

The Raising of Lazarus.

Mary and Martha sent a messenger to Jesus with news of Lazarus' sickness. "Lord, the one you love is sick." He had hurried along the dusty roads, praying to be spared from bandits, ignoring blistered feet and probably not stopping to eat. He had an urgent appeal to bring to Jesus, who was the only one who could save Lazarus' life. He was not a close personal friend of Jesus like Lazarus and the sisters and envied their fortune in being able to rely on Him coming immediately to their aid when there were so many making demands on His healing power. He delivered his news, giving details of the sickness and how near death Lazarus was. He did not need to ask for Jesus to come; it was perfectly obvious that He would. What a relief when he heard Jesus' reply. All would be well. Jesus would heal Lazarus. He turned back, barely stopping for rest and food, to deliver the assurance to the family.

In the meantime, Lazarus lay dying on his bed – Jesus had been a frequent visitor to the family and become a dear friend to each of them. "Jesus will come soon. He has been healing all these strangers day after day. I know He will come quickly to heal me, His dear friend."

What a relief to hear that the message had been delivered to Jesus. What a comfort to hear He said his sickness will not end in death. But Lazarus grew worse and then the following day, when Jesus had still not arrived they heard Jesus had not even set out!

The messenger was sent for, "What exactly did Jesus say? Did he promise to come? Was there anything that could have delayed Him? Did you tell Him how urgent it was?" They simply could not understand why Jesus had delayed. Jesus had made a promise but He was failing them.

Lazarus and his sisters faced the ultimate challenge of faith. Who do you believe when all the evidence stands against believing God? Do you believe God anyway or conclude that God has let you down? I have a Christian friend who years ago decided that because of the suffering he saw in the world, God was fickle and did not truly have his best interests at heart. Looking back on

his life he can now see how devastating this view of God has been for him. He has feared God but not trusted Him and he has many times been angry and resentful towards God. He is only now trying to recover His trust in the Father who loves him perfectly.

We do not know how Lazarus responded to the evidence he had that Jesus had deserted him in his hour of greatest need. But notice that Jesus did not leave them ignorant of His response. He sent the message back, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." There was something to hang on to. But as Lazarus worsened it seemed in the end that Jesus' promise had failed.

Jesus' response to the news of Lazarus' serious condition was immediate, firm and confident. He did not go away and seek God's will and then respond. We are told that "When he heard this, Jesus said, 'This sickness will not end in death.'" He took an immediate stand confident that the Father would answer Him and use the situation for His glory. "My friend Lazarus will live!" He dispatched the messenger with this wonderful assurance – and then stayed put! Jesus was moved by his friendship with Lazarus and his sisters and gave them an important promise to strengthen their faith. But being God He did not need to march to another man's drum. He set the pace of events and would not be dictated to by Satan who was the ultimate cause of sin, sickness and death. Jesus, not sickness and death would be glorified. It was four days walk to Bethany and he waited until Lazarus had died before setting out.

The disciples do not seem to share Jesus' love for Lazarus and are very happy to stay put. They have taken no notice of Jesus saying He would be glorified through Lazarus' sickness. Rather than urging Jesus to go soon, they advise against it, gloomily predicting that they will all die! The disciples do not exactly shine with love, concern, faith and eagerness for God's glory. They are dull witted and despondent. Is it any wonder that Jesus said "for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." After all they had seen Jesus do and heard Him say, they still had little faith. They knew He was a great teacher and healer, but they did not realise He was God incarnate.

Martha had been busy for four days with the funeral arrangements; making sure all the friends and relations have been fed and found somewhere to stay, getting Lazarus embalmed and sealed in the family tomb, comforting Mary who had been inconsolable. She had not had time to consider her own grief, but when news of Jesus' arrival eventually came, she realised how much she wanted answers from Jesus.

They had been so relieved when the messenger returned with Jesus' response, only to struggle with confusion and doubt as they saw Lazarus get weaker. Then when they heard that Jesus had delayed setting out for two days they lost hope and fell into despair. How could Jesus let them down? It just didn't make any sense. Then Lazarus died.

Mary and Martha's distress was all the greater knowing that had Jesus not delayed Lazarus would have been healed. People got sick and died. It happened all too often. There were no hospitals. But to have Jesus promise to come and heal Lazarus and then let them down through lack of urgency – that cut them deeply. They had to deal with the grief of losing their brother, the anger and frustration at Jesus' delay and the deeply troubling thought that Jesus did not love them as they thought. How could he if he let Lazarus die? Was Jesus really who he claimed to be? Did He care about them? Was he unable to cure Lazarus? How could He have brought such grief to them all. The loss of Lazarus was bad enough, but Mary was utterly broken. She felt that Jesus had failed them.

So Martha hurried out along the road to meet Jesus. Perhaps she had been mulling over the strange second part of Jesus' reply: "it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified". She did not know what this meant, but she could not abandon her belief that Jesus truly was God's son. Jesus could surely do something to ease their pain - though what, Martha could not imagine. So when she found Jesus she did not mince her words, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." In other words, "It is your fault. So what are you going to do about it?"

Jesus is not at all phased by Martha's accusation. He recognises her struggle to cling on to her faith in Him and appreciates her straight-forward approach. He encourages her to see beyond the grief of the moment to an eternally bright future, "Your brother will rise again ... I am the resurrection and the life." She responds to their interchange with remarkable faith, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." Jesus does not tell Martha that He is going to raise Lazarus, but He does encourage her to trust Him, saying "if you believed, you would see the glory of God" He then sends her to get Mary.

Mary is inconsolable and all she can get out between her sobs is the accusation, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." No conversation is possible. Seeing this dear woman whom he loved so broken with grief and confusion and anger broke Jesus' heart and He wept. Jesus wept with those who wept – but not for the reasons that they wept.

The Jews thought Jesus wept with grief for Lazarus. But Jesus had no cause for grief over Lazarus. He knew He was going to restore his life. No, Jesus wept out of sympathy with those who were in tears all around him. Jesus wept that his dearest friends were in despair despite the assurance He had sent with the messenger; Jesus wept that His disciples were still so weak in their faith and so lacking in love. Jesus wept at the hardness of people's hearts and the sin around him. Jesus wept from a deep sense of the misery sin had brought upon human nature and that mankind was still under the curse of death; that the last enemy of mankind was not yet defeated.

Twice we are told that Jesus was deeply moved. He was profoundly and deeply affected by the outpouring of emotion all around Him. God is moved by our predicament. He shares our sorrows and grief. He comforts us in our affliction. But He also sees it from a different perspective. We live in the moment and cannot see God's big picture. And that is precisely why we need to trust God. Our trust must not be based on God doing what we expect or want Him to do, but on His goodness and love. It is having trust despite the apparent evidence that brings us hope and comfort.

At last the time has come for Jesus to fulfil His promise. He commands that the tomb be opened. But Martha still has no idea that Jesus is going to be true to His word. Instead of taking this as an indication that an incredible miracle was to take place, she accuses Jesus of typical unthinking man-behaviour. "But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days." "Stupid man" she might as well have added.

Jesus prays – except that He doesn't pray. He says, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

Jesus didn't need to thank God for hearing Him, because He knew that God always heard Him. But He gave thanks as a witness to the onlookers. He wanted them to know He had authority to command a dead man to rise because God was with Him. He was not acting by his own power, but as a spokesman for God the Father. He did not need to beg and plead with God. He didn't need to spend hours in intercession. Raising a dead man was no more difficult than calling for a mule-taxi. Both depended equally on a person hearing and responding to His words. Jesus simply told Lazarus to come out and he did; but it was God, not Lazarus, who heard and responded to Jesus' command.

All prayer is like this. The only one who needs to hear is God. And He has given us the assurance that He does hear us. But we are not so good at truly believing Jesus' assurances. Like Mary and Martha we believe but struggle to believe. We are confused and perplexed and even grieved by the circumstances that surround us. But Jesus says to each of us, "if you believe, you will see the glory of God."

There are many characters in this story and each has a lesson for us. Perhaps you have identified with some of them. But the lesson I particularly want to leave with you is that God is truly worthy of our full trust. No matter what transpires, God is faithful. If we will steadfastly hold on to that hope then we will certainly see the Glory of God. Not just when we go to be with Him, but time and again throughout our lives.