

## **John 60 – The Death of Lazarus**

**09/14/2025**

### **Scripture 1: (Jn. 11:1-16 ESV)**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."

The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?"

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."

After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."

The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover."

Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

## Sermon:

John next records an event that took place sometime after Jesus concluded His teaching ministry in Jerusalem. This story is very well known within Christian spheres today, just as it was well known during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. This narrative contains the seventh and final “Sign” demonstrating Jesus' divine power within John's Gospel, the death and resurrection of Lazarus; the most extraordinary of His miracles prior to His own resurrection. This narrative also contains the fifth, of seven, “I AM” declarations made by Jesus, where He identifies Himself with and as the LORD God. Yet, the inclusion of this story is problematic for those who try to deny the actuality of Jesus's miracles. However, the evangelist anticipates and pre-emptively negates their objection by providing certain details throughout the narrative that add credibility to the story.

John begins by explaining, “*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.*”, providing us with a place name and the names of three residents. These details are significant evidences because Bethany was a small village in close proximity to Jerusalem (about two to five miles away, on the other side of the Mount of Olives). The village was prominent enough to be remembered, but small enough that its residents would still all know, or at least be familiar with one another. Meanwhile, while Mary was a very common name for Jewish women during the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, connecting her name with those of her brother and sister, created a unique identifier. These four connected details are so specific that if the biblical narrative concerning Lazarus was untrue, as being a factual occurrence, then it should have been easily and publicly debunked as a fraud.

Today, since most people in major metropolitan places, like New York or Chicago, do not usually know or have a relationship with their immediate neighbors, a fraudulent story could be generically set there. No one would really be certain whether or not the story was true or false. It would be neither provable or disprovable. While even now, in a small city or large town like Mansfield, Ohio, where many people are somehow reasonably engaged within their community, (at least, engaged enough to get the local news), there would be enough credible evidence to either support or disprove the story. There would be the testimony of family and friends. There would be a newspaper public record, an obituary. There would be funeral home records concerning his burial or cremation. There would be hospital, police, EMS, or fire department records notating his death and its cause. There would be far too many details and evidences to possibly fake or “conveniently lose”, to even cause “reasonable doubt” or generate “reasonable probability”. If false, the the story would be easily disproved and if true, then there would be enough durable evidence to later confirm the story.

Similarly,

- If there was no family of siblings named Lazarus, Martha, and Mary living in Bethany during the time of Jesus's ministry then, the actual residents of Bethany would have said so.
- If there was a Lazarus living in Bethany at this time, but he had not gotten sick and died as described, then the social support for Martha and Mary, which John will eventually describe, would not have appeared and the people of Bethany would have corrected the narrative.
- If Lazarus of Bethany had died, then everyone in town would have known and, if he was resurrected four days later, then everyone in town would have known that too.
- Yet, if Lazarus of Bethany did not die and he was not resurrected, but that story was being claimed and told all around Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and across the Roman Empire, then many people would have been able to say something. There would have been a compelling counter-argument.

So, even though John's Gospel was written decades after the fact (around 90 AD) and, although most of the eyewitnesses to his resurrection were surely deceased by the time of its publication (Lazarus, Martha, and Mary

almost certainly were), the townsfolk of Bethany would still remember the truth of what happened, about whether this happened or not, because an event like this would become ingrained into the local cultural mythology. People tend to remember stories from the past that they were told by their parents or grandparents in their youth. We should expect that there would have been stories like:

- “I remember the day when Lazarus walked out of his tomb. It happened on a Tuesday at 1 o'clock, just after I finished my lunch. I was sitting on my front porch step when Lazarus came walking down the street, alive as alive can be, even though I had just helped to close up his tomb four days earlier.” confirming the tale or, something like,
- “Yeah, I've heard that story too. But, it is completely untrue. Lazarus was never sick, he did not die and, he certainly wasn't raised from the dead. My daddy told me that, Lazarus and Jesus simply pulled a big prank on everyone. First, Lazarus went and hid in the next village over for a couple of days, but then his sisters snuck him into an empty tomb the night before Jesus arrived. When Jesus arrived, He put on some big show, crying for His friend, and when He told them to move the stone, the still living Lazarus walked out, perfectly healthy and fine.”

Furthermore, if someone was hoping to perpetuate a fraud, they would not invent details that would be easily refuted or disproved. Therefore, we may be just as confident in the historicity and factual nature of Lazarus' story, as we are of the historicity, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture.

Next, who were Martha, Lazarus, and Mary? More specifically, who were they to Jesus?

While this is the first mention of them by John, by writing, “*It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.*”, the casual way he mentions them implies that he expects his audience to already be familiar with them. This implies that they were well known to 1<sup>st</sup> Christians, by reputation at a minimum, but also perhaps as leaders within the Christian community. Judging by modern reaction to claims about “near-death experiences”, whether they are positive or negative alleged visions of heaven or hell {although books and movies about “heavenly experiences”, like *90 Minutes in Heaven* by Don Piper, generally sell better; I cannot recommend reading any such books, expecting them to be merely sensational fabrications.}, we would reasonably expect that Lazarus experienced a degree of notoriety and fame, as the recipient of such a wonderful miracle. However, Lazarus was not used as John's point of reference, but Mary, while the event he refers to has not yet happened in John's Gospel. This suggests, by way of a foreshadowing comparison, that what Mary will do will be more impactful and memorable than Lazarus' resurrection.

Meanwhile, his two sisters were notably mentioned in the other Gospels; the older, Synoptic Gospels. Luke records a story about them and their devotional differences, “*Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”*” (Luke 10:38-42 ESV). Within this example, Martha demonstrated her devotion to loving service through the responsibilities of her hospitality, while Mary demonstrated her devotion to learning more about God, by focusing her attention on the Lord whom she also loved. Both women and their devotions were good and commendable, despite their disagreement or opposition. One sister was not better than the other. Both women served Christ well, in their own unique ways.

But, as important as their example in the other Gospel was, I doubt that story was part of John's intention. Instead, by referencing Mary's future activity in the past tense, the evangelist establishes the present context

without diminishing what she will do. Furthermore, by recording the personal character of the sister's communication to Jesus, "*So the sisters sent to him, saying, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.'*", John emphasizes the fact of their existing relationship and the closeness of it; as being familiar and familial. The "*love*" the sisters write of is *phileo* love, which is often considered as "brotherly love" {where *phileo* is part of the root of Philadelphia}, and is a type of emotional love born from mutual affection and high regard. So, while it is never expressly defined, the relationship between Jesus and this family in Bethany is surely as close as those friends who become as family. The sister's notification of Jesus, as mere notification and not express request, is more evidence of the closeness of their relationship, presenting their natural expectation by assuming that Jesus would come to their brother's aid without Him needing to be expressly asked. Similarly, we would each assume or expect that someone we love, or who loves us, would urgently and automatically come as soon as they were informed, especially if they have the capability of effectively doing something to help.

But Jesus, when He heard the news about Lazarus, responded oddly, saying "*This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*"

Firstly, during ancient times, having no rapid system of communication, a person would not send a message to inform someone about a minor illness because reasonably, the person would have probably recovered by the time the message got where it was going and before a person could travel back. Such a message might only be sent if there was a critical concern and the recipient needed to be informed urgently; such as, so they could come quickly to help or to come, make their peace, and say goodbye. Those two options are the most reasonable reasons for why the sisters would have sent this message to Jesus. Clearly, they believed:

- Lazarus was deathly ill, and
- they hoped Jesus would come save their brother, by healing him.

Secondly, although it is true that God's glory is displayed and increased in ways that we do not ordinarily expect, hearing a person say (even hearing Jesus say) that "Lazarus is sick for the glory of God." and that "He is sick so that the Son of God (so that I) may be glorified through it." would be naturally unsettling. At best, it would sound insensitive, while at worst it would sound self-serving and harmful. It certainly would not be the comforting sort of response anyone would want to hear. But, lest we doubt the righteousness of Christ, we must remind ourselves that when Jesus confidently declared, "*This illness does not lead to death.*", He was speaking prophetically. Jesus did not speak in unknowing error; He was not wrong. Nor did Jesus knowingly speak a lie; He spoke truth. This illness of Lazarus did not lead to death. It led through his death to him being raised from the dead, by Jesus.

Next, to show that Jesus was not being callous, the evangelist explains Jesus' emotional situation, "*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.*". While the sisters implored and impressed themselves upon Jesus' feeling of *phileo* love for Lazarus, John explains that Jesus had a greater *agape* love for Martha, Mary, and Lazarus. Jesus had unrequited, selfless, sacrificial and abounding love for His three friends in Bethany. Therefore, because He *agape'd* them, when Jesus "*heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*", Jesus chose to intentionally not immediately go to them. Jesus not only did not rush to their aid precisely because He loved them, but instead, He waited two whole days before setting out for Bethany.

{The timing within this story is important. There are two different locations assumed to be "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (John 1:28):

- The first is in Perea, east of the Jordan river, opposite Jericho, located about a day's journey from Jerusalem and Bethany. This is the traditional interpretation.

- The second is the region of Batanea<sup>1</sup>, called Bashan in the Old Testament, located within the Tetrarchy of Philip, north east of the Jordan river, and about a four day's journey from Jerusalem. This is a more recent interpretation, dependent on assumptions related to variations in transliteration.

The narrative's timeline is dependent upon whichever location is preferred and carries implications for what we may assume about Jesus' supernatural knowledge.

- If the first location is assumed, then we would expect that Lazarus died shortly after the messengers was sent; dying before Jesus was even notified. But, supernaturally “knowing” that Lazarus was already dead, Jesus would know that there was no immediate urgency. Therefore, by waiting two days before traveling another, Jesus would ensure His arrival at Bethany four days after Lazarus' death (John 11:39), long enough to refute claims of a mere resuscitation.
- If the second location is assumed, then we would expect that Jesus waited the two days until He supernaturally knew that Lazarus had died, before spending the next four days en route to Bethany, ensuring His arrival after a long enough period had passed to refute any claims of resuscitation.

However, no matter which location is correct, the truth and reliability of the story is not impacted.}

Jesus delayed because of the love He has for His friends. While the desire of the Martha and Mary was immediate and the need of Lazarus was urgent, Jesus's delay reminds us that when we trust God, we also trust God's timing. When we trust the LORD with all of our cares, our worries, and our fears; trusting Him for our provision and with our lives; trusting that He will act for our good; then, we also trust God to act in His time, according to His purposes and His plan. The evangelist reminds us that we cannot make Jesus act according to our schedule or plan, according to our wants and desires, except when they are in accord with His own.

*“Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?”*”. The disciples tried to remind Jesus about what had just recently happened during the Feast of Dedication, the furor He stirred up that caused Him to relocate out and away from the region of Judea (John 10:31). The Jewish leadership was out to get Jesus because of His alleged blasphemy; because of His claims about being the Son of God. The disciples knew that going back into Judea, especially going so close to Jerusalem, would be dangerous. They were concerned for Jesus's life and for their own, as His followers. They believed that going back was too great of a risk, that it was too provocative. Perhaps they thought that Jesus had been in agreement with them, hence His delay, but now He had changed His mind. Yet, it was not their place to understand what God had planned.

But Jesus responded to their doubt and fear, saying *“Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.”*. The ancient world of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century did not divide days into 24, 60 minute, hours. Instead it divided it into 2 unequal portion as day and night, with each portion subdivided into 12 equal portions; portions that would change length depending on the time of year<sup>2</sup>. But, chronology aside, the point that Jesus was making is that “daytime” was meant for work and for traveling safely, while “nighttime” was meant for rest; that we should be “going and doing” during the day and “staying and resting” at night.

- Applying that principle to His ministry, Jesus was arguing that while He lived, it was day time and therefore, it still was time for Him to be working, echoing what He had said in John 9:4, *“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.”* (Jn. 9:4 ESV). Jesus could not stop and rest, or stop doing the Father's will, even though “the day”, the time of His earthly ministry, was nearly over.

<sup>1</sup>D.A. Carson *The Gospel of John*. p. 147, 407

<sup>2</sup><https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/early-tech-adopters-ancient-rome-had-portable-sundials-180962225/>

- Applying this principle to our present ministry as Christians, both individually and corporately, because we carry the light of Christ within us (the “*light of the world*”) where ever we go, we do not walk in darkness (John 8:12), but instead we are charged to carry the light of Christ into the darkness. Therefore, we should continue to serve Christ by serving and loving others in grace, sharing the Gospel to them with urgency, even and especially because the “day” is getting later. We should be even more motivated, more driven, and more diligent about evangelizing Christ to the world, the later it gets since we believe and know that Jesus is returning soon, just as He has promised (Romans 9:27-28; Hebrews 10:37-39; 2 Peter 3:9-10; Revelation 2:16, 3:11, 22:7, 12, 20). We just do not know when the sun will set.

Continuing to explain the present reality, Jesus told them, “*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.*” *The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.”* They misunderstood Jesus literally, when He was speaking figuratively. They thought Jesus meant that Lazarus was merely sick and that he would recover on his own, without needing miraculous intervention. But since during this era of history, sleep was not commonly used as a metaphor for death, only being used in the sense of “*Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David.*” (1 Ki. 2:10 ESV), so it is not strange that they took Him literally. But, “*Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”*”

The idea of death as metaphoric sleep, is a Christian cultural attitude. But to Jesus, death was and is as temporary as sleep. Death was and is not the end for Him, nor for those who believe and trust in Him for their salvation. As He would soon do for Lazarus, He will one day do for each of us, but permanently and eternally. Otherwise, “*For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*” (1 Cor. 15:16-19 ESV). Thus the miracle of Lazarus' resurrection is evidence which supports our hope of eternal life, while the resurrection of Jesus confirms our hope in His promise of life.

Meanwhile, the disciples' misunderstanding highlights the most popular misunderstanding concerning our sin and its rightful consequence. We wrongly assume the we are only made sick by our sin (Romans 6:23), when truly, apart from a Christian's union into Christ, every person is dead in their sins. The Apostle Paul explains, “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*” (Eph. 2:1-10 ESV). Despite humanity having originally been created good, we no longer are, “*as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*” (Rom. 3:10-18 ESV). We are neither born morally good, nor is anyone good, deep down in their heart. The prophet Jeremiah tells us, that “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*” (Jer. 17:9 ESV). We cannot choose the good. We can only and always only choose evil because

we are born into bondage by our sin and under the tyranny of the Devil (Psalm 51:5). Our sin, and sin's natural consequence, is far worse than any of us want to admit, or to consciously understand and accept, until and except when the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of our heart and we recognize the truth about ourselves, leading us to repent in faith. Therefore, we each need Jesus to awaken us from our “false sleep” in sin, to true life in Him.

Finally, like His earlier statement concerning Lazarus' illness, “*It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.*”, Jesus tells His disciples, “*...for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.*”. Considering these two statements in light of what Jesus said about the man born blind before giving him sight, that “*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*” (Jn. 9:3 ESV), leads us to expect that what Jesus will do next will be another sign of His divinity, proving the truth of His earlier claim, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*” (Jn. 10:27-28 ESV), and definitively proving that He and the Father are one.

How should we respond to Jesus' and His response to Lazarus' dying? What is the evangelist trying to show and teach us through this narrative?

First, we should remember that God is Sovereign and is in control of all things. The Lord of Life is also Lord over our sickness, our healing, and our dying. All things work towards the accomplishment of His purposes and His glory, even the things that cause us to respond with sadness. We are reminded that we cannot see how everything fits together, and we will not understand things fully in this life: the whys of these hows. Tragedy in our lives is a call towards greater faithfulness and are opportunities for us to lean upon and trust Jesus Christ even more.

Second, Jesus loves us. We are encouraged to remember that, even when bad things happen to us, Jesus still loves us. He does not promise us safety and security in this life. He does not promise us that we will not have troubles. Instead, He promises that He will be with us through our troubles and in our times of tragedy. Jesus will not remove us from these things, just as He will not remove us from the world, but He will carry us through them. The Psalmist wrote, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me...*” (Ps. 23:4 ESV), therefore, Christ has promised that we should not fear because He will never leave us alone, or abandon us, or forsake us. He will provide us with a solution and provide for our restoration, though not always as we expect.

Third, the LORD is not slow to act. He moves and He does things precisely when and how He purposes to. We cannot hurry God. He does not act on our time table. His schedule and His plan is far better than ours even could be. He is and He will always work “*...all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” (Rom. 8:28 ESV), for those who truly love Him and whom He loves. Therefore, we are called to be patient as we trust Him and wait upon Him.

Fourth and finally, “*believe the works*” (John 10:38), believe the testimony of sacred Scripture, and remain steadfast in your hope that Christ will raise you up and bring you to Himself in glory.

**AMEN**