

Mary, Martha and Lazarus

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev Iain H.Murray

[0 : 00] We take as our text this morning the first 45 verses of the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John.

And we take these verses together because they belong together, as they all deal, as you see, with the same theme.

The resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany from the dead. And by way of introduction, let us summarize the extraordinary contents of these verses.

You may recall that in the previous chapter of this Gospel, in chapter 10, we have an account of our Lord's ministry the previous winter in Jerusalem.

That is to say, just a matter of weeks before the event recorded in chapter 11. And as our Lord had ministered in Jerusalem and shown forth his glory, the Jews had once again charged him with blasphemy and had taken up stones to kill him.

[1 : 19] And we read towards the end of chapter 10 that Jesus escaped out of their hand, verse 39.

And the 40th verse tells us that not only did he leave Jerusalem, but he went beyond Jordan. And he went, says John, to the place where John the Baptist at first baptized.

Now we may not be absolutely certain the exact location of that place. It was probably the place which, in the authorized version of chapter 1 of John, is called Bethabara, a place about 13 miles south of the Sea of Galilee, and more than 50 miles from Jerusalem and from Bethany.

At any rate, it is perfectly clear that our Lord thus left Judea and withdrew some distance beyond the Jordan.

And while he is absent, something happens in the household of Martha and Mary at Bethany. Now the Apostle John knew that the readers of his gospel would already be familiar with the names of Martha and Mary.

[2 : 43] After all, you remember the statement of Jesus that the name of Mary would not be forgotten as long as the world stood. Their names were already well known in the church.

But here in this chapter, we are introduced for the first time to their brother, Lazarus. On that occasion in Luke chapter 10, when Jesus was entertained in the home of Martha and Mary, you remember when Martha was admonished because she was busy and cumbered about with many things, and when Mary was commended that she had chosen the better part, on that occasion we are told nothing of Lazarus.

Perhaps he was not there. Perhaps he was not then a disciple. But certainly as we find Lazarus here, he is a disciple. Because in verse 11, we hear our Lord speaking of him as our friend Lazarus. He belonged not only to the home of Bethany, but indeed to the household of faith. And into this home, there now comes sickness.

And Lazarus is sick. And so, seriously does his sickness deteriorate, that this urgent and simple message is sent by his sisters to Jesus.

[4 : 17] He whom thou lovest is sick. Our Lord does not go with the messenger who comes to him, but he sends a brief reply.

The reply, this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby.

Now, we do not know if Lazarus was still alive when that message came back. It depends partly on the exact distance which Jesus was away.

In all probability, he was a distance of some two days, or even into three days, journey from Bethany. It may have been that the message came back as Lazarus was even on the point of death, or perhaps that he was dead already.

What we do know is this, that two days after this message had been received by Jesus and his disciples, two days later, our Lord arises and says, let us go into Judea again.

[5 : 34] And then he proceeds to announce the reasons, or the reason why he was going. It was, he says, that our friend Lazarus sleepeth.

In other words, our Lord knew exactly the moment when Lazarus was taken from that home in Bethany and was translated into the world to come.

Lazarus was dead. But the disciples didn't understand our Lord to be speaking of death, and so Lazarus, so Jesus has to say explicitly to them, Lazarus is dead.

Thus they travel to Bethany, and when they arrive, the scene is so graphically described by the Apostle John.

The usual, traditional Jewish practices of mourning had already commenced. Lazarus had been buried for four days.

[6 : 39] It was common amongst the Jews for mourning to continue through thirty days. The first three days, it was said, were given to weeping, the next seven to lamentation, and so on.

There were these varied customs, and amongst these customs was the practice, not only for neighbors and close friends to come, but for many to come, and to assemble together with the bereaved for the purpose of mourning.

And that had certainly happened, as John tells us, in this case. Many, he says, in verse 19, many of the Jews came. Jerusalem, perhaps from elsewhere, had come to Martha and Mary so that this house of mourning was filled with people.

And as Jesus draws near to Bethany, Martha hears word of his coming, and without waiting, she arises at once, and she hastens to meet with Christ.

And it has often been said, and I think very rightly said, that whereas in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10, it is Mary whose grace shines forth most eminently, there is much to be said for believing that here in John, chapter 11, it is the grace that was in Martha, which is more clearly seen.

[8 : 11] It may be that Mary was stunned with grief. At any rate, she stays where she is. But Martha is at once engaged to proceed to meet with Jesus.

And the fact is, and it is one that we do well to remember, that Christians should never be judged by one incident. There are graces in God's people which sometimes are stronger in different circumstances.

And that appears, I think, with these two sisters. Martha goes to meet with Jesus. And in verses 21 to 27, we have an account of the conversation that took place between them.

And then, the word is sent to Mary, that the Master is come and calleth for thee. And Mary at once, rising up, also hastens to meet with Jesus.

And the crowd of mourners, not knowing the reason for her departure, supposing she was going to the grave, they hasten to follow after her. And when, as we read here, Jesus meets with Mary, a new element enters into the story.

[9 : 35] Not only, we read in verse 33, not only did Mary weep and her companions, but of Jesus himself, we now read, as we have it translated here, he groaned in spirit.

Which means literally, he was deeply, powerfully moved. And says John, he was troubled, he was agitated, he was visibly disturbed.

And then, John goes on to write those amazing two words, Jesus wept. that is not actually the same word of which we read that Mary and her companions wept, they wailed.

But when John says Jesus wept, the word is a word which expresses the falling of silent tears. He shed tears, but he did not wail.

And what surely we are being shown here is something glorious concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and of which we will speak again in a moment.

[10 : 53] Then our Lord is taken to the grave where Lazarus lay. Verse 38, it was a cave, says John, a cavern and a stone lay upon it.

and it is possible that we may infer from the nature of this grave that Martha and Mary and Lazarus belong to a rather better off section of society.

Certainly the status of Jews was often indicated by the type of grave in which they were buried and here was a grave that was a cavern that was common enough but with this great stone rolled across its entrance.

A stone doesn't actually say the size of the stone it was obviously considerable from the effort that was needed to move it. But then something else we are told and this also suggests or perhaps more particularly suggests the well-to-do nature of this family.

Lazarus was bound with linen strips what we are referred to as grave clothes.

[12:14] The Jews of course did not embalm like the Egyptians but some Jews were honored in their burial by thus being swathed with strips of linen and sometimes certain scents powdered scents were thrown between the folds of these linen strips and a napkin a sweat cloth literally bound about his head.

It was in that position that Lazarus was buried. Now the Old Testament scriptures taught the Jews in the ceremonial law that there was a legal impurity connected with death.

To therefore be in contact with a corpse was to incur that legal impurity and out of that stipulation in the ceremonial law the Jews had certain prescriptions of their own.

For example the Jewish Talmud required that a grave once shut should not be opened and that no one should come within four cubits distance of a grave.

These were undoubtedly thoughts that belong to this generation of Jews and yet as our Lord comes to the grave he takes his position before it and he gives this word of command take ye away the stone and Martha at once speaks impulsively she fears that Jesus has forgotten something that Lazarus has been dead four days already she dreads the sight and the smell of his decomposing body Lord she says Lord by this time he stinketh for he hath been dead four days now some modern translations give it by this time he decayeth well that is more polite but the original is followed by the authorized version there was the odor of death in that tomb by this time she says truly he sinketh for he hath been dead four days already now we are familiar of course my friends today with the fact that we discuss in learned ways definitions of death you know that a man may be dead as to his mind his mind may have ceased operating and yet there may still be a pulse his heart may still be beating here was a case of absolute total death it was not simply that Lazarus his mind had ceased to function he was dead in every part of his being not only were his limbs stiff and motionless but the beginning of corruption had already set in he was indeed dead and Martha

[15:54] I say fears that Jesus has forgotten something and our Lord is not the one who has forgotten but Martha has and therefore he turns to her and he says in words of admonition in verse 40 said I not unto thee that if thou wouldst believe thou shouldst see the glory of God and then speaking briefly to his father Jesus the stone having been taken away he cries with a loud voice said John Lazarus come forth Lazarus hither out is what he says and he that was dead says John he that was dead came forth instantly renewed in the full vigor of life hindered says John by absolutely nothing but these bands of linen the grave clothes which were around him obviously loose enough for him to shuffle to move his limbs but still around him and the sweat cloth around his face and as all stand in amazement in silence

Jesus gives another command he says loose him and let him go there was no outburst of excitement there were no fervent greetings there was a solemn awe men were in the presence of God almighty and Lazarus is sent on his way home by our Lord's simple word now my friends this is the narrative which the scripture gives us written of course by an eyewitness by one who saw the events of that day and these things are written in the scripture for a special purpose they are not just some isolated incident but miracles are events with a message for all men and the reason why the narrative is so tied together here is that the teaching of our

Lord is bound up with the facts which occur and we have to take them as I say together and I want us to try to concentrate our thinking upon one special theme and that is what was the purpose of this miracle what was it for why was it done now in looking at that question surely it has to be said immediately that the purpose of the miracle was not to help or to benefit Lazarus that was quite clearly not its purpose let us think about that for a moment you notice in verse 3 at the beginning of the chapter that when Lazarus is fallen sick it is not he that sends the message to Jesus Lazarus had no need to be concerned and I do not believe that he was concerned he knew that just a few weeks before when Jesus was there with them in Jerusalem he had spoken those marvelous words my sheep hear my voice and I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish neither shall any pluck them out of my hands Lazarus knew that he believed it and as he lay there in his bed in Bethany he lay in peace he was undisturbed he knew as Jesus describes him in verse 11 that he was a friend of Christ he knew more he knew that Jesus loved him for as John says there in chapter 5 now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and

Lazarus you know it is a beautiful thing to see people unconcerned in the hour of pain and sickness it's not true of everyone how many there are who have no concern to speak about spiritual things who are never eager perhaps for a visit from a minister or a Christian but when they fall sick what a change can be seen how readily they want such a visit how eager they are to send for help it is that kind of activity which so often reveals unbelief Lazarus is not in distress or concern now somebody might suppose that if Jesus thus loved Lazarus why did he not do something about his sickness he sends a message but he does nothing and the answer of the whole

[21 : 40] Bible to that question is just this it is that the love of Christ and sickness can go very well together together too often God's people when a loved one falls sick a husband a wife a child some other Christian friend too often I say we are like Martha and Mary and we are startled we are surprised and we say he whom thou lovest is sick as though it shouldn't be as though it ought not to happen but it may well be because the Bible no word teaches us or indicates that faith in Christ is a preservative against suffering and against affliction that's not what it teaches one has only to look through the New

Testament scriptures to see how impossible that idea would be in the book of the Acts of the Apostles many are the afflictions of the righteous in the New Testament epistles we find the same thing Paul writing to the Philippians in the second chapter speaks of Epaphroditus who was sick nigh unto death Paul says he was my companion he was the man who was so near to Paul my brother Paul calls him he was one who Christ loved he was a friend of Christ but he was sick nigh unto death and in that very last chapter that Paul wrote in second Timothy chapter 4 speaking of his final struggle he says only Luke is with me Trophimus have I left he says at Miletum sick yes when Paul needed this believer who was a companion in Christ

Trophimus he was sick and Paul could do nothing about his sickness and what is more the Lord Jesus Christ did nothing about his sickness why didn't Christ deliver Trophimus from sickness when Paul needed him why didn't Jesus do something to stop the suffering of Lazarus was it that there was any deficiency in his love the whole chapter witnesses against that possibility those verses that we mentioned just now when Jesus groaned in spirit when he wept these are verses which marvelously indicate to us the depth of the tenderness of Christ as he beholds all grief and pain and suffering he is touched with the feelings of our infirmities and as he beholds all the ravages of sin and all the sorrows that is caused in the world in the very frailty of man and all that goes with it I say the possibility that Jesus is not touched with love is one that is absolutely to be rejected he did love Lazarus he does love all his people and yet and yet it may be that sometimes sickness is better than health for the Lord's people it may be the richest means of grace and it may well be I say that the love of Christ and sickness go together and there is nothing more monstrous than the idea that if a person is a Christian somehow they either should not be sick or if they are sick they should by faith always be delivered from their sickness that is a monstrous teaching and yet alas some do teach it it is not the teaching of the word of God it is not the teaching of John's gospel chapter 11 I say the purpose of this miracle was not to help Lazarus but someone may say but after all wasn't Lazarus raised from the dead wasn't that a glorious benefit and blessing and help to Lazarus not at all of course it wasn't I believe that when Lazarus was raised in this way he was thankful but he was thankful for one reason only and that was that it gave glory to the Lord Jesus Christ he was not thankful to be brought back into this world having been in the very wonder of the world that is to come the Bible teaches us that once a believer dies and immediately he dies he passes into a realm infinitely more wonderful than this present fallen world he passes into a realm of sin of sinlessness of light of freedom from pain and suffering he passes indeed into the very presence of God where he will hunger no more neither thirst any more neither shall the sun light on him nor any heat and what we are told here is not that

[27 : 41] Lazarus was brought back into this world for his benefit he was brought for another purpose and the scripture draws a kind of veil across those four days when Lazarus was beyond this scene of time the apostle Paul says having been in a third heaven that he was prohibited to speak of what he had heard and no doubt the same was true of Lazarus but I say let us never suppose that it was for Lazarus's gain that he was brought back and Christian people here present this morning know very well that when loved ones fall asleep in Christ we do not pray that they should be restored to us and we do not pray that because the word of God assures us that they are far better where they are and that to be restored to us would indeed be no blessing to them the miracle was not for Lazarus what then was it for well it was chiefly for the strengthening of the faith

of the disciples and by disciples here I mean both

Martha and Mary and the eleven disciples accepting Judas Iscariot now think first of the eleven disciples here they are believers trusting in Christ but my friends how weak their faith how ready to doubt when Jesus says as he says in verse seven that he's going into Judea then the disciples say master of late the Jews sought to stone thee are you going to go there again fear unbelief Jesus had been delivered before why might he not again no they didn't want to go and they didn't want to go because they were afraid but more than that when Jesus says why he's going unbelief again hinders them he says our friend

Lazarus sleepeth I go that I may awake him out of sleep what does that mean well it meant of course that he was dead and they ought to have known that perfectly well Jacob in the Old Testament says I shall sleep with my fathers how often the saints of God in the Old Testament scriptures referred to death as falling on sleep that's what it was for them that's what it still is for believers but the disciples didn't understand it they thought that Jesus meant that he was going to go more than 50 miles to wake Lazarus out of some temporary overnight sleep that Lazarus was in and I say they thought that because of unbelief because unbelief you know has an marvelous ability to misunderstand the word of Christ that is done every week in church people hear the word of Christ and because of the unbelief in their heart they don't actually hear what he says but there is a distortion in his teaching so that they think he means something different to what he says beware of that my friend unbelief has the ability to listen to the very words of Jesus and to put an entirely different construction upon them to the true construction

Lazarus is dead says Jesus he has to say it so plainly because they are so slow to understand well if Lazarus is dead and Jesus is going to awaken him out of sleep what then do the disciples say well Thomas it is called Didymus says this let us go also yes but that's not all let us go also he says that we may die with him yes he says he'll be stoned he'll be killed he's forgotten what Jesus has said about a resurrection he says let us go that we may die with him my Christian friends how guilty we are of this unbelief has a power even over our memories things that we've seen Christ do we don't remember these disciples had actually seen

Jesus raising up Jairus' daughter from the couch on which she lay dead they had seen the occasion when the son of the widow of Nain was being carried to the cemetery dead they had seen our Lord stop that procession and raise that man to newness of life they'd seen it but when Jesus speaks of going to awaken Lazarus all that Thomas says is let us go that we may die with him that is unbelief what of these two women Martha and Mary well what choice believers they were what sweet disciples of Christ and yet even in them also you see in this chapter this same power of unbelief they have faith in Jesus that's why they send a message and when Jesus comes the first thing that both these women say is Lord if thou hadst been here our brother had not died that that's not a reproach on

[33 : 37] Christ they are not criticizing Jesus they are simply expressing faith and honoring him they had never seen anyone die in the presence of Jesus no one ever had died in the presence of Jesus they had seen him heal countless numbers they believed that if Jesus had been there this would not have happened that was faith and not only was it faith but as Martha says in verse 22 but I know that even now even now in this hour of death whatsoever thou would ask of God God will give it thee oh yes there was faith there in both of them but where was the unbelief well the unbelief was there at the same time and you see this is so much like unbelief when a Christian looks to but when Martha looked to the corpse then faith seemed to be dead and she does both and faith and unbelief can fluctuate in the same heart almost simultaneously what was the unbelief well the unbelief was partly in the fact that although she says

Lord if thou had been here my brother had not died she was forgetting that Jesus did not need to be there to keep Lazarus alive he could have spoken the word at Bethabara or anywhere else and Lazarus would have lived she forgets that but she forgets something more serious than that Jesus had sent a message saying this sickness is not unto death thy brother shall rise again he says in verse 23 what does Martha say to that well she says I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day well that's a glorious article of faith I expect there are people here this morning who don't even believe that you don't even believe that a day is coming when the very body is going to be raised from the grave she believed that but it wasn't enough what was wrong with it well she looked upon this resurrection as something that would be far distant something that could give no real present comfort to her and what our

Lord has to tell her is this that omnipotent power and fullness of life are always present in Christ no need to look to some far off day I am he says verse 25 I am the resurrection and the life I am that now no more difficult for me to raise Lazarus now than to raise him at the last day he is not a great prophet who has to ask of God something that he can do no he says I am resurrection and I am life and believest thou this he says to her believest thou and she says yea Lord I believe that thou art the Christ the Son of God and she did believe but yet a moment later her her faith breaks down when

Jesus says move that stone she says well stop Lord wait remember he's been dead four days already and that's when Jesus has to remind her again said I not unto thee that if thou would believe thou should see the glory of God this then was our Lord's purpose to strengthen faith and how does he do it well there is really not time to say but let me just indicate very briefly in a few words how does our Lord strengthen faith he did it in the first place by letting matters go to the very worst possible degree so when the message came Jesus did nothing Lazarus dies the sisters look for Jesus coming he doesn't come perhaps they delay burying Lazarus thinking well he may even come now and it may be even now he may do something for

Lazarus but no Lazarus is buried four days in the grave and then and only then does Jesus come well you know that is not unlike Christ not unlike him because it is so good for us it is the way that faith is strengthened to see difficulties and impossibilities surrounding us and then to see Christ put forth his power in a way that no man could do I say that is what our Lord so often does he lets things go to their worst Saul of Tarsus at the feet of Gamaliel what a suitable time for his conversion he must have heard of Christ he did hear of him but he rejects him he helps at the martyrdom of Stephen he makes havoc and then at last as we read in Acts chapter 9 is it breathing out threatenings and slaughters against the church he goes to

[39 : 12] Damascus and only then the voice that awakened Lazarus spoke to him well our Lord often does that and let us not be therefore so concerned as we tend to be at what seems to us to be a delay in answers to prayer and in our Lord's working finally our Lord does this by revealing his own glory how is faith strengthened well my friends let us never forget weak faith is due to weak knowledge it's because our knowledge is indistinct and vague that our faith is weak the more we know of Christ the stronger faith becomes so that our Lord having thus dealt with these disciples in this way he goes on to reveal his glory and that's what he meant by that brief message this sickness is not unto death that is death won't be the final outcome of this sickness but he says for the glory of

God that the Son of God might be glorified thereby that's what strengthens faith the shining forth of Christ's glory and that's what happened in Bethany the voice of the Son of God spoke in that tomb and the disciples were shown that Christ not only can overcome sickness can not only forgive sin but he can conquer death he can empty the grave he has power not only over this material world but he has power over the world to come he can call back spirits of the just departed he has the keys of death and of the grave he says Lazarus come forth and Lazarus at once as we've already seen comes forth and he does this as I said not for

Lazarus is good but for our good that our faith might be strengthened and our Lord says in verses 25 and 26 that there is something more wonderful than the resurrection of Lazarus for us yes for us because after all Lazarus though he was raised he had to fall on sleep again but what Jesus says in verses 25 and 26 is this he that believeth on me though he die that's the easiest way to understand that statement though he die though he fall on sleep though he shut his eyes and is buried though he dies said Jesus yet shall he live that means for a Christian for a believer there is nothing in the event of death that can interrupt communion and fellowship with Christ because Jesus says I am the resurrection and the life he that believeth in me though he die yet he shall go on living because he's united to me who am the resurrection and the life that's what he says that's not all he says and he says whosoever and that is where we come in my friends whosoever literally everyone everyone who liveth and believeth in me shall never die now he's speaking of the believer in this world and he says that the person who lives and believes in

Christ will never die he means never die in the full sense of that word death in its full sense means separation from God it means tasting the sting of death it means going out of this world unforgiven unconverted ungodly that person will die but Jesus says whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die and then he turns to Martha and he says as he says to us this morning believest thou this do you believe that do you know that is that a reality in your experience is there still so much ignorance my friend in your heart that you do not even yet understand that Christ awakens the dead

that that's what the gospel is all about that we by nature estranged from God and dead to God we need to hear the voice of the son of God and live do we understand that yes says a Christian I know that much at least well then my friend you as a believer you need to go on to know more of Christ as these dear women did and these disciples and that's what Christ wants for us that faith will be strengthened that we will stop looking at corpses stop looking at difficulties and set our eyes upon him who has all power in heaven and on earth may God enable us to do so let us pray