

## John 11: A Matter of Life and Death

### I. From Death to Life

*Introduction: The Emotional Upheaval Caused by the Death of a Loved One*

I've taken out a double-indemnity policy. I took it out without understanding what it was. The insurance man explained that when I die, they bury me twice. On this basis, maybe Lazarus needed double-indemnity insurance, because he died twice and was buried twice. But death could not conquer even once the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. Today, you and I need the life assurance that comes only from knowing Jesus, the source of life and resurrection power.

Nothing so profoundly stirs our emotions as the death of someone we love dearly. One day, when I was 11 years old, I went home from school to the news that my father had died, as the result of a factory accident. My world fell apart. I had lost the person I loved more than any other in the world.

Immense sadness, shock, despair, anger, confusion and bewilderment, utter frustration, anxiety, guilt, exhaustion, emptiness - these are but some of the emotions that mark the upheaval caused by the death of a loved one.

Martha and Mary had just lost their dearly loved brother, Lazarus. When both speak their mind to Jesus they both express their profound grief with the same words. When Martha goes out to meet Jesus she says, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (v21). Then Mary, when she first sees Jesus, also says, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" (v31).

What emotion is expressed by these words? Are they words of complaint which reproach Jesus for not getting there sooner? Or are they merely words expressing regret and frustration and resignation? It is not hard for us to identify with these grieving women. "Lord, why weren't you here when I needed you?" "Lord, how could you let such a terrible thing happen? Why didn't you intervene?"

### *Jesus' Emotions in the Face of Death*

But it is not just Martha and Mary who are overwhelmed by their grief. So is Jesus. Look at verses 33-35:

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Jesus "was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The word rendered "deeply moved" is used again in verse 38: "Jesus, once more *deeply moved*, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 'Take away the stone,' he said."

The translation "deeply moved" doesn't capture Jesus' emotion. John is telling us that deep down Jesus was profoundly angry. When Jesus saw Mary and her fellow-mourners weeping he felt immense anger welling up inside him. When Jesus came to the tomb he felt again these waves of anger welling up within him.

It is normal to experience deep anger in the face of death. After my father died, each night I would kneel by the side of my bed and shout at God in my frustration and

anger, "Why, God, why?" This was despite being raised in a non-Christian home and having never gone to church. Night after night my mother would have to come into my room and put me back to bed. But there is no indication in John 11 that Jesus was angry with God his Father. Why then was he so angry?

#### *Jesus' Encounter with Martha*

In verse 20 we read, "*When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.*" We read about Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. There Martha is critical of Mary for choosing to sit at Jesus' feet while she does the housework. Some see Martha as a Type A person - impatient, excessively time-conscious, insecure about her status, highly competitive, hostile and aggressive, and incapable of relaxation. The same people see Mary as a Type B person - patient, relaxed, and easy-going. The reality is that too little is said in either Luke 10 or John 11 for us to get an accurate fix on the personalities of these sisters.

When Martha says to Jesus "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died*" she adds, "*But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.*" She regrets that Jesus had not arrived earlier to perform a miracle of healing and thus prevent Lazarus' death. She is resigned to the finality of Lazarus' death. When she says "*even now God will give you whatever you ask*" she expresses her belief that Jesus is an extraordinary man who has such an intimate relationship with God that if he asks God to admit Lazarus to Paradise then God will do so.

Jesus is the master of loaded language. He responds, "*Your brother will rise again*" (v23). Martha assumes Jesus is simply reassuring her that her brother's eternal future is secure. That's why she answers, "*I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*" (v24). For Martha, as for many of us, the doctrine of resurrection is purely a doctrine that pertains to "the last day." But Jesus drops a bombshell:

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (vv25-26).*

Many look at Martha and think she is an example of someone with an intellectual orthodox faith who needs to be challenged to trust Jesus to raise the dead right here and now. This misses the real point. Martha believes that God is the source of life, the one who causes resurrection. To her Jesus is an extraordinary man who can profoundly influence God through prayer to cause resurrection and give life. For Martha resurrection power and life are "out there" with a transcendent God and to be experienced in the remote future on "the last day." That's how it is for most of us.

Martha's understanding of Jesus falls far short of the reality. Jesus responds, "*I AM the resurrection and the life.*" When Jesus says "*I AM*" he applies to himself the great name by which God revealed himself in the Old Testament, namely Yahweh, meaning "*I AM WHO I AM.*" God is not "out there", but standing right before Martha's very eyes. "*I AM the resurrection and the life*". The power of resurrection and the source of life" is not "out there"; it is not some far-removed reality. It does not belong to the remote distant future "on the last day", but to the here and now, wherever Jesus is present. Remember, we have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in and among us right now.

On Wednesday I experienced the reality of Jesus' life-giving power in two wonderful ways. Firstly, my third grand-daughter entered the world. Secondly, I met a man who

had once been a prominent Muslim leader and intellectual. Here's a snippet of his remarkable story. In a recurring dream he saw a shining figure at the end of a long hall beckoning him. This led him to get a Bible. After reading 21 books of the New Testament he gave his life to Jesus. He had told his wife, whom he feared might betray him, that he was reading the Bible as part of his academic studies. Later, he voiced his concern to a Christian leader that his wife was not a Christian. This man told him, "The same person who brought you to himself (meaning Jesus), will bring your wife to himself within the next week." He thought this was said just to make him feel good. The very next morning his wife said to him, "I want to read the Bible." He asked, "Why?" She replied, "Last night I had a dream. A shining figure asked me to come and sit beside him. When I did so he said to me, 'You belong to me.'"

There is no limit to the life-giving power of Jesus in the here and now. But Martha merely believed that Jesus was very close to God and that if he so prayed her brother, when he rose from the dead on the Day of Judgment, would rise to enjoy eternal security. However, now Jesus is teaching her that his relationship with resurrection is far more profound than simply being in a position to influence God through prayer. Rather than inhering in a transcendent, other-worldly remote God, the very power of resurrection and the very source of eternal life resides in Jesus himself as God dwelling among people. Jesus now calls upon Martha not merely to set her focus on God and to treat Jesus as a secondary figure. No! She must focus on Jesus alone. Jesus is challenging Martha not to think of resurrection as merely a doctrine pertaining to the Day of Judgment. Since Jesus himself is the resurrection and the life his power extends over Lazarus even though Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days.

Some people can't see that resurrection has any relevance to their lives. So what that God can part the Red Sea? So what that Jesus can multiply the loaves and fishes? So what that he can heal? BUT if Jesus is not the resurrection and the life then you have no hope; you will never be made right with God; no hope of having a transformed life; no hope of the Lord intervening to heal your broken relationships, your failure to break that habit and deal with your sin. I know that for some of you everything seems final; everything seems so hopeless; it seems as if your life is shattered; your relationship with a loved one broken forever. See yourself in the presence of Jesus. Hear him say to you, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Back in John 5:24-29 Jesus declared, "*Truly, truly, I say to you that an hour comes, AND NOW IS...*" The real issue is not whether you will be raised on the Day of Judgment, but do you know Jesus' resurrection life right now? Spiritually, some of you are zombies. You are doing well in your lives and careers; you are respected by many and live a decent, moral life. But you have never grasped that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, never experienced the transforming power of the life he gives.

Martha still has not understood what Jesus has just told her. Lamely she says, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.*" She accepts that he is the Messiah, but to her this simply means Jesus has an extra-special relationship with God and is in a unique position to influence what will happen to those who are raised on the Day of Judgment. Martha's words constitute an orthodox statement of belief but mask her lack of spiritual understanding.

### *Jesus' Encounter with Mary*

Jesus' encounter with Martha focuses on what was said. Jesus' encounter with Mary simply focuses on her weeping, on her profound grief, the sight of which moved Jesus to tears but also aroused in him the deep anger we spoke of before.

Now we can answer our earlier question. Why was Jesus so angry? The key is Jesus' words: "I am the resurrection and the life." Every one revolts at death, especially the deaths of those we know and love. But this is nothing compared to the revulsion Jesus experiences in the face of death. Every fibre, every cell in Jesus' being is a life-giving fibre, a life-giving cell. Death is the very opposite of everything Jesus stands for. His whole being revolts at death, is repulsed by death, protests against death. No wonder Jesus is so angry at this tragic consequence of human sin. For death is NOT a normal part of life, as some erroneously say. As the Bible teaches us, "The wages of sin is death." Death is the ultimate evidence that there is something radically wrong with you and with me and every other human on this planet.

## **II. From Life to Death**

At one level John 11 is about Jesus, as the resurrection and the life, bringing a dead man back to life - a movement from death to life. But this is overshadowed by an even greater emphasis in the context that surrounds this great event?

Immediately before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead Thomas prophetically says to the other disciples, as they follow Jesus back into extreme danger, the area near Jerusalem, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (v16). Immediately, after this event we are told that because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead the Jewish religious leaders became totally determined to kill Jesus. You must not miss the immense importance of verses 49-53:

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

In John 11 the greater movement is not from death to life, but from life to death. When Jesus raised Lazarus he began a process that led to his death. Before calling Lazarus to walk out of the tomb "*Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?'*" Imagine being there when Lazarus walked out of the tomb. Now that is seeing the glory of God! But as the rest of John's Gospel makes clear, Jesus is not primarily referring to this miracle, but to his death. That's the extraordinary thing. You and I see the glory of God more wonderfully displayed not in the emergence of a dead man from the tomb but in the dying agonies of Jesus on the cross. Because it is on the cross that we see the glory of God, full of grace and truth.

We'd love to live in a world where the experience of God's glory and of Jesus' life-giving power was all about saving our loved ones from disease and putting wrong things right and, of course, we must never limit Jesus' power to do just that if he so chooses. BUT the most important way in which you will ever experience the life-giving power of Jesus is at the foot of the cross. In your suffering see him suffering precisely so that he might give you and those you love the life which will be ultimately

expressed when the scattered people of God one day gather around the throne of Jesus, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, glorying in the wonder of who he is and what he has done.