

God's Time to Show Mastery Over Death

John 11:1-45 (NIV84)

¹ Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. ³ So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick." ⁴ When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." ⁵ Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. ⁶ Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. ⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." ⁸ "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?" ⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. ¹⁰ It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light." ¹¹ After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." ¹² His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." ¹³ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. ¹⁴ So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, ¹⁵ and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶ Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." ¹⁷ On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸ Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁹ and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. ²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ²¹ "Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²² But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." ²⁸ And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. "The Teacher is here," she said, "and is asking for you." ²⁹ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹ When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. ³² When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept. ³⁶ Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" ³⁸ Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ³⁹ "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." ⁴⁰ Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew 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." ⁴³ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." ⁴⁵ Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.

Is there a funeral plot with your name on it or a name plate on a wall where your ashes will go? If you've already purchased one, I'm sure that you have stared into your own grave. What a reminder that our time is limited, that we all will die. We face death not just by looking into our own graves, but any time that we get sick or when a loved one is diagnosed with cancer. What do you do when you face your mortality?

I hope and pray that you turn to God. That's what Mary and Martha did when they saw their brother become sick. He was fading. He wouldn't be long for this world. They turned to Jesus, sent word to him, "Lord, the one you love is sick." (verse 3) They knew Jesus could do something about this. They loved Jesus, and they knew that Jesus loved them. Surely he would answer their prayers and make their brother well again.

"Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days." (verse 6) What? Can you imagine what Mary and Martha would have said had they known that Jesus purposefully delayed coming to them? Their Lord, their God, who loved them so much, who cared for them so much, can't be bothered to visit in a timely fashion let alone make their sick brother well. Would Mary and Martha have thought that Jesus had given up on them?

When you were facing your mortality, did your requests for healing go unanswered? Did God not come right away? Was he nowhere to be found? Has he never come and healed you? What did that do to your faith? Did you feel like you had to make excuses for God, like “He’s really busy” or “I’m sure he has a good reason for not coming”? As more time passed, did your thoughts turn to, “God, why didn’t you do this good thing that I know you are capable of doing?” Did your trust in God wane as your prayers for healing went unanswered? Did you feel like you were now staring at your own grave or the grave of a loved one and that the God you had always relied on and depended on was nowhere to be found? Did you start to question if God loved you, that he ever loved you? Did you start to ask, “God, do you even care?” Did the question change into, “God, are you even real?”

When your mind starting going down this line of reasoning asking these questions, your faith in God is soon in danger of being lost. This past week the Catechism kids and I looked at an atheist’s argument that God does not exist. His primary example was that God has never healed an amputee despite all the prayers that Christian amputees must have offered to God. He came to the conclusion that because God never regrew a limb that an amputee prayed for, because he never healed you, God does not exist. God is dead to you, and you, in turn, are dead to God.

In truth, Jesus purposefully waited long enough for Lazarus to die from his sickness and be buried in a tomb. Then he came to Mary and Martha. Amazingly, Martha had not gotten to that point of losing her faith while staring at her brother’s grave. When Jesus arrived, she said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” (verses 21-22) She is still trusting that Jesus can and will do something about her brother’s death.

Her trust was well placed. Not to gloss over it, but you know the result. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead! He prayed to his Father in heaven and then called out in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” (verse 43) The dead man came back to life and walked out of his own grave! Jesus did something no one else has ever been able to do. He could talk to a dead man and make the dead man come alive and do things. All Lazarus’ cells were dead, his body had started decay, but just by his words, Jesus fixed all that. He made those cells live again. He made the decay go away. Lazarus rose from the dead fully restored. You can stare at a grave, shout at a corpse as much as you want, but you will not bring the dead back to life. Jesus, though, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He showed that he was master of death by raising Lazarus from the dead.

If Jesus could do this – raise a man who had been dead for four days – then why did he delay? Why didn’t he just make sick Lazarus well as soon as he heard the message? Why stay where he was for two more days after hearing the message that Lazarus was sick, ensuring that he would not arrive in Bethany until Lazarus had been dead and buried for four days?

Well, what is more miraculous: to make a sick man well or to raise a dead man back to life? If Jesus just made Lazarus better, cured his sickness, I can see the atheist who would say it was mere coincidence that Lazarus got better after Jesus arrived. There’s no miracle there, just an active immune system. But Jesus waited to come until Lazarus had died because no one can raise a dead man back to life. This was his plan. Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” (verse 4)

Why four days though? Jewish rabbis taught that the soul hovered over the dead body for three days. So, by waiting until Lazarus had been dead four days, even the Jewish skeptics could not claim that the soul just decided to return to the body around the same time that Jesus got there. No, by all standards, Lazarus was dead dead. Our God, our Jesus, took the time of four days to prove that he is the master over death. He took someone completely dead and raised him back to life.

But there’s even more going on here than the resurrection of one dead man. Jesus told Martha when he arrived, “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?” (verses 25-26) But Lazarus already had died even while believing in Jesus. Truth is, we are all going to die unless God decides to return before we do. We believe you, Jesus, but what exactly do you mean?

Jesus waited until Lazarus had been dead four days to allow “many Jews to come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother,” since Jerusalem was less than two miles away. (verses 18, 19) Because he waited those days before coming, there were a lot of people there mourning Lazarus and trying to comfort Mary and Martha once Jesus arrived. After the stone to Lazarus’ tomb was removed, Jesus prayed, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew 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.” (verses 41-42) Then he raised Lazarus. The end result? “Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.” (verse 45) They all saw Jesus as the master over death and now they believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

Now you see the beauty of God’s timing. Although some would be angry with Jesus for purposefully delaying and not immediately healing Lazarus, we see that he did this on purpose to raise more than just Lazarus from the dead. These Jews were spiritually dead. Once they heard Jesus prayer and saw him raise Lazarus from the dead, Jesus’ words raised them to life spiritually.

We were like these Jews – spiritually dead. Every single one of us is sinful from birth, sinful from the time our mothers conceived us. We were dead in our transgressions and sins. What can a dead person do? Nothing! But then we heard Jesus’ voice. He called out to us. He called us to come alive. We were dead. We couldn’t respond. We couldn’t do anything. But his words made us alive spiritually. Jesus is the resurrection and the life spiritually as well as physically, the master over spiritual and physical death. You have already experienced spiritual resurrection thanks to Jesus’ words of life. He has made you and me alive to him and rescued us from remaining spiritually dead, to die in our sins and be eternally lost to hell. This is what Jesus means that “whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (verse 26) God has raised us from spiritual death to spiritual life because he is the master over death, even when he does not heal us physically.

That gravestone still stands. It still has a blank on it to be filled in one day, on the day we die. We know that our time on this earth is limited. Every single one of us must come to face to face with death, our own death. So, what should we do as we peer into our own graves? While we are still here on this side of heaven, this side of the life that Jesus has given you, think about that day. Think about your funeral. Plan for it. I know we don’t like to think about death, especially our own deaths. But think about what you can do to plan for that event. Plan for how you can make sure that Jesus’ words of resurrection and life can be proclaimed so that people who are spiritually dead can become spiritually alive as Jesus has done for you. Think about the Bible passages that you want to proclaim, the ones that showed you most clearly that Jesus is the master over death – both physically and spiritually. Think about how it can be proclaimed how Jesus made you alive and that you still live even now in heaven. Think about how it can be proclaimed that this life is being offered to everyone who will come to your funeral. Make a list, an invitation list, a list of people who need spiritual life. Put it in your funeral plans and your will to invite them to your funeral so that they can have Jesus’ words of resurrection and life proclaimed to them and let them work. His words make dead things alive. That’s what he did for Lazarus. That’s what he did for you and for me.

Hear that Jesus is the master over death, even when he does not act according to our time. He told us, “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?” (verses 25-26) We believe it. And so we know that we will live, even though we die. God has raised us to life spiritually, and he will raise us physically. Even as we stare into our own graves, we know that we are alive and that we will live forever with him because Jesus is the master over spiritual and physical death. Amen.