

## **John 11:1-44 The raising of Lazarus**

### **Jesus: The Resurrection AND the Life**

Today we're looking at a great passage, one of those passages you could just preach on for hours and hours, because there are so many things to say about it – so get comfortable! Seriously, there are so many points that can be made about what happens and what is said in John 11, we will be watching a lot of opportunities fly by as we join Jesus on his walk first to Judea, to Bethany, then to Lazarus's tomb. Because even if we do get sidetracked by a few interesting tidbits, we need to ensure we stay focused on the main point of this passage – that Jesus is both the resurrection and the life.

That is a vital focus for us to hold, because the moment you take your eyes off resurrection and life – eternal life, that is – it is easy for so many other things, whether little or large, to crowd into our lives and seek to soak up our time and our headspace like a thousand little sponges.

#### **We know how it's going to end (v 4)**

We are told that is why Jesus does this miracle, this amazing action of raising one who was very dead. Look at verse 4 and see what Jesus says is going to happen with Lazarus and his sickness, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Jesus knew what the result of this situation was going to be – it was not going to end in death. Now of course when we hear that, when the disciples heard that, they surely thought it meant Lazarus wasn't going to die. Because death is pretty final. If death is involved, it's fairly safe to say that the situation ended in death. But not when Jesus is involved.

Everyone here today heard this passage read out. I'm not ruining the story by telling you Lazarus gets raised from the dead. Most of you probably already knew. But the amazing thing about this story is that Jesus tells his disciples, and John records for us, before Lazarus has even died, that Jesus knows how this is going to end. It is not going to end in death. Death might be involved in the middle, but it's not the end. Because this is the way that glorifies God and Jesus.

Death is on the road before all of us, but it's not the end of the road. We shouldn't think it is, or act like it is. We have to remain, both in our hearts within ourselves, and in our speech and actions with others, focused on the fact that this life, while important, does not end with our death, but afterwards will come resurrection, and then eternal life through Jesus Christ. There really is nothing more important than eternal life. Our bodies will be resurrected, but our eternal dwelling will be either with God, or without him. That's where our focus should be – on spending eternity with God.

#### **We know what the road ahead will be like (vs 9-10)**

That is not as easy as it sounds. People don't like to be reminded that they are wrong either in what they think or what they do or don't do; to be told that their actions matter, that they are going to be judged and they are not good enough to pass such a judgment on their own. It doesn't matter how gentle we seek to make that message, it is a fundamentally offensive message to be told you're sinful and broken and you need Jesus. People are going to be offended, and be offensive back, and that's the road we have to walk, that's the focus we need to have, and the message we need to bring into other people's lives, or remind them of when necessary.

And again, no-one knows the hard road better than Jesus, who every step of the way – even before this miracle, and certainly afterwards - was dogged by Jewish leaders plotting and scheming his

murder. In fact, last time Jesus was in Judea, they tried to stone him to death, and his disciples tell him as much. But what is Jesus' response? Look at verse 9, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world's light. 10 It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light."

This is a bit of a puzzle, but Jesus' meaning is clear from the situation. He's about to walk into a dangerous place, where he has already been threatened with stoning for his words. His disciples are concerned that it will be dangerous. But Jesus says to them two things. First of all, he knows what the road ahead holds. He's not walking into this situation ignorant of what's to come. Yes, it's dangerous. Yes, he's going to do it anyway. But knowing what's ahead is only part of the meaning. If that was all Jesus meant, it would be like saying, "It's okay to do stupid and dangerous things so long as you know they are stupid and dangerous." Kind of like smoking.

No, there's more to it than that. Jesus is saying anyone who walks in physical light doesn't trip over – it's when you try and walk in the dark you trip and fall. In the same way, he is walking in God's light, and even though that will take him down what looks like a dangerous path (because it is), it is nothing compared to walking down the path of life that is without God's light. That path is the really dangerous path. That's the path where people really stumble and fall. That's the path that leads not just to death – because even God's path can lead to death - but to eternal death, an existence without God forever.

And this message is not new to Jesus' disciples either. We are all familiar with the words of Jesus in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that they were to 'take up their cross and follow' him (Matt 10:38, Mar 8:34, Luk 9:23). So this message is likely not foreign to us either. The road ahead is lit up for us – we know what to expect. How many times do we see those uncomfortable verses about persecution, suffering for God's name, trials and pain and loss in the New Testament? But the future is also lit up with God's light, so that not only do we know what's ahead, but we know that it's the only way we can really go. God's road might contain insults, pain, suffering, even death – but it is still better than the dark road, where people are stumbling and falling into an eternity without God.

### **Death is still sad (vs 33, 35,38)**

Turn back with me now to Jesus and his path to Judea, to Bethany, where he is greeted first by his dead friend's sister Martha, and then his other sister Mary. Now I can't imagine the sort of weight that is placed on Jesus' shoulders at this stage, and I would think few people outside of doctors really could. How many of us have had our best friend's sisters come and say, "If you'd been here, he wouldn't have died"? And we read here in John 11 not once, but three times, how this fact of Lazarus's death impacts on Jesus emotionally. Verse 33 tells us that when Mary was weeping at his feet, along with other Jews who were weeping, Jesus too was deeply moved and troubled. Verse 35 is that simple and powerful verse, "Jesus wept." And in verse 38 we see again Jesus deeply moved when he comes to the tomb of Lazarus.

Now I've been saying that our focus needs to be on resurrection and on life. And Jesus, as I've said, knows that this situation is not going to end in death – he told the disciples so! He knows that this has happened to glorify God and himself as God's Son. He knows whether Lazarus will be with God in eternity (we assume he will be!). He knows this isn't the end. He knows all this – but he still weeps. Why? I think every Christian, every human knows the answer – because death is still sad. We are at our core eternal beings, and so when we witness the ceasing of a life, it brings sadness. Even in someone who has 'lived a long life,' or someone who 'won't be suffering any more' – even in those who we know, as much as we can know, are going to be with God, part of us still weeps.

Death also brings with it grief – a feeling of loss, because we know that we will go on living and not have that person with us any more in this life. And we should recognise grief over loss is natural, and it is acceptable to God to express that grief. Jesus looks at Mary crying at his feet, the others around her in tears, and he feels that grief. Moreover, Jesus knows that even though Lazarus will be raised now, he's going to die again. Jesus is human too, and he knows what everyone is going through. Going to visit Lazarus's tomb makes him weep and moves him deeply, for himself, for his friends, for those others that have suffered loss.

But as Christians, we can recognise the grief of loss that death brings us, and still keep our focus upon resurrection and life. Paul tells the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 4:16-18, “The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Paul's advice to the ancient church remains true for the modern church – our encouragement lies less in what is happening now, but in what will happen on that last day, when all Christians will find ourselves alive eternally through Christ.

### **Our focus should be on life, not just resurrection (vs 25-26)**

Even though Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, after about seven days of being dead (four days in the tomb, but probably about three days being embalmed before that), that is not the most important part of this passage. This miracle only exists to back up the pivotal verses of this passage, verses 25 and 26, where Jesus explains his all important 'I am' statement. “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” And then he asks the hard question, “Do you believe this?”

This is the fundamental truth of being Christian. Even when we die we will live again, because we believe in the one who is the resurrection. And when we find life in Christ, we will never truly die, for he gives us life eternal. Our focus must be on resurrection, but it must also be on eternal life. Even resurrection, incredible truth that it is, is not enough to pull us through. Lazarus was raised to life, but he was going to die again. In fact, all people will be raised from the dead in the last day – Martha refers to that in verse 24 – and then they will be judged. Judged by Jesus, for Jesus is the resurrection. Do you believe this?

Jesus is also life. On the last day, all those who are resurrected that live by Christ will not die, but have eternal life with God, in a place where there is a new heaven and a new earth. Do you believe this? Because if you do, it should be visible in the way you live now. If we believe in eternal life with Jesus, then our attitude to those things in life that try and trip us up should be one that glorifies God.

I don't want to belittle those tragedies and struggles we can have in life – they can be a really big deal! Struggles with health, security, love, loneliness, death... they are big, hard, painful things. We can mourn for the loss that they bring, but still be encouraged that in the last day, we will all be caught up with the Lord forever, with all Christians, in an instant on judgment day. We should know those hard struggles are ahead of us, so they shouldn't cause us to stumble, because no matter how hard life might get, we're on the road lit up by God's light. And we should be out there showing people that even though our lives as Christians are filled with the same troubles as all humans – we get sick, we suffer, we die – that we face those problems knowingly, and that our path is still the path in the light. Our path doesn't end with death, but with life.