

Lazarus Is Dead

HN/SS 11/09/05 am

Reading: Ephesians 5:1-21, John 11:1-44

Study Text: John 11:7-16

Sing Psalms: 40:1-5, 40:8-10, 143^{2nd}:6-8, 143^{2nd}:9-12

‘I will stay here and continue helping lepers in the name of Jesus’ said Gladys after the death of her husband. ‘But these people have just murdered your husband and your two sons. These people do not appreciate your work. They don’t want you here. They might come and kill you next’. This is what many said or thought when Gladys determined to stay on at the mission hospital in Orissa, India. She knew it was God’s will for her to stay. She knew this was where her Lord wanted her to be to serve him. She believed it was still ‘day’ and the Lord had work for her to do.

Are you where the Lord wants you to be? Are you doing what he wants you to doing, while it is still ‘day’?

Day and Night

Let us go to Judea again Jesus said to his disciples (11:7). This was two days after he had received the message that Lazarus was sick in Bethany. Clearly Jesus was not rushing off to heal his friend Lazarus. Indeed his disciples may not have connected this call to join him in going to Judea with the sickness at all – until he told them.

They were horrified at the thought of going back to Judea for only recently the Jews there had tried to kill Jesus. During the Feast of Dedication Jesus was at the temple, maybe just weeks beforehand. The Jews crowded around to listen to him teaching. They did not like what he said – *I and my Father are one*. They accused him of blasphemy and tried to stone him. He escaped across the Jordan into Perea. How could Jesus even consider going back there now!

Jesus did not at this time explain why he was going back. Rather he spoke in general terms about walking in the day, walking while there was light. His language was similar to that he used when healing the man born blind. *I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work* (9:4). And then he said *I am the light of the world* (9:5). Why did Jesus heal the man born blind – *that the works of God might be revealed in him!* Why did he do it when he did? Because it was the right time, because the night had not yet come, because the evil day had not yet arrived.

Are there not twelve hours in the day? said Jesus. The day is finite; it will come to an end. The light will go and darkness will descend. The farmer must work flat out during the day bringing in the harvest for the darkness stop him from working. It is the same with the traveller – at least in Jesus’ day. In terms of God’s work, the work of proclaiming the gospel, Jesus is the light – he is

the light of the world. We must work the works of God while it is still day. The night comes when no one can work.

Jesus did not fear going back to Judea if this was his Father's will. If his Father gave him the green light as it were he would go with confidence. He would not be discouraged by his disciples. It was not a matter of 12 votes against one. It was a matter of doing the will of God. God still calls people to go to strange and difficult places – like Gladys and many others.

He calls us to do things that may seem strange to the world, to those around us – like forgiving our enemies as Gladys did with her husband's killers. The Bible says *understand what the will of the Lord is* (Ephesians 5:17). In the same passage we are told to *walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil* (Ephesians 5:15-16).

Lazarus Sleeps

Having called his disciples to go back with him to Judea, Jesus now tells them the reason he is going. *Lazarus our friend sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up*. Jesus called them to go with him into this hostile territory just to wake up this friend! If Jesus has rushed off immediately he got the news that Lazarus was sick they might have understood. But to wait two days and then go just to wake him up – they did not understand. Somewhat incredulous they said *Lord if he sleeps he will get well*.

As John informs us however, Jesus was not talking about taking rest in sleep, he was talking about death. This euphemistic term is widely used in the Scriptures and we might think the disciples would have understood what Jesus meant. When Old Testament kings died the Scriptures speak of them resting with their fathers (e.g. II Samuel 7:12). Daniel (12:2) speaks of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake*. Jesus spoke of death in this way previously (Matthew 9:24 – Jairus' daughter). 'So at first glance the failure of the disciples to discern the metaphorical significance of 'asleep' is remarkable'.

But they knew only that Lazarus was sick. To sleep would be natural and therapeutic for the sick person. Then Jesus said 'he sleeps' and that he would wake him up. They had no reason to think that Lazarus was dead. Jesus must have known by divine omniscience. But he had not told his disciples clearly up to this time.

The term 'sleep' is not simply a comforting euphemism but reflects the actual status of the dead. There is of course the likeness of one who is dead to one who is sleeping. But more than this, the term precludes any notion of annihilation – rather there will be a waking from 'sleep' unto judgment as spoken of in Daniel and Revelation. 'The soul is asleep to the world it has left but it is awake with respect to its own world'.

Lazarus Is Dead

Then Jesus said to them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead'. If Lazarus was sick they may have understood Jesus wanting to go and see him – though not after two days. If he was sleeping then he did not need Jesus to go and wake him up. But Lazarus was dead. Jesus made this abundantly clear to

them. But then what could be done if he was dead. What was the point of risking their life if he was dead?

It is interesting that it is Thomas rather than Peter or John who speaks to his fellow disciples. His words are hardly encouraging. With exasperation and a sense of futility he says to them *let us also go that we may die with him*. Not exactly an eager disciple was he? 'There can be only one meaning in this expression: it was language of a despairing and desponding mind which could see nothing but dark clouds in the picture'. This was Thomas the doubter, Thomas the pessimist, Thomas who always expected the worst to happen. Do you know any people like Thomas – anyone in the mirror like that!

Jesus called upon Thomas and the others to go with him 'that you may believe'. Jesus was about to do something wonderful. But Thomas could only think of the worst – we will die with him. The fact that he was going meant he was a faithful follower. He was prepared to die with Jesus – at least he said so. But this dark view that he took of everything robbed Thomas of the joy of the Lord. Jesus said to him 'stop doubting and believe'. The apostle Paul did not despair even when he was in prison – 'rejoice in the Lord always' he said (Philippians 4:4).

Note the irony that is typical of this gospel, in verse 16. Thomas thinks he is going to die with Jesus but Jesus is going to give life. He is going to raise Lazarus from the dead. In fact there is a foreshadowing of the great truth that those who follow Jesus, those who believe in him, will never die but will live (11:25).

Wake Him Up

Jesus told his disciples *I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe* (11:15). Jesus deliberately did not go prior to this – he did not want to be there before Lazarus died. It seems a strange thing to be glad about – that his dear friend had actually died. But Jesus recognised the providence of God in what was happening. He recognised that God would be glorified through the death of Lazarus. He told them that this had happened *that you may believe*. If Jesus could bring good out of the death of Lazarus then he can certainly bring good out of your difficulties and your suffering.

Jesus had indirectly revealed what he was going to do. He was going to wake Lazarus up. If the disciples had connected this saying with the fact that Lazarus was dead they would have gone with a sense of great anticipation, a sense that Jesus was about to do something wonderful, rather than going with a sense of despair and hopelessness.

Let us meditate on this precious word of God. Let us come with open hearts anticipating blessings from our loving heavenly Father. Do not flick through with the attitude that there is nothing here for me in my situation. Read this word carefully and read it prayerfully. You will find wonderful and exciting truths herein; you will find life, abundant life, and eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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