

The Seventh Sign: The Death and Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-57

A. John 11:1-16 The Sickness and Death of Lazarus is Announced

John 11:1-3

The narrator began his account by pointing out that this family was well known to Jesus and that he had a close relationship with them. In part, this fact may be intended to explain why Jesus eventually went to where Lazarus was even though the journey was dangerous.

The sisters told Jesus that their brother was ill but not yet dead. They appealed to him on the basis of his love for their brother and for them as well. Their expectation was that Jesus would act now to save their brother from death. Since he had already healed the official's (4:43-54) son without any physical contact they may have been expecting him to act immediately and return their brother to full health immediately.

John 11:4-6

Jesus' response to them is rather enigmatic. Literally, he seems to have said that their brother would not die and this may have been what they understood at first. However, on the basis of how the story unfolds, this cannot be what he actually meant. The end of the story contains the clue. Jesus has power over the forces of life and death so whatever happens will not result in Lazarus' real death because his illness and subsequent death will be the occasion for God's glory as well as the Glory of His Son.

NOTE: Read Bruce Milne page 158 where he refers to Joni Eareckson Tada

In these short verses the narrator has provided a foreshadowing of Jesus' own death and resurrection that will also be the occasion of God's greatest work where death will be overturned as God deals finally and effectively with the consequences of Adam's sin in the garden.

However, it is doubtful that the two sisters could have understood the theological import of what Jesus said to them. A fuller understanding awaited them after they discovered that his tomb was empty. (Chapter 20)

The details of verse 5 and 6 serve the purpose of drawing the reader's attention to Jesus' delay in going to Bethany. He must have known that Lazarus would die during because of the delay and so the reader is forced to look for an explanation of this delay. He knew that if he acted immediately he would be able to make them happy but he is more interested in making them holy by faith in him.

John 11:7-10

When Jesus finally announced that it was time to return to Judea his followers objected because it was too dangerous. Again he responded with a statement that they must have found difficult to understand. Jesus' words seem to have two meanings. The first has to do with timing and the second a reference to his declaration that he is the "light of the world." (9:5)

The time of his arrest was quickly approaching so Jesus knew the dangers that lie his future. He knew, however, that the timing of his arrest and crucifixion were controlled by his Father so the dangers that lie ahead must not be over estimated. It is still day time so the journey is still possible if the right hour for traveling is chosen. There is still time to do the work of the Father because the night, with all its dangers, has not yet come.

There is another meaning in his words as well. He is the light of the world and because this light can never be extinguished those who walk with him

are in a place where danger can do no ultimate harm. Jesus has answered his disciples fear by telling them that they can follow him under the protection of God's timing and his own protective presence that holds back the darkness of the night. The night will inevitably come but not now. For the time being, they are safe.

John 11:11-16

Jesus was misunderstood by his disciples when he told them, using the language of metaphor, that Lazarus was dead and that he was going to bring him back to life. They suggested that there was no reason for Jesus to make the journey because Lazarus would recover on his own. For this reason he spoke more plainly leaving no doubt in their minds what he really meant in verse 11.

Then Jesus explained that he was glad that he will have the opportunity to raise Lazarus to life because it will be an occasion for them to have their faith strengthened and deepened. The pain that must have been experienced by Lazarus' family Jesus regarded as less crucial than the opportunity to strengthen and nourish the faith of his followers. Their holiness was more important than their happiness.

Thomas spoke up and encouraged the rest to follow the master. Jesus assured them that the journey would be a safe one but Thomas associated following Jesus with death. His words reveal a profound understanding of the cost of discipleship in the first century and they serve as a reminder to us that following Jesus requires us to value obedience more than life itself.
(Easy to say)

B. John 11:17-37 Jesus Meets with Mary and Martha and He Grieves

John 11:17-22

Jesus arrived and found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. This detail may be intended to give an even greater significance to what eventually took place. There is some evidence from rabbinic writings of the third century that Jews believed that for the first three days after death the souls hovered around the body trying to re-enter it but on the fourth day, when decomposition began to set in, the soul departed giving up its quest for the recovery of the body. However, we have no way of knowing that this tradition went back to the beginning of the first century but it may have.

We do know that Jesus' arrival corresponded to the end of the three days of intense mourning and that decomposition would have certainly begun. In this circumstance the greatness of the miracle is emphasized and the greater the miracle the greater is the strengthening of faith.

Typically, it was Martha who took the initiative to meet Jesus before he arrived at her home. What she said to Jesus can be read in two ways. She could be expressing her regret that her brother's death was the result of Jesus' absence from her home. However, her words in verse 22 suggest that she is anticipating that Jesus will be able to restore Lazarus to life because of his intimacy with his Father. The second possibility is the most natural reading. The reader cannot say exactly the content of Martha's faith at this point but she does recognize the uniqueness of Jesus' relationship to God.

John 11:23-37

Jesus announced to Martha that her brother would live again but she understood him only partially. She assumed that he was speaking of the final resurrection that would take place “at the last day” and her words expressed a belief that was held only by the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees, they believed that there would be a general resurrection when the messianic kingdom is established.

Jesus response to her contains the greatest words in all of scripture. He is the “resurrection and the life” and that this life is freely available to all who believe in him. The narrator wants us to see that Lazarus’ resurrection is the verification that what Jesus said about himself is true because it foreshadows his own resurrection as well as our own. Then he asked Martha if she believed because everything that was about to happen was intended to establish faith in him as the Messiah of God.

Martha proclaimed her faith that Jesus was the Christ and she was anxious to have her sister come to the same understanding. She hurried home to tell Mary that Jesus was nearby because she wanted her to make the same confession that she had made. Martha left so quickly that her fellow mourners thought that she was on the way to the tomb.

When Mary saw Jesus she could not contain her grief as she repeated the very same words her sister had spoken. Jesus reacted in two ways. First he was moved to tears and secondly he was troubled in his spirit, a phrase that implies much more than the emotional upset that accompanies grief.

The Greek word used by John to describe the intensity of Jesus reaction to Martha’s grief is ‘embrimaomai’, a word that was usually used to describe the snort of an angry horse. When used in reference to people it means to express indignation and rebuke. It is the same word used in Mark 14:4-5 when the woman is ‘rebuked’ for pouring the perfume on Jesus head. This same word is also used in Matthew 9:30 after Jesus had restored sight to the

blind. After the healing, Jesus warned them 'sternly' that they were to tell no one about what he had done.

John has told us that Jesus' tears were accompanied by an outburst of anger as he approached Lazarus' grave. Surely he could not have been angry that he had been called upon to perform another miracle or that he was angry at the mourners for their lack of sincerity. He may have been angry at the sisters' unbelief but it is very difficult to imagine that Jesus would direct anger towards Mary and Martha at the time of their tremendous loss.

If Jesus is not angry at these things then what is he angry about? B.B. Warfield probably has it right. "The spectacle of the distress of Mary and her companions enraged Jesus because it brought poignantly home to his consciousness the evil of death, its unnaturalness, its 'violent tyranny' (Calvin). In Mary's grief he sees and feels the misery of the whole human race and burns with rage against the oppressor of men. It is death that is the object of his wrath, and behind death him who has the power of death, and whom he had come into the world to destroy". (B.B. Warfield, 'The Emotional Life of our Lord, in the Person and Work of Christ, page 115) Here Jesus is expressing the same emotion he felt when he had overturned the tables in the Temple. Things were not as God intended and to him this fact was an outrage that called for action.

He asked Mary where her dead brother was and he followed her invitation to "Come and see" and he wept at the sight of her grief. Some observers who had watched this scene unfold, recognized his love for Lazarus but others drew a more cynical conclusion. For them Jesus had simply failed to prevent a tragedy that he could have easily prevented. In the verses that follow Jesus shows how wrong their conclusion was. They had underestimated his love for this family and they had put limitations on his powers over death.

The modern reader may look critically upon those who doubted Jesus powers without realizing how often they manifest the same lack of faith. Are

there not times in our own Christian experience when we are so overwhelmed by the events and circumstances of life that we too doubt God's promise that He will never abandon us in the time of our greatest need?

The raising of Lazarus encourages our faith by reminding us that we can never be overwhelmed by the forces that would destroy us so long as we trust in the one whose power is made evident in the raising of Lazarus? Paul was right when he wrote, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose". (Romans 8:28)

John 11:38-44 Lazarus is Raised From the Dead

Jesus approached the tomb still deeply moved. He is not like the traveling magician who is interested only in impressing the crowd with his mighty acts. Unlike those whose good works are intended to acquire attention and admiration, Jesus is moved primarily by his love for Mary and Martha as well as his anger that creation is not what God intended. Jesus saw life and death in a radically different way than those around him because he is from the Father.

What others regarded as the natural world was unnatural to him and that is why he used this occasion to demonstrate that the Son's work is to restore God's creation. Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb as a sign that He was working to overturn the effects of the Fall. A theft is taking place and Satan is the thief attempting to steal what does not belong to him. In effect, all the miracles signs foreshadow Stan's final defeat when the creation will be possessed only by God.

From our human point of view, we experience the world as it is and call it reality. Jesus, on the other hand, views the world as actuality (Lazarus was actually dead) but not reality because reality is the world as God intended it

to be. Sickness, death, and suffering are not what God wanted for His creation and that is why Jesus responded to them with such vigour and anger. For him creation does not need renovation; it needs a complete overhaul by the power of his actions, teaching, death and resurrection.

He has called his followers to live in the world as it is now but with the expectation that all things will one day be put right. Today we are called 'to stand on tip toe' in eager anticipation of the day when God's kingdom will be fully inaugurated. Because the fullness of His kingdom has not yet come, we are unable to draw conclusions about God's will and purpose from our observation of the 'natural' world. It has been distorted by human sin. In a Fallen world God is known only because He discloses Himself in Jesus and without this revelation He is unknowable in every important sense.

When Jesus asked for the stone to be taken away Mary's faith faltered again. What she said in 39b has the force of "You can't be serious!" He then tells her that if she believes she will see the "glory of God." He cannot mean that Lazarus will remain in the tomb without a confident demonstration of faith from her as if what he does is dependent on Mary's faith. He must mean that those who were there will see Lazarus emerge from the tomb but they will not grasp the real significance of the miracle. Everyone will see the miracle but it is faith alone that makes its meaning apparent. A person can believe that Jesus performed wondrous acts without perceiving the truth behind them. Only faith can do this and faith is a gift of God.

The stone was taken away and Jesus prayed out loud and his prayer taught them several important aspects of prayer.

When the stone was taken away Lazarus was still dead. At this very moment Jesus raised his eyes towards heaven and by his upward gaze indicated that what he was about to do was in every sense the work of His Father who is complicit in all of Jesus' actions. He prayed confidently because God had always listened to his prayers in the past and he wanted those gathered

around him to recognize his intimate relationship to God and draw the necessary conclusion; He has been sent by the Father.

John wants us to pray in the same spirit as Jesus and know that God always listens just as he listened to His Son. Jesus' prayers were always answered (His prayer in the garden may be the one exception) because he was in complete harmony with God. What about us when we pray?

“The contrast in the mind of the evangelist is evidently that between the prayer of Jesus which is always heard because the will of the Father and Son are one, and the prayer of ordinary man who, because he cannot be sure that his prayer is according to the will of God, cannot be certain that prayer will be answered in the way he expects.” (John Marsh; Saint John, page 437)

Jesus commanded Lazarus to leave the tomb and by doing so he fulfilled his prophecy in 5:25. Because he has the power over death, this miracle, viewed from the perspective of his own resurrection, guarantees his victory over the most destructive effect of the Fall.

John 11:45-57 The Sanhedrin Decides to Have Jesus Killed

The raising of Lazarus resulted in two different reactions. Some Jews believed “in him” (i.e Their faith was authentic because they believed in Jesus and not simply in what he did.) but others reported what Jesus had done hoping that the Pharisees would be able to stop any popular movement from rising up around him. The chief priest and the Pharisees called a council meeting to decide what to do. The meeting was most likely a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin was the most important court for the Jewish people because it was concerned with both the political and religious life of Israel on a daily basis. Rome provided the only limits on its authority. Its membership numbered about seventy people and most of them were Sadducees although

the Pharisees were an important minority. The members of this court were members of Israel's elite class and they had much to lose if a popular movement arose within Israel that threatened Roman peace.

The Jews who called upon the court to act did not deny the mighty works that Jesus had done but they never debated what these acts meant. Verse 48 gives the sense that their fears were for themselves rather than the entire nation of Israel. If the temple was destroyed they would have no basis on which to exercise their authority. Like modern times, people had no objection to religion so long as it was prevented from informing public life in any way.

Caiaphas, the chief priest for that year, was very decisive. He suggested that the death of one man to save an entire nation was an acceptable thing to do. The narrator cannot resist the irony of what Caiaphas said so he points out that Jesus' death was to save a nation. The priest was used by God unwittingly to speak the profoundest truth of the Gospel. John took great care to give a universal significance to what Caiaphas; Jesus' death will gather in all the nations who recognize Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

From that day forward the council was resolute in their determination to kill Jesus and in doing so they were instruments in God's hand.

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