

THE DEATH OF LAZARUS AND ITS PURPOSES JOHN 11:01–16

Introduction

Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life. The death of Lazarus gave Jesus the opportunity to reveal Himself as the resurrection and the life. There were seven purposes for Lazarus' death. (Each purpose is also applicable to the death of the believer.)

- I Lazarus was sick (vv. 1-3).
- II Purpose 1: to glorify God and to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 4).
- III Purpose 2: to show Jesus' great love (v. 5).
- IV Purpose 3: to show the necessity for waiting upon God in great crises (v. 6).
- V Purpose 4: to teach the need to grasp opportunity (vv. 7-10)
- VI Purpose 5: to show Jesus' great power over death (vv. 11-14).
- VII Purpose 6: to help strengthen the disciples' belief (v. 15).
- VIII Purpose 7: to stir the disciples' courage and loyalty (v. 16).

I. John 11:01–03 Jesus Christ and the Family of Martha

Lazarus was sick. Jesus had said, “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58). At this particular time Jesus was being rejected by almost everyone. Apparently He was an unwelcome guest in most homes. He was walking about preaching and proclaiming that He was the Messiah; He is One with God, that is, He is God Himself; He is the Son of God Himself; God is in Him and He is in God (10:22-42). Just imagine a man making such a claim. He was thought to be “mad” and demon-possessed (Mk. 3:20-21; Lk. 4:25). His own family was even having difficulty with Him at this time. They were apparently so embarrassed by His claims and the rumours of His insanity that on one occasion they travelled a great distance to bring Him home lest He be harmed. (Mt. 12:46-50.)

However, there was one family who always opened their home to Jesus when He was in and around Jerusalem — the family of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, who were brother and sisters. They lived in Bethany, a suburb about two miles outside Jerusalem. Their closeness to Jesus is the reason the sisters felt so free to interrupt His evangelistic tour with the request to help their sick brother. Jesus' great love for this family should be noted throughout this passage.

II. John 11:04 Sickness of Lazarus – to Glorify God

The first purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to glorify God and to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. Lazarus' sickness was not for death. He was to die for the glory of God and

Christ. He was sick, and he was to die so that the works of God could be demonstrated. Lazarus died so that....

God could be glorified...

- By showing His desire for man to have life
- By proving His power to give life
- By showing His approval of Christ by which He proved that He really did love the world enough to send His Son to save the world

Christ could be glorified...

- By having the opportunity to do the work of God
- By demonstrating God's power
- By showing compassion
- By strengthening the faith of believers
- By leading unbelievers to believe

In raising Lazarus from the dead, both Jesus and His Father were glorified as the *Life* of the world. In dealing with the blind man, both were glorified as the *Light* of the world. If man wishes to be delivered from darkness, he must come to Christ. Christ is the only One who gives sight to man and His world. (Jn. 9:3, 5).

John 5:23 That all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.

Psa 29:2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

Psa 34:3 Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

Psa 71:8 My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendour all day long.

Psa 145:5 They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works.

Isa 25:1 O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago.

III. *John 11:05 Jesus' Great Love for Man*

The second purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to show Jesus' great love. Note: each member of the family is mentioned personally. He loved the family, but He also loved each one individually. This is a fact in the Scripture that needs to be stressed, for each one had a need, and each one needed and received the help of Jesus. Lazarus' death gave Him the opportunity to demonstrate His great love not only for the families of the world but for each individual in the world.

John 10:3 “The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

John 13:1 It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

John 15:9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”

Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

Gal 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

IV. John 11:06 Necessity of Waiting Upon God during Trials

The third purpose of Lazarus’ sickness was to show the necessity for waiting upon God in great crises. Jesus was not waiting two days so that Lazarus would die and He could perform a great miracle. Jesus knew that Lazarus was either already dead or that Lazarus was going to die on the very day the person brought word of Lazarus’ illness. We know this because Lazarus had already been buried four days when Jesus arrived in Bethany (v. 17, 39). Jewish burial immediately followed death. The four days would be counted from...

- the day of travel by the messengers in bringing word to Jesus (v. 3).
- the two days needed for Jesus to complete His ministry (v. 6)
- the day or two needed by Jesus to travel to Bethany (v. 17). (Remember huge crowds thronged Jesus, which prevented Him from travelling rapidly. It is possible He completed His ministry in one day and took two days for travel to Bethany.)

The point is this: Martha and Mary were learning to wait upon God throughout the whole experience. In facing severe illness or death, there is no answer but to wait upon God. Jesus knows when to act. He knows the exact moment, the best time...

- for us to bear the trial
- for us to stand
- for us to be helped
- for us to learn the most
- for us to bear testimony of God’s power and strength

Whenever that moment arrives, the Lord arises to meet the need of the believer. What the believer must do is what Martha and Mary had to do: learn to wait upon God. The Lord will act at the right moment.

Thought 1. We cannot dictate to God when to act nor how to act. Note two events.

- (1) Mary, Jesus' own mother. At the marriage feast she wanted Him to go and secure more wine. He rebuked her for interfering with His work, the work of God. He has His own way and time, the very best way and time for meeting the need (Jn. 2:3-4)
- (2) Jesus' own brothers. They tried to ridicule Him into going by caravan with them to the feast in Jerusalem. Jesus rebuked them for the same reason He had rebuked Mary. He, the Son of God, knew how to conduct His ministry and when to go about doing it. He knew what was best.

Psa 25:5 Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

Psa 27:14 Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Psa 62:5 Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him.

Psa 123:2 As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy.

Prov 20:22 Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.

Isa 40:31 But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Hosea 12:6 But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.

V. John 11:07–10 Opportunity to do Service

The fourth purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to teach the need to grasp opportunity. It had been three days since Jesus had received word of Lazarus' illness. Jesus now said it was time to go into Judea, for Bethany was in the district of Judea. The disciples protested, for it was the Judean leaders who had stood so opposed to Jesus and had threatened to kill Him (Jn. 10:31). The disciples could not believe their ears. Why would Jesus jeopardize their lives?

Jesus' answer was forceful, and it stands as a great lesson for all of us. There are only twelve hours in a day. Jesus must walk, that is...

- go and do His work while it is day.
- go and do what is right, regardless of the danger.
- go and do what is right lest the day pass and the opportunity be lost. (Jn.9:4.)

If Jesus had walked in the dark, failing to work and failing to do what He knew to be right, He would have stumbled. He would have shown that there is no light in Him.

The idea is, of course, that there is light in Him. He knew the work to be done and the right thing to do, so He must go into Judea.

Thought 1. A man must do the same way as Jesus. A man has only twelve hours of daylight (approximately).

=> He must walk, that is, work and do what is right, grasping the opportunity while it is day.

=> If he walks in the night, he will stumble. When the night comes, it is too late to walk. Works cannot be done in the night without stumbling about. The opportunity is lost.

John 4:34 “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.”

John 9:4 As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.

Rom 13:11-12 And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

Eph 5:16 Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Col 4:5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Note the term, “this world’s light”. Jesus is “the Light of this world”. A person has only twelve hours, only a certain amount of time to see “the Light of the world”. Once the night comes, the opportunity is lost. Note also the statement, “for he has no light [in him]”. Man has no light within. All he can do is walk...

- as he sees
- as other men see
- as the world sees

The problem with such a walk is that no man or any combination of men can see beyond the physical and material world, and the end of the world is fear - the fear and trembling brought about by bondage and death. (Note the fear of the disciples above, v. 8.) The end of the world is not life. Life comes only from Jesus, “the Light of the world.” (See *Light*, Jn. 8:12).

Mat 6:23 “But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”

John 1:4 In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

John 3:19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

John 8:12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

John 12:35 *Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going.”*

John 12:46 *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness.”*

Eph 5:14 *For it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: “Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”*

JOHN 08:12 JESUS THE LIGHT

When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” **John 08:12**

Jesus is said to be the *Light of men* (Jn. 1:4) and the *Light of the world* (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; 12:46). It is possible for the Light, Jesus Himself, to be *in men* (Jn. 11:10; see Col. 1:27) and for men to become children of Light (Jn. 12:34-36).

Apparently, Jesus used the word *light* often. John uses the word twenty-four times. What is meant by calling Jesus the Light?

1. Jesus, the Light, is light by nature. Light is what He is within Himself, within His being. His nature, His essence, His character. Scripture says...
 - that “God is Light” (1 Jn. 1:5);
 - that Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15);
 - therefore, “Jesus is Light.” He is “the Light of the world.”
2. Jesus, the Light, tells us that He is holy, righteous and pure. Light is the symbol of purity and holiness. Light means the absence of darkness and blindness; it has no spots of darkness or blackness, nor of sin and shame.
3. Jesus, the Light, reveals. His light shows clearly the nature, the meaning and the destiny of all things. His light shines in, spots, opens up, identifies, illuminates and shows things as they really are. The light of Jesus Christ shows the truth about the world and man and God. The light of Jesus Christ reveals that He loves and cares for man and wants man to love and care for Him.
4. Jesus, the Light, guides. His light allows a man to walk out of darkness. Man no longer has to grope, grasp and stumble about trying to find his way through life. The path of life can now be clearly seen.
5. Jesus, the Light, does away with darkness and with chaos. His light routs, wipes out, strips away and erases the darkness. The empty chaos of creation was routed

by the light given by God (Gen. 1:3). Jesus Christ is the Light that can save man from chaos (Jn. 14:1, 17; 12:46; 16:33).

Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Light of the world at the great Feast of Tabernacles (Jn. 7:2). The very first ceremony of the Feast holds great significance for Jesus' claim. It was called "The Illumination of the Temple" and was held in the Court of the Women. The centre of the Court was surrounded by large sections of stadium-like seats. In the open space of the Court sat four huge candelabra. When darkness fell the candelabra were lit, and the elders danced and led the people in singing psalms before the Lord all night. The brilliance and glow from the burning flames of the huge candelabra were said to be so bright that the light could be seen throughout the whole city. It was against this background that Jesus cried out, "I am the Light of the world." □

VI. *John 11: 11–14 The Great Power of Jesus Over Death*

The fifth purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to show Jesus' great power over death. Jesus stated very plainly what He was going to do. Lazarus was asleep; therefore, He would go and awaken Lazarus out of his sleep. However, the disciples misunderstood what Jesus was saying. *By sleep*, Jesus meant that Lazarus was dead, but the disciples thought He meant that Lazarus was resting in sleep. Note that Jesus gave His meaning of sleep: "Lazarus is dead." Note four significant things.

1. Jesus called Lazarus "our friend". He was dead, but he was still "our friend". This is a hint that Lazarus is still a friend despite being dead, that he is still living, still alive in another world. Note the strong feelings Jesus had for this believer, Lazarus.

Thought 1. Jesus' love reaches out to every believer just as much as it did for Lazarus. Jesus calls every believer His friend. And note the words: "our friend". Every believer is to be the friend of all other believers. There is to be a sweet fellowship between all believers.

2. Jesus predicted that He would raise Lazarus from the dead. He would "wake him up" and resurrect him. This is a picture of the resurrection of believers (vv. 23-26).

John 11:25 *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."*

John 5:28-29 *"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."*

3. The disciples misunderstood. Many still do. They misunderstand the meaning of death and the resurrection.
4. Jesus said that death is as "sleep".

JOHN 11:13 SLEEP – DEATH

Death is sometimes spoken of as sleep when referring to believers. (Lk. 8:50; Mt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:18, 20, 51; 1 Th. 4:13-15; 2 Pet. 3:4.)

=> Jesus said that Jairus' daughter was asleep

=> When Stephen was martyred, he is said to have fallen asleep (Acts 7:60)

=> Some of the five hundred witnesses to Jesus' ascension are said to have "fallen asleep"

=> Believers already in heaven are said to be asleep in Jesus (1 Th. 4:13).

Death is called "sleep" in order to picture the idea that the believer is...

- resting in the presence and comfort of God.
- resting from the labour of his service on earth.
- resting and refreshing himself for a greater service for God.

Many within the world picture death as annihilation, as ceasing to exist. Scripture says it is not. Believers continue to exist, resting in the life and comfort of God. The body lays down and, so to speak, sleeps; but not the soul of man.

2 Cor 5:8 We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. □

VII. *John 11:15 Hope for Resurrection*

The sixth purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to help strengthen the disciples' belief. Jesus said an astonishing thing: He was rejoicing that He was not in Bethany when Lazarus was sick. Why? Jesus joyed over what was to happen. Lazarus was to be raised from the dead, which meant that every thoughtful believer, both then and in succeeding generations, would experience a great leap in faith.

Thought 1. The glorious event of Lazarus' resurrection stirs the heart of sincere seekers, for it pictures the most glorious hope of life possible. Jesus Christ has the power to give life and to raise the dead (Jn. 5:24-29; 1 Th. 4:13f; 1 Cor. 15:1-58). Any follower of Christ who truly experiences the scene of Lazarus' resurrection is bound....

- to take a great leap in faith
- to have his faith stirred to new heights
- to see his faith grow progressively

John 20:30-31 *Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

VIII. *John 11:16 Courage and Loyalty of the Disciples*

The seventh purpose of Lazarus' sickness was to stir the disciples' courage and loyalty. Note that Thomas took the lead here. He showed great courage and loyalty to Christ, a dynamic example for every believer. He demonstrated...

- a deep love for Christ, a love that was ready to die for Him.
- a willingness to stand and to die with his fellow believers in the Lord's work.
- a knowledge that to die for Christ is better than to live without Him.

John 16:27 "No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God."

1 Pet 1:8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. ■