

THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

John 11:1-46

About two miles from Jerusalem was the village of Bethany, where Martha, Mary, and Lazarus resided. These sisters and their brother were devoted friends of Christ. To this well-ordered home of true love, which was so much to His liking, Christ frequently resorted as a visitor. When weary from the toils of the day, and the ceaseless assaults of His foes, Christ considered it a privilege to go there to rest from His labors and to enjoy sweet fellowship with these devoted friends. How pleasant it must have been to Christ to have a place to which He could go at any time and feel "at home," and at the same time find seclusion, relaxation, rest, understanding, cheer, and love!

In that home at Bethany Christ had just such a place. There He could always find refreshment for both body and soul. To have someone to whom we can go at any time, and know that they will not laugh at our dreams, or misunderstand our confidences, is truly wonderful. To have somewhere to go where the tensions of life are relaxed in peace is a lovely thing. It is our privilege to make our homes like that. This sort of thing does not cost money, or require lavish hospitality, but it does necessitate an understanding heart. This home in Bethany was an ideal one, for the brother and the sisters loved one another, each of them loved Christ, and He dearly loved each member of that household. In their home Christ was always a welcome guest.

If Christ should come to the community in which you live, would He want to go to your home? Would He feel at home in your house? Would Christ find a number of comforts and conveniences in your house which you had bought with the tithes that you withheld from Him? Would you welcome Christ into your house, or would you be embarrassed to have Him there?

While Christ was away on a preaching tour in Bethabara beyond the Jordan River, a distance of twenty miles at least, Lazarus became desperately ill. Sickness is a common experience of men. Sooner or later it comes to every family. Doubtless Lazarus received the very best care that the loving hearts and the tender hands of his sisters could provide, but he did not improve.

Grievously concerned about their brother's critical illness, the first thought of his sisters was to get the word to Christ, their best friend. They thought that the simple statement about his and their need would bring Him to them. One does not love a friend and desert him. Two friends served together in World War I. One of them was wounded and left lying helpless and in pain in no man's land between the trenches. The other, in the dark, at the peril of his life, crawled out to help his friend; and, when he reached him, the wounded man said: "I knew you would come." The simple fact of need brings Christ to the side of His followers.

Martha and Mary promptly dispatched a messenger to Christ with the laconic message, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick." They did not tell Christ what to do, but they just left it to Him to do what He knew was best. They fully believed that Christ would do the right thing. We would do well to exercise as much faith in Him when we pray.

Since Christ was such an intimate friend of the family, it was, of course, to be expected that He would either use His supernatural power from where He was, or He would hasten to Bethany and minister to the needs of Lazarus by restoring his health. But that was not the procedure which Christ followed.

When our Lord received the message, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." By this statement He meant that death would not have complete dominion over Lazarus, but that it would be a temporary state only and that it would provide an opportunity for both God and His Son to be glorified. We can only imagine the amazement and sorrow of the sisters when Christ neither

came nor sent a message to them. He waited for two days, apparently for the purpose of letting death occur. What gave an added strangeness to Christ's delay in coming was the fact that this is the only case on record where He hesitated to respond to a call for help. It should be remembered, however, that Christ acted on His own initiative, and not on the persuasion of someone else. He did things in His own chosen time. The right moment had not come for Christ to act. He did everything on time. He did not run ahead of God as we often do. If He had gone ahead and healed Lazarus, as they wanted Him to do, there would not have been any great miracle of raising him from the dead. He permitted Lazarus to die so that God might have a greater glory. This certainly teaches us an important lesson. So often we want the Lord to do things in our way and at the time we want them done, but we must let Him do them in His own way and in His own good time. When we pray and God says "No," we can accept it. If He says "Yes," we are glad. But when He keeps saying "Wait," we find that the hardest to bear. Sometimes we think that God waits too long to do what we want done, but He doesn't. The prophet was right when he said, "If the vision tarry, wait for it, for it will come, and it will not be late" (Habakkuk 2:3).

God always has a purpose in what is done, even though we may not know what it is. Years ago a fishing fleet had gone out from a small harbor on the east coast of Newfoundland. In the afternoon there came up a terrible wind and snow storm, and when the night settled down not a single vessel of all the fleet had found its way into port. All night long the wives and mothers and children and sweethearts paced up and down the beach, wringing their hands and calling on God to save their loved ones. To add to the horror of the occasion, toward morning one of the cottages was found to be on fire. As the men were all away, it was found impossible to save the building. When the morning broke, to the joy of all, the entire fleet was found safely anchored in the bay. But there was one face that did not wear a smile, one heart that was not comforted. It was the wife of the man whose home was destroyed. Meeting her husband as he landed, she exclaimed, "Oh, husband, we are ruined; our home and all it contained was destroyed." "My dear," he replied, "thank God for the fire; it was by the light of our burning cottage that the whole fleet found its way into port." Brethren, sometimes God burns a cottage of ours, that by its light other souls may be guided to safety.

When Christ suggested that He and His disciples go to Bethany, they were shocked. They remembered that the last time He was in Judea the Jews had tried to find a way to kill Him. To return there seemed to them the surest way to commit suicide. In conversation with His disciples about His return to Bethany, Christ said, "Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep."

The fact that Lazarus was sleeping sounded like good news to the disciples. So, Christ had to tell them plainly that Lazarus was dead. Had He not said, "Lazarus is dead," there would have been those through the ages who would have said that Lazarus did not die, and that Christ did not raise him from the dead. Christ went on to say that for the sake of the disciples it was a good thing that Lazarus had died, because his death would produce an event which would give them an additional reason for believing in Him, and would strengthen their faith greatly.

Due to Christ's insistence on going to Bethany, Thomas said to the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." We admire his and their loyalty to Christ, for they went with Him even though they thought they were facing certain death in doing so.

When Christ finally reached Bethany, Lazarus had been dead and buried four days. As soon as the word reached Martha that Christ was approaching her home, she rushed out to meet Him. She said, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died." Doubtless she meant, "Why didn't you come sooner?" But, in spite of the fact that death had beat Christ there, Martha was not bitter. In my years as a minister I have come to know people in almost every condition. Many of them would bring tears of sympathy to your eyes. But

the most pitiful creatures of all have been those who have allowed sorrow, and kindred things, to make them bitter. Unfortunately, Martha did not see in Christ the same sovereignty over death that He held over disease.

Christ gave Martha's faith another test by declaring, "Thy brother shall rise again." Instead of interpreting His statement to mean that Lazarus was going to rise immediately, Martha thought that He meant he would rise on the resurrection day. She and Mary believed in the resurrection at the last day, but they did not know that He had the power to raise the dead then and there.

Our Lord said, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live," meaning that those who believed in Him, even if they were dead like Lazarus, would again be brought to life. These matchless words have brought untold comfort and assurance to countless sorrowing hearts. Just as soon as Martha received this comfort from Christ, in the assurance that what is called death is but an incident in the course of an endless life, she rushed back into their home and said to her heart-broken sister, Mary, "The Master is come, and calleth for thee." As soon as Mary heard that, "she arose quickly, and came unto him," trusting Him more fully and loving Him more devotedly.

Martha and Mary should not have wounded the heart of the Christ Who loved them and craved their confidence. It is understandable that "Jesus burst into tears," not merely because Lazarus had died, for He knew that He was soon to restore him to life again, but because those whose confidence He sought, and whose love was His delight, suspected Him of deserting them in the hour of their trial, and were grieved because His will ran counter to their own. Christ wants all of us to know, and particularly those of His followers who are in the midst of sorrow, that we are resting in a deathless love, and that nothing comes into our lives that does not have attached thereto a blessing for us.

Those who saw how Christ sympathized with the bereaved immediately began to criticize Him. They inferred that His delay in coming was wrong. How natural! Whatever the Lord does, if it is not in accordance with the whims or wishes of people, or with what they think He should do, is immediately the subject of criticism.

Christ, the sorrowing relatives, and some of the friends moved out to the tomb where Lazarus was buried. Taking charge of the situation, He requested the friends to remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Some of them wondered if His request should be granted. Martha remonstrated with Christ, reminding Him that Lazarus had been dead for four days, and that, by this time, the body would be decomposing; therefore, to remove the stone would be to pollute the very air. However, the stone had to be removed before Lazarus could come out of the tomb.

Here is an important lesson for all of us, and especially for those of us who have unsaved loved ones in our homes. There may be some hindrance that has to be removed before that loved one will trust Christ and be saved. Maybe there is something in your life at which that loved one or friend is looking that has to be stopped or removed before he will ever be saved. If so, you must remove it. Christ never does for us what we can do for ourselves, but what we cannot do for ourselves He will do for us. The fact that He has supernatural power does not relieve men of their responsibility. He is ready to do great things for us always, but He will not do them as long as we stand idle.

In spite of Martha's protest the men removed the stone. There lay the body of Lazarus in full and open view. Those who stood by and witnessed the scene must have had strange feelings. The Saviour lifted His voice in thanksgiving to God, expressing appreciation for answered prayer, saying, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me." What a marvelous lesson in prayer! We come quickly to ask, but how rarely do we come back to God to

thank Him for hearing and answering our prayers.

Then, with a loud voice Christ cried, "Lazarus, come forth." The elevated voice was not for the benefit of Lazarus, but He wanted all who were present to hear, and to see that Lazarus responded simultaneously with His call. When Christ restored Lazarus to his natural life, he came forth bound in his graveclothes. Christ again called upon man to do what man could do, saying "Loose him, and let him go," and they obeyed.

One might think that all who saw Christ put together again the soul and body of Lazarus and raise him from the dead would have believed in Him as the Son of God. And many did so. But some of those who witnessed the miracle of the raising of Lazarus rushed back into Jerusalem and reported the event to the Pharisees. These Jewish leaders, who were committed to the destruction of Christ, reported the matter to the chief priests, the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. Greatly agitated, they remarked, "This man is performing miracles and becoming more popular. If we don't put Him out of the way, the whole country will go after Him." They began to plot His death. The time would come when Christ would be crucified, but that time had not yet arrived, and until that hour He was perfectly safe and they could not harm Him. The purposes of God will be accomplished in spite of the schemes of men.