Mary, with a more passive and contemplative nature, stayed in the house (Luke 10:38-42.) Both sisters had been tormented with the thought, "If You had been here, our brother would not have died." In her first words to Jesus, Martha showed full confidence in Christ's power to heal, but she was uncertain about her brother's life being restored until the resurrection at the last day (John 6:39-40, 44, 54; Job 19:25-27; Daniel 12:2-3.) The last day in Jewish history meant the end of the present age just before the Messiah would inaugurate the new kingdom age. Martha knew one thing for sure that God would do whatever Jesus asked. Martha's faith in the midst of deep sorrow must have pleased the Lord.

B. Jesus' Response

Jesus said to her, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?*" He was leading Martha's faith forward from the Old Testament assurance that God would resurrect all believers on the last day to a personal belief in Himself as the source of all life. He wanted her to understand that all resurrection is a manifestation of life in Him.

1. The Meaning of Christ's Words

The two sentences in this astounding claim taught two separate, but related truths. The first one, "*though he may die, he shall live,*" referred to the believer who experienced physical death and is resurrected on the last day (John 5:21, 25- 29; 6:39-40,44.) The second part, "*whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die,*" adds the element of eternity and confirms that the believer will never experience spiritual death. The ultimate result is that everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ can say with absolute certainty and eternal gratitude, "*O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?*" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

2. Martha's Reply

Martha's answer was magnificent. She was not sure about what would happen next, but she stated confidently that Jesus was the Messiah and the unique Son of God. Her belief system was established on absolute truth and she based her life on it. After she said these things she went and told her sister, Mary, that Jesus wanted to see her.

C. Mary's Deep Sorrow

Mary went quickly to Jesus and fell at His feet weeping. She was emotionally crushed and absorbed in grief. Her Jewish friends and mourners went with her, thinking she was going to the tomb. Mary's meeting with Jesus was public, whereas Martha's had been private. This seems to indicate that God planned this miraculous event to be witnessed by many family friends as well as professional mourners, wailers and flute players. Mary's words to Jesus were identical to Martha's, stating that His presence would have prevented her brother from dying.

D. Jesus' Compassion and Sympathy

At His request, Mary and others walked with Him to the tomb. Jesus was troubled in spirit because of the devil's momentary triumph in bringing sin and death to humanity. He was also deeply saddened by the painful misery of Mary and the other mourners over Lazarus' death. The intensity of His inner emotions were expressed outwardly as He shed tears for His dearly loved friend. No other Scripture expresses His anger and empathy as strongly as the words, "*Jesus wept.*" He knew that He was going to restore Lazarus back to life. But in His humanity, He showed His common lot with mankind - compassion, empathy and sorrow.

III. The Raising of Lazarus (11:36-44)

A. Hopelessness

The departure of their beloved brother and friend seemed hopeless. Mary and all of the Jews were weeping. Lazarus had been dead four days. Some even suggested that Jesus, who had opened the eyes of a blind man, could have kept Lazarus from dying. To everyone except Jesus, it seemed final.

B. The Mystery of Death

There is something awesome and frightening about death, especially to unbelievers. It is a mystery shrouded in finality and deep sorrow. Its immediate result is grief, pain and suffering. And yet, from God's infinite perspective, it was and is the only way to maintain His holiness, justice, mercy and love. The rebellious sin nature of mankind had to be dealt with. In God's infinite wisdom, He wanted to provide man the opportunity to be reconciled to Himself forever. He implemented the plan of redemption and sacrificed His beloved Son to give meaning and purpose to life, and hope beyond death.

C. Jesus' Power

1. Martha's Hesitation

When they came to the tomb, Jesus told them to take away the stone. Martha hesitated, knowing that her brother's body would have begun to decompose after four days. She expected a strong odor of decay and thought it would be gruesome for her and others to see and smell his body in a decomposed state. Jesus, however, wanted her complete cooperation in obedient faith and reminded her that by believing, she would see the glory of God.

2. Jesus Spoke to the Father

After they removed the stone, Jesus lifted His eyes and openly thanked His Father for always hearing Him. He spoke to His Father aloud, not so much a prayer for help as a public acknowledgement of His complete dependence upon the Father. He wanted all of the believing and unbelieving Jews present to know that He worked in complete union with His Father. He intended that all of these mourners would observe that the raising of Lazarus from death was proof of His divine authority and power to give eternal life to all who believe.

3. The Miraculous Moment

The scene must have been one of eerie suspense. The stone was moved away, opening the cave-like

tomb for all to see. From Jewish tradition, they knew that the body had been clothed in a linen garment. The arms and legs were tied with bandages. There was a towel around the head. With fearful apprehension, they wondered what Jesus would do next. Then, Jesus broke the silence with a loud cry, "*Lazarus, come forth!*" And immediately, Lazarus appeared before these terrified people. He was bound like a mummy and could not walk, but the power of Jesus' words put him on his feet. There was an awed silence as Jesus calmly instructed Martha and Mary to unbind him and let him go. Certainly, those who witnessed this awesome miracle would never be the same again. Lazarus and many others would live the remainder of their earthly days in the light of the glory of God as seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

D. Different from Christ's Resurrection

We should note that, while similar, there are significant differences between Lazarus' and Jesus' resurrections. Lazarus was restored to life, only to die again later as a mortal being, whereas Jesus arose never to die again (Colossians 1:18.) Lazarus arose with the same physical body that went into the tomb, but Jesus arose with a glorified, spiritual body that could pass through walls (John 20:19, 26.)

IV. Jewish Reaction to the Miracle (11:45-53)

A. The Chief Priests and the Pharisees

Not surprisingly, many mourners believed after seeing this staggering event. But some went to tell the Pharisees. The ruling body of Israel was the Sanhedrin, comprised of Sadducees and Pharisees. Sadducees were wealthy priests or Levites and Pharisees were the elite, educated religious party of the middle class. The two groups were at odds with one another on many issues, including resurrection of bodies and the existence of angels. The Sanhedrin gathered for an official meeting and discussed Christ's increasingly powerful influence over the people. The leaders recognized that if they did not do something, His many signs would convince everyone to believe in Him and the Romans would take away their place and nation.

B. Caiaphas, the High Priest

As the high priest that year, Caiaphas settled their frenzy and frustration. He proposed getting rid of the trouble-maker instead of letting the whole nation perish. Despite their dissension over other matters, their mutual hatred for Jesus united them to take joint action against Jesus. Caiaphas had

unconsciously prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation Israel. He was not aware of God's plans for using His Son's atoning death to bring about an all-inclusive body of Jewish and Gentile believers in His church and kingdom. Caiaphas' murderous solution became the Sanhedrin's official decision to kill Jesus.

V. Jesus' Reaction (11:54-57)

A. Complete Control

When Jesus learned of the Jewish leaders' intent to kill Him, He withdrew with His disciples to a private city called Ephraim. His public ministry was over. He was in complete control of the situation. No one would be able to seize Him until God's appointed time for His passion - the upcoming Passover week. Since the Mosaic law required that Jews who had become ritually unclean must purify themselves one week before the feast, hundreds of thousands gathered in Jerusalem early to undergo purification (Numbers 9:6-14.) They wondered if Jesus would be at the Passover since they knew of the official antagonism against Him.

B. Summary

In John's previous chapters, the Jewish authorities tried unsuccessfully to stone Jesus because of His claim to be working in complete and conscious union with His Father. In this lesson we learned that His claims and even His supernatural demonstration of power over physical death were more than the hard-hearted, self-righteous Pharisees could take. The raising of Lazarus from death was the final miracle which caused the Jewish authorities to take decisive official action against Jesus. It was also the sign which disclosed to us, more clearly than any other, the meaning of His own death and resurrection.

Application:

As you reflect upon this lesson, have you come to a peaceful understanding of the Biblical meaning of the following terms:

1. Physical Life and Physical Death
2. Spiritual Life and Eternal Life
3. Spiritual Death and Eternal Separation from God

Other than leaving our loved ones, most of us are not as concerned about the actual event of death as we are the process of dying. We may have some

anxiety or even fear about whether the process will be sudden, drawn out, or somewhere in between. But God has given us precious and magnificent promises to live by and sustain us through any and all anxieties of physical/spiritual life on earth (Isaiah 41:10; 43:1-3a; Philippians 4:6-7.) Put your trust under the shadow of His wings and meditate on the words He gave to Paul, "*To live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:19-21.)