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Losing Lazarus

I imagine it was a day like many other springtime days in Judea. The air was full of the anticipation of the imminent Passover season. In the midst of the excitement, hustle, and bustle, Jesus received word that one of His best friends, Lazarus of Bethany, lay dying, his body ravaged by illness.

If we were the disciples sitting with Jesus at the time, we might have expected Him to immediately rise and hurry to Lazarus' side. Instead, Jesus stayed where He was for two more days. Though He promised His disciples that Lazarus' sickness would not end in death, Jesus fully intended that Lazarus would die.

It is here that our stories, if we allow them, intersect with those of Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. All three loved Jesus more than family. All three of them professed Him as the Messiah, although they still didn't realize everything that meant. What they did know was that at a simple word from this Nazarene carpenter, evil spirits fled, the blind saw, the lame walked, and the sick were made well. At issue was not their faith that Jesus was the answer to their problem. At issue was Jesus glorifying the Father, and the Father glorifying Jesus, through their loss: Mary and Martha's loss of their brother and Lazarus' loss of his own life.

How many of us have watched a dying child slip from this world as we fervently believed that God could not only heal him, but that God *would* heal him? How many of us have seen our life's dreams die with the end of a marriage, all the while praying for the God of reconciliation to step in and save us from our heartbreak? We have watched our businesses crumble, though we diligently worked and even more diligently gave in each Sunday morning's offering plate. We have experienced all this and more, waiting for and believing in the One who can make everything right to step in at the last minute and save the day. But He didn't. The cancer won. The divorce happened. The business closed its doors forever.

Where does that leave us? Where did that leave Mary, Martha, and Lazarus? We can wonder how cognizant Lazarus was that his life was slipping away. Perhaps God mercifully allowed him to die in his sleep. Mary and Martha, however, were not so fortunate. They waited for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus. They waited as they watched their brother die. They waited as they prepared his body for burial. They waited as they sealed the cave that became Lazarus' final resting place. For four more days they continued to mourn. And, they continued to wait, feeling abandoned and betrayed by their Lord.

Lazarus was evidently a well known and well-loved man. People came from miles around to add their tears to those shed by Mary and Martha. It is all too easy for us to imagine Jesus coming on the scene, some four days "late", as an aloof, sanctimonious God, detached from the very real, very great suffering that now enveloped the village of Bethany. We may have a tendency to believe that He looked down His nose at the mourners around him, annoyed – no, angered! – by their lack of faith that He would raise Lazarus from the dead. But this Jesus, this God who left His Father's throne to step into our darkened world, did not walk into Bethany that day to judge those who

mourned. He did not come to rebuke those who felt He had left them in their time of need. He came to mourn with them, even as He came to give them hope that could be found only in Him.

I believe that two of the Bible's most powerful verses are found in this account of Lazarus' death. One is John 11:25. When Martha tells Jesus that she believes Lazarus will rise again in the "resurrection on the last day", Jesus' answer is that He IS the Resurrection and the Life. Resurrection and life are not merely events or states of being – they are found only in the person of Jesus Christ. How comforted Martha would have been had she understood those words. How comforted we would be if we truly understood and believed them, as well.

The second of these powerful verses records Jesus' response to the suffering of Mary, Martha, and the others who mourned the passing of their brother and friend. John 11:35 simply states, "Jesus wept." He wept with those whose lives were shattered by Lazarus' death. He wept that they couldn't see that the Resurrection and the Life stood before them, full of mercy and compassion. But something we may miss is that He wept because of what He had put them through by allowing Lazarus to die in the first place.

The Greek word that is translated in verse 33 as "groaned" in the King James Version or "deeply moved" in the NASB actually indicates that Jesus blamed Himself for what they were experiencing. But, we must not err in thinking this implies that Jesus did anything wrong by allowing Lazarus to die. Rather, like a parent who mourns having to let his child learn a painful lesson the hard way, Jesus knew that Mary, Martha, Lazarus, the mourners in Bethany – indeed, all of humanity – could never know Him as the Resurrection and the Life unless they saw firsthand that He controlled not only sickness and demons, but even life and death themselves.

But the death and resurrection of Lazarus was not the endgame. It was only a prelude to the main event, intended to prepare their (and our) minds to comprehend the magnitude of what was yet to come. A few short weeks later, Jesus Himself was going to die. Jesus Himself was going to cry out, seemingly fruitlessly, to the Father that the blood-filled, agonizing cup of His final battle with, and victory over, the darkness of fallen creation be allowed to pass from His hands. Jesus Himself would remain in a rock tomb, wrapped in grave clothes and imprisoned by death. And Jesus Himself would be resurrected.

Though it is our temptation to stop here, and glorify in the resurrection, even this isn't the end game. Unlike Lazarus, Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, taking Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and all of the cosmos with Him when He went. He rent the veil that stood between fallen humanity and the Father. By living our lives and dying our deaths, He reconciled all of Creation with the Father and included all of Creation in the perfect union of the Triune God. End game. Mission accomplished. Battle won.

We might ask at this point what this seeming digression has to do with our original question of why Mary and Martha had to lose Lazarus. Even more important to us, why does God allow – even expect – us to "lose Lazarus," sometimes time and time again? For Mary and Martha to see Lazarus resurrected, he first had to die. For them to know they needed Jesus as Resurrection and Life, they had to be shown their need through suffering and death – first in losing Lazarus, then in losing their Lord. We are just the same, though losing our Lazarus may not be the death of our brother. It may

be our struggles with divorce, or cancer, or drug addiction, or obesity, or abuse, or neglect, or pornography, or infidelity, or...

However it may manifest itself, our loss of Lazarus, our point of need in our life and death struggle, is the disease of humanity's fallenness that will cling to us as long as we grope about in our fleshly darkness. In that darkness, we will cry out in our pain. We will agonize as God makes us wait. We will bargain with Him. We will reason with Him. We will curse Him. We may even hate Him. But He will come in His time and not before.

He already knows that our sickness will not end in death, but that doesn't mean we will not die before we actually see His deliverance. To know our need for Him, we must see our need. We must feel our need. We must bathe in its fetid waters, soaking us to the bone of our being. To know Jesus as the Resurrection and the Life, we must taste the death that we would be without Him.

Through it all – the pain, the weeping, the gnashing of teeth – He will be there with us. He will mourn as we mourn. He will weep as we weep. He will groan in the knowledge that He must put us through this suffering so that we will be able to know Him as He is, not as we think or fear Him to be. Then, one day, we will hear him cry "Lazarus, come out!" Our lives will be brought out of their fleshly tombs and He will unbind our grave clothes so that we will be free. Truly free.

~ Stephen M. Webb